

Phoenix Suns lose their edge, playing not to lose

Written by

Saturday, 15 March 2014 09:49 -



After 63 games of playing to win, the Phoenix Suns find themselves playing not to lose as they cling to playoff hopes that once seemed like destiny.

"Eighteen games is a lot of games," Goran Dragic told himself out loud after the Suns lost to Cleveland to drop two games out of the playoff hunt on Wednesday night.

That the team is even worried about a 2-game deficit with 18 to go is telling. It tells me that, for the first time all season, the collection of players with the second-least NBA experience in the league are doubting themselves.

One game later, the Suns have already cut that deficit in half by closing out a too-tight win against Boston aided by the Celtics worst shooting game of the season (and second-worst shooting game in the league this season). Eighteen games is indeed a lot of games.

Just like their GM last summer, the [Phoenix Suns](#) have found it easy all season to beat low expectations.

It's easier to be fearless when you've got nothing to fear. Loaded with expectations of no more than 15 or 20 wins out of 82 games, these Suns players with the second-least NBA experience in the league had no problem pinning their ears back and playing as hard as they could.

When you're not supposed to win, you don't need a conscience.

At some point, though, human nature takes over. Human nature dictates that we do have a conscience and that feelings of inadequacy are always present, if just below the surface.

Phoenix Suns lose their edge, playing not to lose

Written by

Saturday, 15 March 2014 09:49 -

After more than 60 games of playing fearless basketball, the Phoenix Suns found their playoff position being threatened by a surging Memphis team while Dallas and Golden State kept winning and winning. At the same time, injuries took a toll on the Suns as [Goran Dragic](#) missed 5 crucial quarters leading to two losses (Minnesota and Utah) that really needed to be wins to keep the good times flowing.

After that, a couple of too-close wins (Atlanta, New Orleans) and some tough losses to playoff teams forced the Suns collective to ask themselves dreaded question, "Are we really good enough?"

And like a bad song on the radio, it sticks in your head over and over until you hear a good one to replace it.

These Suns are waiting for that good song to play.

It consumed them in the Cleveland game. A 36-27 team looked more than a 15-48 team they were supposed to be at this point. They played "not to lose" rather than playing with abandon.

This phenomenon, playing "not to lose", is prevalent throughout sports. Football teams running the ball to protect a late lead when it was passing that got them the lead in the first place. Tennis players trying to just get the ball back over the net, rather than hitting the winners that got them there. Baseball teams swinging to make contact, rather than drive the ball.

The problem with these strategies is that you're ceding a bit of control to the opponent, rather than taking complete ownership of that win.

Even during the Boston game, you could see the bad song take over during the second half for the Suns. It's not a lack of effort or energy, it's the lack of inertia due to second-guessing. How many times did [Gerald Green](#) pass up a quick shot, only to dribble-tantrum himself into a worse one? How many times did [Channing Frye](#) clank an open three off the back of the rim? How many times did [P.J. Tucker](#)

Phoenix Suns lose their edge, playing not to lose

Written by

Saturday, 15 March 2014 09:49 -

commit an over-aggressive foul?

It felt like a team that doesn't trust itself. These guys love each other, and they want to win for each other. There is no selfishness on the Suns.

But there is a bit of fear creeping in. Fear that you might let down your teammate. Fear that you might just turn into a pumpkin after all. Fear that not making the playoffs just proves those doubters right all along.

Goran Dragic calls it a "black hole". Black hole = fear. Even in the Boston win, [P.J. Tucker says "we made it so hard on ourselves"](#)

Coach Hornacek summed it up perfectly for Paul Coro in Boston yesterday.

"So now they lose a game and they're all disappointed and down and we all get frustrated. We have to realize that we put ourselves in the position where we are at least in the hunt for a playoff spot.

"Part of our success has been the confidence and the high level of them trying to go out there and prove things. Now that they proved it, that's that little edge that we're missing. We've got to get back to where we were not supposed to be a good team and we have to go out there and prove it every night."

It's time to be unafraid, as Ryan McDonough said last summer.

If you're afraid to fail, you're halfway there already.

Phoenix Suns lose their edge, playing not to lose

Written by

Saturday, 15 March 2014 09:49 -

Shake the fears, Suns. You still have something to prove. Prove to everyone who says you can't make the playoffs that you CAN make it. And WILL make it.

Prove that you are winners.