

Fourth quarter collapses doom Phoenix Suns, but the trend was already there

Written by

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The Phoenix Suns have been a pleasant surprise this season, going 33-23 so far and sitting in a playoff position if the season ended today. But the season doesn't end today, and these last 26 games will have to break a troubling trend to end on a positive note.

Two fourth quarter collapses for the [Phoenix Suns](#) in the last two games. One from an 11-point lead, the other from an 8-point lead.

In each case, the Suns shot just 31% while allowing 60% shooting to the other team. One line: 32-19 [Rockets](#) . The other line: 35-20 [Timberwolves](#) .

"Giving up 35 points tonight in the fourth quarter, 34 (Sunday) night in the fourth quarter," Suns coach Jeff Hornacek said. "You are not going to win games."

Unfortunately, there is a trending decline in the 4th quarter for the Suns, who are just 14-12 since January 1:

- On the season, the Suns shoot 45.7% for a full game, good for 8th in the league
- On the season, the Suns shoot 44.8% in the 4th quarter, good for 14th in the league. This is a bit lower than their full-game percentages, but still in the better half of the league.
- Since February 1, prior to these last two collapses, the Suns were shooting just 37.8% in the 4th quarter, ranking 27th in the league in shooting % in the 4th
- In these last two collapses, the Suns shot just 31% and 30% in the 4th.

The Suns fourth-quarter scoring is declining as well:

- In January, the Suns led the league in 4th quarter scoring at 27.9 points per 4th quarter

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- In February, prior to the last two collapses, the Suns are just 18th, with 23.9 points per 4th quarter
- In these last two collapses, the Suns scored just 20 and 19 points in the 4th

The same pattern is unfolding on the defensive end as well:

- For the season, the Suns have allowed the 11th lowest opponent shooting % for the game, at 44.8%
- Also for the season, the Suns have allowed the league's second highest opponent FG% in the 4th, at 46.6%
- In January, that percentage rose to a league worst 48.8% allowed in the 4th
- In February, prior to the last two collapses, the Suns are even worse at 49.6% allowed in the 4th
- In these last two collapses, the Suns allowed 61% shooting

You'd think with that decline, the Suns are getting blown out in the 4th. But such is not the case. The Suns are keeping things close, despite the shooting discrepancy, by limiting opponent shot attempts in the final quarter.

- Since January, the Suns are allowing the 4th-fewest 4th quarter shots, at only 18.5 per 4th quarter
- In February, the Suns have that down to just 17.1 attempts, fewest allowed in the entire league

But last night, the Wolves were able to pinch off 21 shots (making 13 of them) and convert 8 of 11 free throws. In the Sunday game, the Rockets only took 15 shots but made 9 of them and also made 12 of 14 free throws.

The Suns are particularly deft at committing shooting fouls in the fourth quarter of games in lieu of allowing open shots. The thinking being, apparently, that there's a better chance the opponent will miss 1 of 2 freebies from 15 feet than a layup from less than 2 feet away.

Generally, this is marginally effective enough to make the 4th a wash on most nights.

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Overall scoring differentials

- For the season, the Suns are only a net -0.1 in 4th quarter scoring, basically a wash
- In October/November, the Suns were a net -1.8 in 4th quarter scoring, with a 10-9 record
- In December, the Suns were a net +0.8 in 4th quarter scoring, with a 10-3 record
- In January, the Suns were a net +3.1 in 4th quarter scoring, with a 9-7 record
- In February, the Suns are a net -5.2 in 4th quarter scoring, with a 5-5 record

How are the Suns getting worse in the 4th?

For one thing, it's the lack to go-to scoring options when the game gets tight. The Suns only big threat in the 4th quarter is [Goran Dragic](#), but teams can scheme to get the ball out of his hands and/or force him into tough shots. Still, Dragic scores just over 5 points per game in the 4th, or 25% of his full-game scoring. Perfect balance.

For another, it's a rookie coach. Several times in recent games, the Suns out-of-timeout play call has been scuttled by the other team's defense, forcing the Suns into a tough shot. Without a go-to scorer you can just hand the ball and say 'score', coach is forced to call intricate multi-action plays to get an open shot that's usually a spot-up jumper.

But having a go-to scorer does not guarantee a win either. Simply look at the [New York Knicks](#), with one of the league's best go-to scorers in Carmelo Anthony. Their team is abysmal at closing out games.

Those excuses have been true all season (Hornacek) or at least in the last 2 months (missing Bledsoe), and the Suns were just fine through January.

But February is a different story and these last two games against quality Western Conference competition has been telling.

All is not lost. Even after these last two losses, the Suns are 29-7 when leading after three quarters, while going just 4-14 when trailing. The Suns are generally winning the games they are supposed to win.

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But when the road gets tougher, the Suns need to get tougher.

It will help to get [Eric Bledsoe](#) back. But a closer look at the 4th quarter stats by individual player shows that only [Gerald Green](#) (37% overall, 32% on threes) and Eric Bledsoe (36.8% overall, 30% on threes) are appreciably worse overall shooters in the 4th than the rest of the game. Everyone else in the rotation stays steady in FG% and scoring.

The Suns tend to shoot a lot of threes in the 4th period (6.9 per game), but still make 36.2% of them. The Morris brothers, while overall productive in the 4th (almost 8 points, 4 rebounds between them), don't shoot three-pointers as well in the 4th (34%). Only [P.J. Tucker](#) (52%), Dragic (51%), Leandro Barbosa (44%) and Channing Frye (43%) shoot better in the 4th when the game is on the line.

What next?

The going gets tougher.

It's not likely that the Suns will continue to get worse and worse in the 4th, but there is certainly precedent here that the Suns are going through a rough patch.

The key, of course, is to get a big lead before the 4th starts. These lost leads of 10-points and 8-points are an anomaly. Overall, the Suns are 29-7 when leading going into the 4th quarter.

But as defenses tighten in the final weeks of the season and the Suns find themselves on the road more often than not (9 of last 14 on the road), the tough has to get going. The Suns have to find a way to control the opponents' scoring in order to close out tough games against good teams.