

Going Gorilla: The Phoenix Suns rant - All sizzle, no fizzle

Written by

Monday, 10 March 2014 12:42 -



Win, lose, or draw the Suns have brought excitement back to their brand and a team that has grown exponentially brings plenty of flair to their playoff push.

I'm writing this after getting a chance to sleep off the Suns 113-107 loss to the Golden St. Warriors. Phoenix seemed to be in control of the game before they lost traction by giving up a pesky little 25-5 run to close the third quarter. They still made it interesting at the end (sort of) and I wasn't too upset by the blown opportunity. Even the Suns losses these days (except for that grating affair with the Jazz) are pretty fun to watch.

The Suns have 20 games left and have just backed themselves out of the top eight in the Western Conference by virtue of a Memphis Grizzlies' owned tiebreaker. Phoenix gets a chance to play meaningful basketball the rest of the season barring an implosion. Does grinding down the stretch trying to sneak into the backdoor of the playoffs sound familiar? A couple of recent iterations of this team were in a similar situation, but fell just short of the opportunity to get bludgeoned in the first round and won a late lottery pick as a consolation prize.

Call this a revisionist history, but this season feels way different. There's a big difference between growing pains and dying breaths. I'm enjoying experiencing the former.

In a span of four games Goran Dragic and Gerald Green joined a group of players that have scored 40 points in a game this season that includes Kevin Durant (10), Carmelo Anthony (5), Kevin Love (4), LeBron James (2), Blake Griffin (2), Kyrie Irving (2), Stephen Curry (2), Terrence Ross, LaMarcus Aldridge, James Harden, Arron Afflalo, Paul George, Marcus Thornton, Chris Paul, Damian Lillard, Rudy Gay, DeMar DeRozan, Trevor Ariza, Jodie Meeks, Al Jefferson and Dirk Nowitzki.

The dynamic duo also joins three other sets of teammates (on the Clippers, Raptors and Trail Blazers) that have accomplished the feat. The parallel between these four teams? They all have relatively young cores and appear to be on the good side of their apogees. The type of

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explosive and multifaceted scoring it takes to drop 40 has been conspicuously absent from the melange of mediocre (at best) talent the Suns have marched onto the court the last three seasons.

In the 2012-13 season the Suns only had a player score 30 or more points four times. The season before that it was two. This season it has already happened 13 times courtesy of Goran (8), Green (4) and Channing Frye (1). The paucity of scoring outbursts the previous two seasons was not only a conviction of the team's lack of talent, but it's overall lack of appeal. They were boring even before they were really bad.

Now the team has a threat to go for 30 on any given night. Markieff appears poised to join this group any day. I've actually been expecting him to hit the mark for some time now. To me it's quite refreshing going into games thinking, "Which Sun/s will go off tonight?" instead of, "Which scrub is poised to have a career night against us?"

This trend of standout performances comes without Eric Bledsoe, whose season high is 28, even in the discussion. With the impending return of the fourth horseman of the apocalypse (Bledsoe) the Suns have gone from a team with no true "go to" scorer to a team that can field a lineup full of guys that I (mostly) trust with the ball in late game situations.

Dragic, Green and Markieff Morris have emerged as the core of the team in Bledsoe's absence. They have become the team's de facto offensive constant, emotional sustenance and in game leadership. The trio has recently posted point totals of 79 against the Rockets, 70 against the Pelicans, 73 against the Hawks and 87 against the Thunder. That's 70 or more points in four of the last eight games.

Green has scored in double figures in 14 straight games and is averaging 23 points per game since the All-Star break. Markieff has become the stabilizing force off the bench, with consistency that has led to double digit scoring in 23 of his last 25 games. He has topped 20 in five of his last nine. Goran broke his career high for points in a game three times in the month of February.

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Goran's name has been floated in MVP discussions and as a potential candidate for All-NBA teams and most improved player. Markieff should be right near the top of a very short list of candidates for the Sixth Man award. I've heard accolades float around during broadcasts and read about them as they rattled around the box of everything on various basketball sites. But what about Green? I would aver that the Suns have three of the most improved players in the league on the same roster. Do you know who you would even vote for on this team?

I can only hope that the recent games against the Rockets, Thunder and Warriors are a harbinger of how captivating a first round playoff series might be. In lots of cases a seventh or eighth seed is just an annoying formality for a top seed on their way to the second round (see this year's Eastern Conference), but I really hope the Suns can cling to one of the final playoff berths because I don't see that being the case.

Sure, finishing ninth would put a minor blemish on all the positives from this season, but just the selfish angle of wanting to watch primo quality basketball does it for me. Who wouldn't want to get a crack at the Thunder after watching the Suns wild 128-122 triumph. That was just plain fun to watch. Not just because the Suns won, or that I think it means the Suns could upset the Thunder in a seven game series, but because that was one hell of a well played basketball game by both teams. It was a case where both teams played well enough to win. Even the refs called a clean game.

And there was Green.

We've all seen Green enter heat check mode this season, but the OKC game gave him a chance to springboard to the national stage. Not only was Green (41 points, eight threes) matching Westbrook's production (36 points, nine rebounds, nine assists), but he was mirroring Westbrook's white hot intensity.

I'm all about that kind of back and forth. I'm a huge fan of watching players who can channel their energy into a weapon to destroy their opponents. Charles Barkley and Amar'e Stoudemire, probably my two favorite Suns, were this way. But these types of players can also struggle with this trait. Instead of playing with emotion, their emotions play with them.

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Green has gone through a palingenesis in this aspect, too. At the beginning of the season he seemed more tentative, if not timorous, to just unbottle his inner rage. To be arrogant... in a good way. Arrogant - characterized by a sense of superiority. Call it swagger if you're more comfortable with that term. But I feel teams need a guy or two that is/are dripping with confidence. The kind that leads to an internal thought process such as...

"I'm better than you and I'm going to go out there and show you that I'm better than you and let you know about while I'm doing it right in front of everyone."

Green's confidence had not produced the results it was supposed to throughout his career. Maybe a situation where he just knew that he **could** do it, but for some reason he just couldn't **do**

it. Well, now he's doing it and it's allowing him to play with unrestrained emotion. Let's face it, it's hard to play with passion when you're not playing up to your ability. Instead, it manifests as frustration.

There's a certain green monster (the Hulk) that tends to break out into fits of blind, ass-stomping rage when people piss him off. He's been known to say, "You won't like me when I'm angry."

Well, I like our green monster when he's angry. He's been converting that choleric streak into high level production. And when that scowl comes across Green's face these days it seems more likely that he's about to go nuclear on team X than that he's lambasting himself over a mistake he just made.

And to me, Green, maybe more so than any other player, epitomizes the Suns' reversal of fortune. He runs the break. He dunks like a man possessed. He can light it up at the flip of a switch. He is exciting to watch. He came out of nowhere. He's having fun. He's playing team basketball.

So while the Suns take on the Clippers tonight I'll obviously be hoping for a win, but I'll also be waiting to see who goes off tonight. Maybe Kieff will go for 30 and 10... And going into it I'll be expecting to watch a great game of basketball.

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Which is a world away from just hoping to not get embarrassed like last season.