

Written by

Tuesday, 18 March 2014 09:00 -

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The gang comes together to discuss what things look like in the rear view mirror of other teams for the first time this season and what has been going on as of late in Fairy Tale Land...

Not too long ago the [Phoenix Suns](#) (38-29) were 11-games over .500 and surging towards a potential run at the Pacific Division crown this year. Now, they are on the outside looking in trying to find the right moment to jump and steal this dance...

As of late the team has dealt with injuries ( [Miles Plumlee](#) ), suspensions ( [P.J. Tucker](#) ), and are finally getting [Eric Bledsoe](#) back from injury.

Enough of me, let's get to what matters. The staff takes the state of the playoffs for the Phoenix Suns, here we go.

Twenty-Ninth Topic: How will the stretch run go?

**1. *Breaking the Ice: On a Scale of 1-10 what is your confidence level in the Phoenix Suns making the playoffs this year?***

Bryan Gibberman: I'm at a two with the Suns playoff chances. The Suns have been an average to slightly above average team for a variety of reasons for almost 40 games. They can lose games to teams they should beat and they can win games against teams they shouldn't, it just

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depends how effective they are at the offensive end.

Jim Coughenour: π. See everybody, I'm .14159... more optimistic than a couple of our other writers (I cheated and looked at their answers). The Suns have a stretch of winnable games where it's conceivable for them to go 5-2 or 6-1, but their inconsistency has been too consternating for me to expect that to happen. Right now the smart money is on Phoenix finishing in the absolute worst place possible. Last in the lottery.

Dave King: THREE. That's simply because I can't predict what the Grizzlies and Mavericks are going to do the rest of the way. The last two games for the Mavs, their opponent has rested a key player (Westbrook, then Rondo) so of course if crap like that keeps happening the Suns have little chance. Memphis only has 7 home games left but Dallas has 10. The Suns only have 6. If the Suns aren't back in the picture by April 1, then we're the fools.

Jacob Padilla: I'll go with a 4 just so I appear more optimistic than everybody else, and I'll credit that extra one to Goran Dragic's awesomeness.

Kris Habbas: Dallas has won 14/20 and face seven teams at or under .500 in their final 15 games. Memphis has won 12/16 and face eight teams at or under .500 in their final 16 games. Both are playing well and have a soft enough schedule to cherry pick wins and finish ahead of the Suns. As I said all last week, the Suns HAVE to be within 1.5 games or less when the final ten game stretch begins or they might be out of time. Going to go with a SEVEN.FIVE

Mike Lisboa: THREE. With Bledsoe back, Phoenix adds a new dimension on both offense and defense. After rough games against the [Boston Celtics](#) and [Cleveland Cavaliers](#), things seemed to be clicking against the

[Toronto Raptors](#)

. But then the

[Brooklyn Nets](#)

happened. Dallas and Memphis are playing too damn well for the Suns to have more than a puncher's chance of going to the dance.

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Sean Sullivan: I'll give it a 5...or a 50/50 shot at this point. Yes we are out of the playoffs at the moment, but we have some winnable games coming up and all it takes is for the Suns to get on a roll while the Mavs and Grizzlies start losing a few, and we're right back in it. Besides, I'm done doubting this team.

## ***2. Who is the biggest threat to the Suns playoff hopes? Memphis? Dallas? Other?***

JC: Every predictive model I've looked at has Memphis as the team directly ahead of Phoenix. The odds specify that Dallas has a ~90% chance, Memphis has a ~70% chance and Phoenix has a ~30% chance of making the playoffs. Phoenix is behind with time running out and the tiebreakers stacked against them. Memphis does have a back-to-back against the [Heat](#) and [Pacers](#)

coming up and then goes on a five game road trip, so it's possible Phoenix can make up a game or two on them over the next two weeks. The Suns will have to solve the Memphis puzzle even if things go right, though, because I can't envision a scenario where the Suns make the playoffs that doesn't include beating the Grizzlies in the home finale. I could probably be coerced into going to that game if it does end up this way...

JP: I feel pretty confident that the Grizzlies have figured things out and are going to make the playoffs. That means there is one spot up for grabs, and that spot is currently held by Dallas. If the Suns are going to make it, it's the Mavs they will have to pass. Unfortunately, the Mavs are playing well too and have a head start.

DK: Well certainly, Memphis is playing balls out and won't disappear. Golden State is winning at a good clip too. You can only hope that Dallas loses its mojo, or that Portland tanks the rest of the season away. That's called grasping, folks. The Suns only real hope is to out-win the others.

KH: Other. That means themselves. Dallas and Memphis are winning games, both out of the Suns control when all things are said and done. If the Suns go out there, win games, do not give up wins that playoff teams take advantage of, and focus on themselves they can make a strong push. Their own psych and confidence is what will hurt them down the stretch run.

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ML: How about themselves? They have to worry about the games they can control. Circle April 12th and 14th on your calendars. Those are consecutive games against the [Dallas Mavericks](#) and

[Memphis Grizzlies](#)

and will likely be de facto play-in games for the 7th and/or 8th seeds in the Western Conference. If Phoenix can win both of those games, they should be in.

SS: Everyone already took "themselves", so I'll go with Memphis, since they are directly in front of us at the moment. But it all boils down to the fact that we need to start winning some games, and let the chips fall where they may in regard to the other teams.

BG: Memphis and Dallas are currently tied in the loss column, but the Mavs have two more wins. These are the two teams we're looking. Memphis is the best of the three, while Dallas is similar to the Suns in that they rely heavily on their offense. Even at his old age [Dirk Nowitzki](#) is the best player on Phoenix or the Mavs and as good as

[Jeff Hornacek](#)

has proven himself to be in his first season as a head coach he's no

[Rick Carlisle](#)

### ***3. Right now, if you had to put your finger on it, what is the main issue with the team?***

DK: Experience. The Suns are the least experienced team in the West, in terms of NBA games played, and only three of the guys have even played a key role on a team fighting to make the [NBA playoffs](#)

before. Even worse, not one of them has been a starter on a playoff team. Not one. Dragic, Frye and Bledsoe were all backups on their playoff teams. P.J. Tucker is the closest thing they've got to a proven winner, leading two overseas teams to league championships.

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KH: Talent. That is not a secret. McDonough has said it. [Channing Frye](#) has said it. Everyone in the world has said it all season. Shouldn't be a shock today that the Suns are not as talented as most of the other playoff teams.

ML: Consistency. Even in their good games lately, they've struggled to play at a consistent level throughout. In Toronto, they played 10 minutes of stellar defense in the second quarter, only to completely collapse and give it all back in the last 2 minutes. In Brooklyn, they just went straight to the collapse. Some of this is youth and some of it is conditioning. None of these guys have been expected to contribute at this level for a full 82 games in their entire careers. No doubt some of them are hitting walls. It's up to [Jeff Hornacek](#) and company to figure out how to get the most of the roster for the rest of the season.

SS: Defense. They have been flat out awful defensively since the All-Star break, and I'm not sure what happened to cause it. The Suns started out the year as one of the best defensive teams in the league over their initial stretch of games, but lately they have been horrendous. Longabardi and the players need to get this corrected if the Suns are to have any chance of seeing post season play.

BG: The biggest issue with the Suns is defense. You can't win in the NBA on a consistent basis when you play defense equivalent to what would be the worst in the league. Phoenix has been doing this for too long and it's caught up to them. On certain nights they're good enough to offensively to hide it, but even with an elite offense you need to be able to play at least average NBA level defense to put together an extended winning streak.

JC: Defense. Aside from the exception that proves the rule against a team that looks like they celebrate St. Patrick's Day before every game the Boston Celtics the Suns have been on the bad side of a perpetual layup drill. The Suns have yielded 104 points or more to 12 of their last 13 opponents. Teams like Utah and Cleveland. It's the cruel punchline to the twisted joke this stretch run is devolving into. Determining what pernicious forces are undermining the remnants of what used to be this team's defense is a deeper issue, though. An enigma that escapes not just me, but apparently Jeff Hornacek as well.

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JP: I think Mike hit it right on the head. This team has just been all over the place recently. Nowhere has that been more evident than on defense. Overall, they just haven't been playing very good basketball lately. They're not doing all of the things that got them wins earlier in the season.

***4. What is the point of no return for the Suns this season in terms of games back in the standings?***

KH: The line I drew in the sand was 1.5 games at the 10-games to go mark I will stick with that. There is no way the Suns are getting higher in the lottery than 14 and the best playoff seed is likely 8th Overall. House money on the roulette table with 12 more rolls to go...

ML: I think 2 is tough, but 3 could be insurmountable. Dallas, Memphis, and even the [Minnesota Timberwolves](#) are playing well enough that, as the saying goes, if the Suns aren't getting better, they're getting worse. None of those teams can afford to tread water. Everyone is hungry, but the Suns need to be hungrier.

SS: Right now it's probably two or three games out at the most, but that number starts rapidly shrinking the closer we get to the end of the regular season. But like I said before, the Suns just need to focus on winning games right now and let everything else take care of itself.

BG: The Suns are two games out in the loss column right now. To feel comfortable I would want the Suns to be sitting at least two games ahead of the Grizzlies or Mavericks by the end of March. Phoenix has the easiest schedule of the three teams for the rest of the month. If they haven't moved ahead of one of the teams it means they've lost too average to below average teams and I wouldn't expect them to be able to muster anything together in April.

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JC: Anything over two games (which is really three because of tiebreakers) will be a death knell. Memphis can butter our bread if they make it through their @ Miami/vs Indiana back-to-back this weekend 2-0. Otherwise, the Suns can take care of business and still be in the mix. Home wins against Orlando and Detroit would put Phoenix at 40-29. Memphis will be 40-27 if they beat Utah Wednesday. If Memphis splits they'll be 41-28 and just a game ahead (two with the tiebreaker). If they managed to lose both the teams will be tied and Phoenix will control their own destiny by virtue of their home finale against Memphis.

JP: The Suns are 1.5 back of Memphis and 2.5 back of Dallas with 15 games to play. They can't afford to fall any further behind. We've seen what happens when the Suns have to win their last couple of games to jump into the field; they're going to have to get back even over the next 10 games or I don't think it is going to happen.

DK: The Suns have to be in playoff position again by April 1. You can't go into the last few games of the gauntlet needing to make up games.

***5. April 12<sup>th</sup> at Dallas and April 14<sup>th</sup> at home versus Memphis... Most important games of the season, yes?***

ML: No doubt. As I said above, these are basically play-in games for the playoffs. Win or go home.

SS: Depending on where we are at by then. If we are still fighting for that 8th spot with Memphis, then absolutely. But right now tomorrow's game against the [Magic](#) is the most important game of the season, and every game after that will have the same significance until they are either in, or out.

BG: You hope those two games are really important or not important because the Suns have taken command of one of the final two spots. Right now I lean towards they don't mean anything, but not for a good reason.

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JC: Right now the most important game of the season is Wednesday against Orlando. Those games could be meaningless if the Suns can't pull it together now. But, as I mentioned above, I can't envision a scenario where the Suns make the playoffs and don't beat Memphis in that game so, yeah, that one's important.

JP: With 15 games to go, every single game is important. The Suns can win both of those games, but if they haven't caught up in the standings by then they won't matter. Conversely, if they get back into the field and lose those games, it could be the nail in the coffin. The Suns need to take it one game at a time; they can't afford to lose more than a few more games the rest of the way.

DK: Due to their inexperience, the Suns really need to enter those games already in playoff position. Something tells me that the Suns will be fighting Portland as much as Memphis and Dallas though. They don't play Portland in the final week, but they face Portland on April 4. That game there might portend to the season's result as much as any.

KH: Yes and no. If they are 2-3 games back or worse on April 11th those games mean nothing. Also, those games are important to Memphis and Dallas as well. They are not going to roll over for the Suns out of sympathy no matter how generous that would be.

***BONUS: Are the playoffs the barometer of success for the Suns this season? If not, what is?***

SS: Yes and no...but mostly no. Yes, because making the playoffs would be a huge boost for this young team that wasn't even supposed to win 20 games this season. But no, because this team has already far exceeded expectations and has brought the "Phun" back to "Phoenix". This team has given everyone something to cheer for again, and given the fans and team alike a reason to predict good things to come. We can finally see the light at the end of the tunnel again, and it's very bright.

BG: Absolutely not. This season has been a tremendous success for the Suns whether they make the playoffs or not. You learned about the players on the team and in most cases it went better than you could have ever expected. They are flush with cap space and draft picks to add on to the core in the near future. Phoenix is trending up.



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JC: The playoffs aren't the barometer, but they'd be a piece of carrot cake cheesecake for dessert to an overall excellent meal of a season. Great menu (McMiracle), great service (Hornacek), surprising appetizers (Kieff and Green), savory main course (DragonBlade), reasonable cost (cap space and picks), no health violations (Beasley, Blanks and Hunter)... but no dessert. And I'm kind of a dessert guy.

JP: Absolutely not, but the fact that this is a question just speaks to what a turnaround Ryan McDonough and Jeff Hornacek have orchestrated. However, while the playoffs aren't the barometer, missing them sure would suck after all that's happened this year.

DK: Haha, the playoffs are the barometer. Until they're not. Frankly, this entire season is playing with house money. But you don't fold until the final cards are dealt, no matter how bad the hand you're holding. It's all about the playoffs now. Afterward, we can tell the tale in a Bright Side fashion no matter what happens, though.

KH: Okay, this is a dumb question. Who writes these (says the guy looking in the mirror)? No the barometer was general improvement and development. Then it was the 26th win. Then it was getting All-Star notoriety. And now it is back to the same thing it was at the beginning. Improvement, development, and getting that 26th win.

ML: Nope. The fact that we're even talking playoffs is a good sign that the barometer has already been shattered. The playoffs are the ice cream, gravy and icing on the cake all in one. This team was supposed to go nowhere and arguably built to do so. What the coaching staff and players have come together to do is nothing short of remarkable. This team is on the right track and any post-season action is a win with house money.

JP: Ew, Mike. Gravy on cake? Remind me not to come to your next birthday party.

***Bright Sidors, what do you think? What are your overall thoughts on All-Star Weekend this year?***

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