

## NBA Free Agency 2014: Phoenix Suns try to move into "elite" status

Written by

Sunday, 20 April 2014 09:20 -

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The Suns want to move into elite status soon, and they want to use this summer to do it. While trades are the most likely way to accomplish this ascendance, let's review the free agents available in July.

[Phoenix Suns](#) General Manager Ryan McDonough stated the obvious in Friday's season-ending press conference: that the Suns want to win even more than the 48 games they won this season.

"We are not going to sit here as a team that didn't make the playoffs and say we're all set," Suns GM Ryan McDonough said. "There are some roster upgrades you can make."

He specifically mentioned that the team is set at the guard positions, saying that the combination of [Goran Dragic](#) and [Eric Bledsoe](#) are among the league's best.

To keep those two among the league's best, you need to continue playing the offense that was designed this season which is predicated on spacing so they can drive to the hoop to create havoc. No more than one big guy can be in the paint on offense at any one time. The Suns accomplished this with front-line combinations of [Channing Frye](#) , [Markieff Morris](#) , [P.J.](#)

[Tucker](#)

[Marcus Morris](#)

and

[Miles Plumlee](#)

this season - somehow playing a stretch offense while being passable on rebounding and defense as a team.

Somehow, the team finished in the top half of the league in defense (points per possession) and rebounding, while also being 8th on offense (points per possession).

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However, each of those stretch-shooting players has limitations and a murky contract future.

"We would like to retain as much of our core as possible," he said, "but if you look at our cap sheet, we have a lot of flexibility coming up. But we also have big decisions to make. How can you upgrade the talent? Or, how can you retain the talent you already have?"

Both the Morris twins will be restricted free agents in a year. Channing Frye will either sign an extension this summer or become unrestricted next year. P.J. Tucker is restricted this summer, and might earn more money than the Suns want to pay.

McDonough specifically mentioned that the team would like to upgrade their talent, and that the small forward, power forward and center positions would be areas of focus.

"We could bring back all the guys," McDonough said. "But I think we'll make some tweaks and try to get better."

### **Free agency**

As we've seen with McDonough, the Suns are not all about signing free agents to improve the team's talent level. Last summer, they signed zero big-name free agents but executed four trades to bring in young, unproven talent that outperformed their contract.

Generally, free agents are already at the peak of their skills and are being paid commensurate with that production. In this age of salary caps, the more cheap rookie contracts you the better.

However, the Suns do have about \$20 million in free agent money\* to spend on day one of free agency. If they sign Bledsoe to his mini-max (\$13.8 million vs. his cap hold of \$6.5), that drops to \$13 million. If they sign Tucker to anything more than his cap hold of \$2.8 million, it drops further.

\*After factoring in the new projected cap of \$63.2 million, and adjusting the cap sheet from Lon's

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feedback to me, the Suns will have \$19.7 million available on day one, including Frye's contract and RFA cap holds.

Will the Suns spend their \$13-20 million in cap space on a free agent or two? Not likely. Most likely the Suns will save their room to use in a trade for a star that's not a free agent.

However, let's have fun anyway.

### Restricted Free Agency

This summer, many of the "class of 2010" is up for RFA offers. This means that their current team can match any offer made by another team.

This helps the Suns keep Eric Bledsoe and P.J. Tucker, or at least have final say over what happens with them.

But it hurts the Suns because the RFAs this summer are the best available free agents, as a combination of youth and productivity allows the Suns to spend money on their prime years rather than their sunset years.

Focusing solely on the [RFAs that play the SF, PF and C positions](#), ESPN's Amin Elhassan ranks them thusly:

5. [Greg Monroe](#) | C | RFA | 2013-14 Team: [Detroit Pistons](#)  
2013-14 Salary: \$4.1 million | Suggested AAV: \$12.5 million/year, four years

Monroe

Monroe's season hasn't been the resounding statement he'd probably hoped it would be after failing to reach an agreement for an extension last October, but it bears mentioning that he's been able to maintain relatively even production despite playing in a pretty questionable

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situation. At 23 years old, he's got a world of potential, although his defense lags far behind his offense. This deal is framed against the comparable extensions signed by [DeMarcus Cousins](#) and [Derrick Favors](#)

Monroe is ranked fifth overall in this summer's free agency, behind Wade, Bosh, James and Nowitzki. He is the top available RFA, according to Amin.

Monroe is offensively talented near the basket but has no stretch game at all. When you need buckets as the game and/or clock wind down, Monroe can get you that. However, he's a sieve on defense. The Suns would likely improve their offense but worsen their defense by signing Monroe.

I would take a pass on this one.

10. [Gordon Hayward](#) | SF | RFA | 2013-14 Team: [Utah Jazz](#)

Hayward  
2013-14 Salary: \$3.5 million | Suggested AAV: \$9 million/year, four years

Hayward has struggled with his shooting touch this season (3P% below 30 percent), but there will be no shortage of suitors willing to take a chance on him, particularly if he doesn't have to be a main offensive option. His size, age and skill level all make him a worthwhile investment, although his valuation gets knocked down to reflect the precipitous drop in shooting efficiency.

The Suns and Gordon Hayward have seemed like a good match for years, until Hayward completely tanked it this past season that is. Everything fell apart for him.

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But you could say that his shooting declined when Hornacek left, and he's still just 23 years old. A reunion with Hornacek could be just what Hayward needs. As a small forward in the Suns' offense, Hayward could be that third playmaker and stretch the floor with shooting, while also rebounding at a good rate.

Hayward still put up 16 points, 5.2 assists and 5.1 rebounds per game in a bad year on a really bad Utah team. He draws 5 free throws a game (making 82% of them) and until this season made 40% of his threes. Hayward still appears to be a perfect fit in Hornacek's offense and though he's not defensive dynamo he moves better than Marcus Morris.

The hesitance with Hayward is a 30% three-point shooting this season, and the looming contract. It's hard to imagine Utah giving him away for a normal contract amount (\$8-10 million per year), so the Suns would either have to entice them with a trade of good assets and/or offer bigger money.

I'd really explore this one hard, and try to get it done.

19. [Ed Davis](#) | PF | RFA | 2013-14 Team: [Memphis Grizzlies](#)

Davis

2013-14 Salary: \$3.2 million | Suggested AAV: \$5.5 million/year, three years

Davis' production has been encouraging: an efficient scorer around the rim (almost 68 FG% at the rim), an above-average shooter in midrange and an excellent rebounder. He hasn't had the minutes to post the type of gaudy numbers that can drive up his market value, so there might be an opportunity to lock him into a value deal.

Amin has Ed Davis ranked 19th overall this summer, and the #2 big man RFA available. He's been playing behind [Zach Randolph](#) for the past two years, so he really hasn't put up any numbers worth crowing about.

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He's thin as a rail, and never been a full-time starter in the NBA. If the Suns pass on Monroe, they could offer a mid-sized deal to Davis but is he a real upgrade from Morris or Miles Plumlee? Davis doesn't shoot threes, so he's more of a Plumlee/Morris replacement than Frye replacement.

I'd say pass on this one. He's not a real upgrade.

### Unrestricted Free Agents

Lebron James, [Carmelo Anthony](#) , [Chris Bosh](#) and [Dwyane Wade](#) all could become free agents if they want (early termination options) but all make \$20+ million per year. To get them, the Suns would have to work out a sign-and-trade with their current teams.

James and Bosh would fit very well on the Suns, while Wade would not (frail, plays SG) and Anthony would not. Anthony is a super-Marcus (like, Marcus x 1000) but that's not really the Suns scheme to shoot a ton of mid-range jumpers.

Let's cross these guys off the list for now.

Zach Randolph has an option to become a free agent too. He would be great in those big moments the Suns need scoring at the rim or a big rebound or both, but he would slow the team down and he doesn't play good D. At this point, I'd take Greg Monroe over Zach. Pau Gasol is another over-the-hill player who can score and rebound in big moments but otherwise is a bad fit on the Suns team.

[Lance Stephenson](#) has been coveted for a long time in the Valley, but his part in the [Pacers](#) ' swoon cannot be discounted. I just don't see him being a good fit on the team in terms of chemistry. Gordon Hayward would provide much of the same production with a much better attitude.

And then there's [Luol Deng](#) .

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16. Luol Deng | SF | UFA | 2013-14 Team: [Cleveland Cavaliers](#)

Deng

2013-14 Salary: \$14.2 million | Suggested AAV: \$7.5 million/year, three years, team option on third year

There will be a bidding war for Deng among several teams vying for his services, including his former team, Chicago. I still maintain my skeptical assessment of Deng's long-term effectiveness, and his performance in Cleveland thus far hasn't inspired confidence that he can provide All-Star level production going forward.

Deng is on the decline lately, and the [Bulls](#) were better after he was traded. However, Deng is still a very good SF who could play stretch-four a lot in the Suns scheme and can help improve the Suns defensively.

I would love to have Deng on the Suns, especially at the price Amin suggests.

20. [Trevor Ariza](#) | SF | UFA | 2013-14 Team: [Washington Wizards](#)

2013-14 Salary: \$7.7 million | Suggested AAV: \$5.5 million/year, three years

Ariza

Ariza went from being an invaluable piece in a championship team as an early 3-and-D player, to an overpaid player with an inflated self-opinion, to back to fulfilling the role he should have never left behind. One of the best corner 3-point shooters in the league (44 percent corners 3's), Ariza should be in demand for contending teams looking to upgrade their perimeter defense without sacrificing spacing. A three-year deal worth \$16.5 million represents full midlevel exception.

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Ariza certainly fits the bill for the Suns and would be a nice addition. I've just never liked him as a player, so I'm cold on this possible addition. He seems to me to be a bad investment as a mid-level deal you wish you hadn't made.

I'd rather keep Tucker than add Ariza.

### **Summation**

In summary, the Suns are more likely to trade for their next big-ticket player but if they want a free-market solution I would lean toward SFs Hayward or Deng. Both are big enough to play stretch-four on occasion while spending most of their time as big SFs in the Suns scheme, and both would be clear upgrades at their position.

Deng is the easier addition because he won't require as much money and/or assets as Hayward, but he is 6 years older so his long-term future is one of steady decline.

As far as free agent big men go, none are a perfect fit for the Suns scheme.