

Phoenix Suns combo of Goran Dragic and Eric Bledsoe are slashing toward the playoffs

Written by

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Opposing coaches game plan to stop Dragic and Bledsoe from controlling the game, but very few have succeeded at that task. The combo of Bledsoe and Dragic have won 19 of their past 25 starts, including 9 of 12 in the most important stretch of the season.

Many national media, and even local fans, assumed the [Phoenix Suns](#) ' rhetoric around intentionally pairing

[c Bledsoe](#)

and

[Goran Dragic](#)

in a small back court was lip service.

[Eri](#)

For sure, the rebuilding Suns would trade one of the two talented point guards to remake the team in order to get back to the playoffs some day. I mean, who starts two point guards in today's NBA?

How about the NBA that requires matchup problems in order to win games. The more traditional your scheme, the easier it is to defend.

Rookie coach [Jeff Hornacek](#) quickly decided that his best matchup problem was playing the 6'1" Bledsoe and 6'3" Dragic side by side in a speedy, slashing offense built around off-ball movement, dribble-drives and spot-up three point shooting.

The team now resembles Jeff Hornacek as a player - unassuming, under-appreciated, but always moving and always doing whatever it takes to win the day.

In one season, McDonough and Hornacek transformed [the team] into your over-competitive

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cousin who *needs* to win every last board game at Thanksgiving and Christmas, regardless of how many family members leave with their feelings hurt. You know, the guy who insists on no bathroom breaks and absolutely no rule-bending, not even for the pre-teenage cousins. You wouldn't want to face the Suns in Scrabble, Parcheesi, Monopoly, Hearts, seven-card stud and definitely not Risk. Can you imagine how quickly Eric Bledsoe would conquer Australia? Would you really want to endlessly tussle with the Morris Twins for control of the Middle East?

-- [Media Row Report, BlazersEdge.com \(Ben Golliver\), after the Suns won on April 5](#)

The Blazers walked up the stairwell tonight, keys jingling, only to find the Suns waiting for them. Jeff Hornacek said, "Jerry". Terry Stotts replied, "Newman". And the knock-down, drag-out, brawl of the century was on. Unfortunately for Portland, the tubby mailman won this round as the Suns owned the final surge in a game filled with them, kicking the Blazers to the curb in a 109-93 romp.

-- [Game recap, BlazersEdge.com \(Dave Deckard\), after Suns won on April 5](#)

Hornacek was exactly that kind of player in the NBA.

"I coveted Jeff for a long time," [San Antonio Spurs](#) coach [Gregg Popovich](#) said of Hornacek the player, before Hornacek the coach and his merry band of Suns blew out the Spurs last month in Phoenix.

Hornacek came out of college as a mid-sized combo guard with a terrible-looking jump shot who transformed himself into an important player for any winning organization.

He remade that jump shot and became one of the best shooters in the history of the game. In 1991-1992, he became the [first pure guard in NBA history](#) to shoot 50% or better from the field and 40% or better on threes while taking enough shots to average at least 20 points per game.

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But Hornacek didn't just shoot jumpers. For his career, he averaged 13.5 points, 4.9 assists, 3.4 rebounds and 1.4 steals per game over 15 NBA seasons spanning nearly 1,100 games.

And despite being a mere 6'3", he started at shooting guard 11 playoff teams in his 15 NBA seasons.

During those 11 playoff years, Hornacek played alongside two supremely talented, if undersized, point guards - Kevin Johnson and John Stockton. Both PGs were 6'1" on a good day, putting Hornacek's teams at a height disadvantage his entire career.

He made the All-Star team once, but more importantly played in four Western Conference Finals and two [NBA Finals](#) alongside those guys.

So as a rookie coach with the Phoenix Suns, there was no question in his mind that playing 6'3" Goran Dragic at shooting guard next to 6'1" Eric Bledsoe could win some games. He had an entire career of proof that it could work.

And work it did.

Five months later, the slashing combo of Goran Dragic and Eric Bledsoe is 22-9 when they start together, and 22-7 when they both start AND finish the game. In those two losses, Dragic missed much of the fourth quarter due to injury.

They are also 15-0 when both Dragic and Bledsoe score 16+ points in the same game.

None of this could happen without Jeff Hornacek first convincing incumbent point guard Goran Dragic that it could work.

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When I found out, I was like, "Oh my god! What is going on right now?", [Dragic told Grantland.com's Zach Lowe recently](#)

. "The GM and the coach - they called me the next day. Coach Jeff [Hornacek] explained to me that he wanted us to play together, and be like the old Suns with two point guards like Jeff and KJ (Kevin Johnson).

When I found that out, I was kind of surprised. But at the same time, I couldn't wait to share. We had some trouble at first, trying to figure out those things. But me and Eric - we are really good friends. We talk a lot. And you can see that in how we play."

Dragic sees how the pairing has helped make him a better player, or at least have a more effective season. When last season ended, Dragic asked for another playmaker in their lineup. He had just played 82 games as the only dribble-drive threat on the team - a team that finished 29th in points per possession out of 30 teams.

He really likes having Bledsoe in the lineup with him.

"We tried, today, to attack Westbrook," he said after the win over the [Thunder](#) on Sunday night. "He is a great player, but sometimes he doesn't play defense so hard. So we tried to attack him. We know he's going to play a lot of minutes, he's going to be tired, so we tried to get after him."

You can't do that with only one threat in the lineup. The opponent can just move a better defender onto you. But when both starting guards are of the same mold, there's no hiding. Westbrook can't be rotated onto a big man, or he'd get abused in the paint. All that leaves is [P.](#)

[J. Tucker](#)

or

[Gerald Green](#)

or

[Marcus Morris](#)

, all who are bigger than Westbrook by a wide margin.

That's where the Suns attack the opponent. Nearly as effective as a deadly pick-and-roll combo is a dual pick-and-roll-or-pop five-man threat with two ball handlers and three shooters. Add in

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that one or two of those shooters are big men who can go down low for post-up opportunities and you've got a tough team to defend.

Just because the Suns are 29th in the league in assists doesn't mean they aren't in constant motion. As mentioned, they're a lot like the Thunder in that they just trust their guys to create a lot more, only they rely on a lot of off ball movement as well. Doing that allows them to get the defenders on their heels, which makes make driving to the rim and catching the defender off balance that much easier, as well as giving a better look at a pullup jumper if the defender can't gather in time for a closeout.

-- [Game Recap, Welcome to Loud City, after Suns beat OKC on Sunday night](#)

The wins didn't come right away, but soon after the start of the season Dragic realized the team could be pretty good. I asked him after the win over the Thunder if he thought being paired with Bledsoe would go as well as it has.

"If I'm honest, no," he said. "But I'm a positive person. The first time in games was really tough, because we didn't know who is getting the ball, who is playing pick and roll, but then when we figured out those things it was much easier and it was kind of fun. I get more space, he gets more space. So far it's working."

I asked if he would like to play with Bledsoe in the years to come.

"I hope so," he said without hesitation. "I hope so."

Have they talked about it at all, with their contract situations?

"No," he said. "We've been so focused on this season, trying to make the playoffs we didn't talk about our future yet. We'll see how it's gonna work out. We are in a good spot, a good situation,

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for Phoenix Suns basketball. That's between Bledsoe and the front office, so we'll see."

The offseason is a long way away, hopefully. Despite being 15 games over .500, the Suns are clinging to 8th place right now with Memphis just a game behind and Dallas just a half-game ahead. If the Suns make the playoffs, they could be playing for another month or more.

That their stellar 22-9 record together only represents 31 out of 77 possible games is the only blemish on such a wonderful season. Bledsoe has played just 38 games this year, missing 10 weeks due to knee ligament injury, coming off the bench for 4 and playing without Dragic for two others.

Bledsoe, just 24 and in his first year as a full time starter, also needs to mature in his work ethic and preparation as the seasons pass.

Hornacek developed his own game after coming into the league, and expects all young players to work on their shortcomings to improve year over year. Bledsoe is no exception.

"He's a competitor," Hornacek said of Bledsoe. "He's quite young. As he moves on in his career and as he continues to grow as a player, you figure out how to go through all the stages to be a better player. You look at some of the great players around the league, they practice hard. They are working on a part of their game that's not up to snuff. He's only been a couple years in the league. He'll learn all those things, and continue to get better."

Last summer, Hornacek had a second-year player ([Kendall Marshall](#)) and rookie ([Archie Goodwin](#)) who couldn't shoot the basketball. He dropped hints that each needed to sacrifice their shot and their ego to remake their stroke - a short-term loss for long-term gain. He specifically commented that Marshall needed to raise the release point on his shot in order to get it off once players started defending him, or he'd always be limited.

Marshall came to training camp in October with the exact same shooting motion Hornacek wanted him to correct. Goodwin, on the other hand, was deep into the rebuild. Goodwin was

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praised for his work ethic. Marshall was not.

Bledsoe is arguably one of the top 50 players in the NBA right now. He defends, scores and passes well enough to be a force on the court whenever he's out there. Where he needs to improve is his conditioning and his shooting stroke, to be more consistent and for longer stretches of time.

He will get there, and Hornacek will help him. For now, he's merely one of a two-headed Dragon laying waste to the NBA. As the season marches to the finish line, the Suns are gaining ground fast.

The Suns have won 10 of their last 13 games, and 19 of their last 25 with Dragic and Bledsoe starting together.

In those 31 games in the starting lineup, the Suns have learned a lot about themselves and how the two-headed ball handling monster can really tilt the scales in the Suns favor.

"Very difficult," coach [Scott Brooks](#) said of the Dragic/Bledsoe combo before the Thunder game on Sunday. "Bledsoe has been able to make threes more this year than he has in the past. Both guys' ability to catch and shoot, catch and drive, penetrate. They're both good playmakers too. And they're aggressive on the defensive end. It's problematic."

The Suns are playing playoff basketball right now, whether they qualify or not after five more tough, tough games.

Enjoy it, Suns fans. We haven't seen basketball this good in Phoenix in the last four years.

#ignited