

## The NBA Coaching Climate Is Decadent And Depraved ... But Not In Phoenix

Written by

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While other teams are stealing headlines, the Suns possibly stole the next great system coach.

The deranged carnival ride that is the NBA coaching carousel has become so bizarre that one can hardly be sure what the proper qualifications even entail anymore. The Nets' hiring of Jason Kidd in 2013 was strange enough considering that Kidd's playing uniform wasn't even out of the dryer yet, but apparently it was only a precursor. Now is as good a time as any to appreciate the stability that the Suns found in Jeff Hornacek, at a bargain price nonetheless.

### Coaching Calamity

Permit me to start with an obvious statement: Head coaching is a fickle business. 13 teams changed head coaches last summer, and currently another 7 are making changes this summer. Detroit and Cleveland made the list in both years. While the salary cap ensures that players on guaranteed contracts are bound to stick around (unless they are Michael Beasley), coaches salaries do not count against the salary cap, and thus their job security is at the mercy of the team's ebbs and flows.

If the team improves and takes the next step, the coach is a genius. If they plateau and stagnate, then obviously the team has "tuned the coach out", or he has taken them as far as he can. Choose whichever cliché you prefer.

When that happens, and it usually does at some point, it's time to cue the funhouse music and hire a new coach. No matter what the team is looking for, be it an "X's and O's" guy or a motivational guru, rest assured that he will definitely be better than that last guy. That guy *totally* sucked.

Another contributing factor to the turmoil in the coaching ranks is the evolving strategies of front office executives. The wave of analytics has washed a new breed of GM's to the shore, and turnover in the front office almost always results in a change in coaching personnel. It isn't difficult to comprehend; the guy in charge of shaping the roster need to be on the same page as

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the guy instructing the players.

When you throw a party, you hire a DJ that can relate to the guests you're inviting. If you invite a bunch of bikers over and the DJ is spinning salsa music, that's how your patio furniture ends up getting tossed into the pool. It's bad for the DJ, it's bad for you, and it's bad for the pool.

Even crazier than playing salsa music for bikers is the recent hiring practices teams are employing.

### **Experience Not Necessarily Necessary**

Not all teams disclose the terms of the contracts given to their head coaches. Included in these nine teams are Atlanta (Budenholzer), Houston (McHale), Minnesota (Saunders), New Orleans (Williams), Orlando (Vaughn), Philadelphia (Brown), Portland (Stotts), Utah (Snyder), and Washington (Wittman).

In addition to the nine teams that do not disclose coaching salaries, there are also two teams that are currently without a head coach -- Cleveland and the Lakers. This leaves us with 19 current available head coaching salaries, detailed [here](#). Of these 19 salaries, it seems that \$2 million is the unofficial minimum salary for an NBA head coach. Six coaches make \$2 million a year -- Dave Joerger (Memphis), Steve Clifford (Charlotte), Brian Shaw (Denver), Frank Vogel (Indiana), Larry Drew (Milwaukee), and the head coach of your Phoenix Suns, Jeff Hornacek.

Two of those coaches (Hornacek and Clifford) received first-place votes for Coach Of The Year, with Hornacek coming in second to Gregg Popovich.

Conversely, five head coaches will make at least \$5 million in 2014: Popovich (Spurs, \$6 million), Stan Van Gundy (Pistons, \$7 million/year), Doc Rivers (Clippers, \$7 million), Steve Kerr (Warriors, \$5 million) and Derek Fisher (Knicks, \$5 million).

Two of the five (Kerr and Fisher) have never coached before.

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The Warriors hired Mark Jackson, a man with zero coaching experience, out of the broadcast booth in 2011. After bizarre clashes with management and insubordination among his assistants, Jackson was fired and replaced with ... a broadcaster with zero coaching experience.

Steve Kerr flirted heavily with Phil Jackson and the Knicks, essentially driving up his demand to the tune of a \$25 million dollar contract, then used those Dolan dollars as leverage to coach closer to home with the Warriors. This is the same guy who, in 2010, walked away from his post as Suns' GM right before the inevitable downfall of the post-Amare years commenced.

If an educational manual were to be written about how to inflate and maintain your value as an NBA coach or executive, it should be written by Steve Kerr. This dude is a straight pimp.

As for the Knicks, they had a \$25 million check already written out for Kerr, and being the Knicks, by God they were going to give it to *somebody*. They were already committed to paying Phil Jackson \$12 million yearly to tell them who else to give money to, so naturally it was longtime Jackson subordinate Derek Fisher that won the handsome contract.

Fisher was the second point guard in as many years to make the leap straight from playing to coaching a New York team, following Kidd's ascension to head coach of the Nets. It remains to be seen how long Fisher will stay in New York before using his family as an excuse to coach a better roster.

The Knicks have now invested \$17 million a year in Phil Jackson and Derek Fisher despite the possibility that the triangle offense might be outdated in today's NBA, wherein offensive schemes are now widely predicated on spreading out the floor as much as possible. Normally this would be pure insanity, but the Knicks have a decorated tradition of paying gargantuan sums of money for mediocre results.

So on that note, pop the champagne!!!

[\(even though water would make more sense\)](#)

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### The Shot Doctor

In stark contrast to the high-stakes insanity occurring in Oakland and New York, there is Hornacek and the Suns. Hornacek became a head coach the old-fashioned way -- by coaching. Before serving 2 1/2 years as an assistant to Tyrone Corbin in Utah he was tabbed by Jerry Sloan to serve as a "special assistant" during the 2007/08 season. His job was to teach players to shoot, specifically the uber-talented Andrei Kirilenko.

Kirilenko's 3-point shooting improved to .379 under Hornacek's tutelage, from an abysmal .213 the previous season.

In the same season, C.J. Miles improved from .219 to .390, Deron Williams improved from .322 to .395, Ronnie Price improved from .323 to .347, and the Jazz as a team improved from 29th in the NBA at .335 to 10th at .372 (partly attributed to the midseason acquisition of Kyle Korver). Hornacek then decided to put coaching on the back burner until his children were older. Utah's 3-point shooting immediately plummeted back to 26th in the league at .349 in 2008/09.

Fast-forward to the 2012/13 season, Hornacek's last as a Jazz assistant. Gordon Hayward shot a stellar .415 from three, only to plummet to a paltry .304 in 2013/14 following Hornacek's departure.

If that isn't enough evidence of Hornacek's influence, consider that four Suns players (Goran Dragic, P.J. Tucker, Gerald Green, Marcus Morris) reached career highs in 3-point shooting in 2013/14, while the Suns as a team improved from 28th in the league at .330 to 8th at .372.

Coincidences of this magnitude simply do not exist, despite the insistence of Markieff Morris (career-worst .315 3P%) and Ish Smith (galaxy-worst .043 3P%) to serve as exceptions to the rule.

### The Future Is Unwritten, But It Looks Amazing

In a game that bears the primary objective of putting a ball into a basket, the fact that Hornacek's nearly mystical ability to improve a team's shooting ability didn't enable him to earn

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more than a league-low \$2 million a season is baffling. Factor in his calming influence, media-friendly personality, his ability to instill confidence in his players (specifically Gerald Green) and the fact that no one in the NBA out-hustles his team, and the Suns simply got *stupidly* lucky that the rest of the NBA didn't recognize these qualities.

The San Antonio Spurs have re-invented themselves as an offensive juggernaut in the twilight of Tim Duncan's career, crediting much of this success to their own shot wizard, Chip Engelland. Aside from fixing the jumpshot of a young Tony Parker and thus turning the Frenchman into an infuriatingly elite player, guys like Danny Green and Kawhi Leonard have been turned into knockdown shooters under Engelland, giving San Antonio the luxury of acquiring a talented wing like Leonard and fixing his one weakness -- shooting -- just like one winds a wristwatch.

Could Hornacek also give the Suns this same luxury? His body of work lends no reason for doubt.

On top of his shooting wizardry, the Suns found an immediate sense of stability with Hornacek. Over the course of the 2013/14 season, the only starting lineup changes that occurred were ones that resulted from injury. Channing Frye started all 82 games, PJ Tucker started all 81 games (missing one due to suspension), Miles Plumlee started 79 of his 80 games, and the only bench player to start more than 3 games was Gerald Green, who filled in when Bledsoe or Dragic were injured (mostly Bledsoe).

As Markieff Morris and Green enjoyed career years and turned themselves into reliable scorers, most coaches would respond by inserting them into the starting lineup. Hornacek didn't flinch, and the Suns finished the year with the third highest-scoring bench in the NBA (39.0 PPG), which kept the offense in a constant state of attack. For Suns fans that grew frustrated with incessant lineup changes and an overall lack of roster continuity over the previous three seasons, this has been a wonderful development.

Hornacek likely won't be underpaid for long, and as Suns fans we can only hope that his influence and tenure lasts longer than previous acclaimed Suns coaches like Paul Westphal, Scott Skiles, and Mike D'Antoni -- guys that were geniuses for a year or two before the warts became too gnarly to ignore.

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The good news is, Jeff Hornacek is apparently way too qualified for anyone to throw a \$25 million contract his way.