

Are the Suns better off hitching their wagon to Goran Dragic or Eric Bledsoe?

Written by

Thursday, 29 May 2014 17:14 -



Goran Dragic and Eric Bledsoe were a dynamic pairing last season, but nothing dictates that they be treated as a packaged deal. If the Suns were in a position where it made sense to move one of the team's talented point guards who should go and who should stay?

This goal of this disquisition isn't to suggest that one of the Suns' starting guards **must** be traded. Although I don't think that building around point guards is the way to construct a champion, I am latitudinarian enough to believe that there is more than one way to fleece a rube (just ask McDonough).

However, if the situation arises where it make sense to move one of them to improve the team which one should be less touchable? Sometimes to take two steps forward a team has to take one step back... Which one of these is the shortest step back? Sometimes to make an omelette you have to trade a few eggs. Insert additional possibly butchered maxims that may be at least loosely relevant to the current situation.

For those of you who have made it this far but are about to stop reading because the mere thought of trading either of these players hurls you into a stabby rage... just consider this an exercise in asset evaluation. Nothing wrong with keeping a thorough inventory.

Age

Dragic just turned 28 earlier this month, which puts him squarely in his prime, but closer than you'd like him to be to the wrong side of the 30. Unfortunately, that number is a pretty consistent demarcation line for the declining skills of NBA players. It's a young man's game.

Out of the 24 players who participated in the 2014 NBA All-Star game only Dwyane Wade, Joe

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Johnson, Tony Parker and Dirk Nowitzki were over the age of 30 when the game was played. Of that group Tony Parker is the only example of a point guard sustaining excellence into his thirties.

The other starting point guards over 30 in the NBA this past season were [Jose Calderon](#), [Kirk Hinrich](#) and [Jameer Nelson](#)

. Not exactly a murderer's row. Maybe misdemeanor assault?

Even Deron Williams, who played like he had died of old age most of the year, is still only 29.

Hinrich (33) had his best seasons between the ages of 24-26, when he averaged about 16 points and six assists. This past season he averaged 9/4. Nelson (31) peaked between the years of 25-28, including an All-Star appearance in 2009. Calderon's (32) offensive efficiency has remained stellar over the last couple of seasons, and his dip in assists can be excused due to a change in system, but even his best argument is that he's maintained his level of solid, though not spectacular, play into his early thirties.

Tony Parker (31), who arguably had his best season in 2012-13 at the age of 30, is the only point guard in the league north of 30 that is really a current exception to the rule.

Expecting Goran to play at his current, or even an improved, level for more than three years isn't a very good bet in terms of playing the odds. Bledsoe, however, just turned 24 and won't be in Goran's situation until after he would finish a four year contract for the Suns (supposing they sign and keep him the length of a new four year deal).

Ultimately, keeping Goran would give the Suns a smaller window to compete with him as a key component.

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Cost

Dragic is on the books for \$7.5 million for the 2014-15 season with a player option for \$7.5 more for 2015-16. Let's assume that Goran isn't suffering from the effects of chronic lead poisoning and opts out of his contract next summer. What kind of deal does the 29 year old Dragic command on the open market? Would he forego free agency and give the Suns a discount for something like a four year, \$40 million dollar deal?

Bledsoe may fetch a maximum salary four year deal in free agency. That would be approximately 25% of the salary cap with 4.5% annual raises. Something close to four years, \$63 million with the 2014-15 salary cap expected to swell to a robust 63.2 million. The Suns should be prepared for exactly that since it only takes one team to offer him a max deal. There's almost always one team.

After all, the Suns were almost the punchline to the cruel joke of a contract the Pelicans are saddled with after Phoenix offered Eric Gordon a four year, \$58.5 million dollar contract. Restricted free agency was like a guardian angel in that case. Now the Suns appear to be taking the same "we are prepared to match all offers" stance that ended up being the Pelicans undoing. Considering Bledsoe is coming off a better statistical year going into free agency than Gordon was it seems likely that there will be a suitor to set the market value and test the Suns' resolve.

What could possibly go wrong with locking up an ex-Clipper guard with an injury history?

Unless the Suns sign-and-trade Bledsoe they will own that contract and it will become a factor in any future deal that sends him out at a later date. There's a chance that he'll be worth every penny, but there's also the consideration that lots of max deals don't work out well for the teams that dole them out.

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Dragic seemingly affords the Suns more financial flexibility, but then again Goran could become possessed by demons and decide he no longer wants anything to do with Phoenix after the 2014-15 season. With Goran the Suns only have one year of guaranteed control while they still have four with Eric.

Injuries

As the aphorism goes, "The best players are the ones that can play." Injuries are an unfortunate reality and front offices must take prudent precautionary measures to forestall health issues from derailing their team's aspirations. Even with the thaumaturgists working on the Suns medical staff injuries to their starting guards stymied the team's run at a postseason berth last season.

Bledsoe missed nearly half the season with a shin bruise and knee surgery (his second), while Goran had lingering ankle issues that plagued him all season and compromised his effectiveness during the stretch run. Durability is a huge consideration for a team when it comes to building around a player.

Goran has been relatively healthy for his career. The ankle injuries from last season are a concern, due to the persistent nature of those ailments, but there isn't a significant injury he has sustained that raises any red flags. Still, the team is concerned enough about Dragic's overall health and stamina moving forward that it openly stated a preference that he not play for his national team this summer.

In his four year career Bledsoe has missed 72 games to injury. Over the same four year stretch Goran has missed just 23. While Bledsoe isn't expected to have any negative short term effects from his surgically repaired knee I have apprehension over a player who has missed this much time early in his career. A vote of confidence from the Suns training staff goes a long way, but some players just can't seem to stay healthy.

A full healthy season from Bledsoe next year would mostly conciliate this issue for me, but he missed enough time last season that I still don't feel I've seen enough of him to have a firm feel on what I think of him as a player.

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Current Performance/Upside

Both Dragic and Bledsoe are excellent players now and still have potential to improve. Even though the growth of many players stalls around the age of 24 (or the player's fourth season in the league), Goran has already bucked that trend and Eric seems far from a finished product.

Both players are efficient volume scorers, but Dragic was off the charts last season. Before posting a .561 in the 2013-14 season, however, Goran's career eFG% was much closer to Bledsoe's mark of .522. Whether Dragic can duplicate last year's heroics or gravitates back to his career numbers remains to be seen, but both of these players excel as scoring guards.

Across the board their numbers are strikingly similar. Besides the aforementioned impressive shooting numbers from Goran and Eric's rebounding edge these two are nearly the same player on paper. Paper doesn't always tell the whole story in these situations, and aspects like Bledsoe's ability to get to the free throw line and defend can be harder to coach improvement in than shooting.

Goran was the definitely the best player last season, but I'm not convinced that he will still be the better player next year or down the line. It's entirely possible that injuries hindered last season from being a true breakout year for Bledsoe and the 2014-15 campaign could be a coronation. Not only could Bledsoe's ceiling be higher, but he also might be able to sustain that level of play for longer. A 25 year old Bledsoe that puts up better numbers than he did last season could be a key component to sustainable success for the Suns.

Intangibles

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Goran Dragic grades out extremely well in terms of leadership, charisma and loyalty. I have no doubts that he can captain this ship moving forward if the team doesn't acquire another alpha who trumps him. Goran is affable and very media friendly.

Try this exercise. Picture Goran in your mind for a second before reading on. Was he smiling? He is in my mind's eye. Goran just exudes happiness and positive energy. He seems to really love being a Phoenix Sun. Dragic seems to feel close to the same way I feel about the Suns. In a league of transience and hired mercenaries it is pretty damn refreshing to have a guy like Goran Dragic on my team. Plus, Dragon is a pretty cool nickname.

The fact that Dragic is actually playing for the Suns is somewhat bizarre in its own right. How many players would boomerang back to a team that unceremoniously shipped them out of town? Goran practically came running back. On a personal level Dragic is a great example of just about everything a person could want out of a player on the team he cheers for.

Bledsoe has a more reticent demeanor and doesn't score nearly as high as Dragic in terms of his people skills. When I picture Bledsoe he has a very austere look on his face. While Dragic is loyal to a fault, Bledsoe doesn't seem to have made a firm bond here. Bledsoe could easily go down the road and it wouldn't really feel like he was worth more than a brief mention in the story of the Suns, whereas Goran has already left a bit of an imprint.

Now part of this, personalities aside, is that Goran has already spent time here and had a chance to grow with the team. He wasn't nearly as charismatic when he was a young kid, struggling with the language and his confidence. If Bledsoe stays he'll have his chance to evolve into his eventual role with the team.

Of course there's always the pipe dream chance (at least we can dream) that Mini LeBron could help recruit LeBron.

In the end it's a complicated, nebulous situation. There isn't a simple algorithm that can be

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employed to make the decision. Neither player has risen above the other to an extent that one can make a definitive argument that the Suns should obviously build around one, making the other completely expendable.

But maybe that actually works in the Suns favor. Being able to treat either one (or both) as a movable asset gives Phoenix even more leverage to work with a broader base of teams in (lopsided) deals. While team X may want Dragic, team Y prefers Bledsoe. The Suns can listen to phone calls from both.

Not too long ago the Suns appeared to be in a prison built from their own missteps. Now they enjoy the freedom that comes with being able to choose among the better of good options... but it's still imperative to capitalize on that freedom by making the best choice.

Poll If you had to choose between keeping Dragic or Bledsoe who would you pick?

- Dragic
- Bledsoe

859 votes | [Results](#)