

Game Preview: Goran Dragi? and the Phoenix Suns Take on Dwight Howard and the Houston Rockets

Written by

Wednesday, 05 February 2014 09:00 -



What: [Phoenix Suns](#) (29-19, 2nd Pacific) vs. [Houston Rockets](#) (32-17, 2nd Southwest)

Where: Toyota Center - Houston, TX

When: 6:00PM AZ Time

Watch: FoxSports AZ, NBA League Pass

Read: Check out [The Dream Shake](#) for the Houston point of view

No time to mope for the Phoenix Suns after a rough 101-92 loss to the [Chicago Bulls](#) . They're hopping on the team plane and looking to gain ground on the Houston Rockets in the Western Conference standings. Houston currently sits 2.5 games ahead of the Suns for the fifth seed. The Suns will look to bounce back hard after getting completely bogged down by Chicago's tar pit of a defense. This game should be a lot more to the Suns' liking as the Rockets play at a similar speed (7th in pace in the NBA to the Suns' 6th) and are similar to the Suns defensively as well (16th in defensive rating to the Suns' 14th).

Previous Meeting

The Suns bested the Rockets in Houston way back on December 4th to kick off their first 5-game winning streak of the season. Maybe this game will prove to be the start of another one! Eric Bledsoe and Goran Dragi? led the Suns victory march with 20 and 19 points respectively. You may remember P.J. Tucker's fine defensive performance, limiting James Harden to 14 points on horrendous 3-17 shooting. And in a rare offensive outburst, P.J. dropped 18 points of his own. Aaron Brooks (remember that guy?) was the leading scorer for Houston with 17 points. Defense was the name of the game as the Suns limited the Rockets to 35.2% field goal shooting on the way to a 97-88 victory. The only black mark for the Suns' was

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a 14-rebound deficit, losing the battle of the glass 54-40.

Of course, the Suns had Eric Bledsoe and Houston was missing Jeremy Lin and Chandler Parsons for that match-up. The line-ups are a little different this time around.

Injury Report

As per usual, Eric Bledsoe (Knee) and [Emeka Okafor](#) (Neck) are out for the Suns. For Houston, walking trade rumor and malcontent Omer Asik is out with a right thigh/knee injury. Francisco Garcia (knee) and Greg Smith (knee) are listed as day-to-day and James Harden (thumb) is listed a probable. It's a safe bet Harden will be out there at tip-off.

Suns' Stats

Offensive Rating - 108.9 (8th, NBA), Defensive Rating - 105.4 (13th, NBA)

FG		3PT		FT		Rebounds		M
G		M		M		A		Pct
Goran Dragic	45		34.3		7.2		14.1	
Eric Bledsoe	24		33.5		6.3		13.0	
Gerald Green	48		27.9		4.9		11.2	
Markieff Morris	47		25.0		4.7		9.9	
Channing Frye	48		28.5		4.5		10.0	
Marcus Morris	48		22.3		3.5		8.1	
Miles Plumlee	48		27.4		4.2		8.2	
P.J. Tucker	48		29.9		3.2		7.6	
Leandro Barbosa	13		20.1		3.2		7.5	
Ish Smith	36		13.4		1.6		4.4	
Archie Goodwin	37		10.5		1.2		3.2	
Dionte Christmas	23		6.8		0.7		2.0	
Alex Len	19		8.9		0.9		2.0	
Viacheslav Kravtsov	18		3.1		0.4		0.8	

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Rockets' Stats

Offensive Rating - 109.3 (7th, NBA) Defensive Rating - 105.6 (16th, NBA)

FG		3PT		FT		Rebounds		Pct
G		M		M		A		
James Harden	41		38.5		7.2		16.2	
Dwight Howard	49		34.1		6.6		11.4	
Chandler Parsons	44		37.9		6.5		13.0	
Jeremy Lin	39		31.0		4.4		9.6	
Terrence Jones	44		28.2		5.0		9.5	
Patrick Beverley	32		31.9		3.3		8.4	
Omri Casspi	48		19.8		2.9		6.6	
Aaron Brooks	41		17.1		2.5		6.3	
Francisco Garcia	40		20.3		2.1		5.5	
Omer Asik	17		18.2		1.5		3.1	
Donatas Motiejunas	29		12.9		1.7		4.0	
Greg Smith	11		9.1		1.6		2.5	
Robert Covington	4		4.5		1.0		2.3	
Isaiah Canaan	5		3.8		0.2		0.8	
Ronnie Brewer	23		6.9		0.1		0.7	

Numbers in a Nutshell

In terms of overall offense and defense, it's a virtual dead heat between a pair of high scoring and average defending squads. If you think the Suns are in love with the longball... well, meet the Rockets who average 26.1 attempts per game (1st in the league) despite shooting a scant 34.3% from downtown (26th in the league). The Suns for their part are 2nd in 3 point attempts (25.3 per game), but are 10th in the league in 3PT% (36.9%). Given the way the Suns' defense has dropped off since December, this could turn out to be a high-scoring, long-bombing affair. Of course, both teams defend the 3-point line well (Suns are 2nd in opponent 3PT % at 33.2, Rockets are 7th at 34.5) so it could just as easily be long-bricking affair.

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The one number the Suns will need to watch is fouls. Houston leads the league in fouls drawn, averaging 24.8 per game (vs. 21.8 for the Suns). If any of the Suns' starters goes the bench early, it will be up to the Bench Mob to pick up the slack.

Projected Starting Line-ups

Phoenix Suns

F - P.J. Tucker

F - Channing Frye

C - Miles Plumlee

G - Gerald Green

G - Goran Dragi?

Houston Rockets

F - Chandler Parsons

F - Terrence Jones

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C - Dwight Howard

G - James Harden

G - Patrick Beverly

Keys to the Game

Padlock it Up - It seems unlikely that James Harden and Dwight Howard (15 points, 4-11 shooting) will have a similarly awful stinkers in this contest. However if the Suns can be even somewhat successful in slowing down the Rockets' leading scorers, it will go a long way towards a needed conference victory.

Rebound - Double meaning here. First the Suns need to demonstrate their league-leading resiliency (source: me) and find their mojo after getting mugged by the Bulls. Second, they got away with one in Houston last time, giving up a staggering 21 offensive rebounds. Phoenix has been better about protecting the glass (they actually out-rebounded Chicago last night) and will need to make sure they get a body on Howard who torched them for 18 boards in their first match-up.

Score Early and Often - We saw last night what happens when the Suns come out sluggish. During their winning streak, they owned the first quarter out scoring opponents by an average margin of 31.6-24. Hot starts beget a hot team and the Suns would like to carry some momentum into the All-Star break 10 days from now.

Key Match-Up

Miles Plumlee, Channing Frye, Markieff Morris, and Alex Len vs. Dwight Howard - I think the Suns' backcourt is capable of hanging with or even out-playing the Rockets' guards. But this game will be won or lost in the paint. Houston scores 50.5 points per game in the paint (3rd in the NBA) and the Suns allow the 4th most at 45.7. In addition to keeping D12 in check, rim defense against easy buckets is a priority.

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Prediction

I'm feeling optimistic. Even though the Rockets are coming off of 3 days rest and Phoenix is playing the 2nd game of a back-to-back, I think the Suns show up with something to prove. Lots of shots, some but not a lot of defense. Suns win 113-108.