

Hey LeBron, Phoenix Suns owner Robert Sarver ain't so bad

Written by

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Robert Sarver is typically hated by most Suns fans, and might be holding Phoenix back from landing LeBron James. But Sarver might not be as big a cheapskate as you might think.

The [Phoenix Suns](#) are looking more and more like realistic suitors in the [LeBron James](#) free agency sweepstakes every day. They are in a unique position, as they have cap space for both James and (with some maneuvering) an additional max free agent, as well as the ability to keep the core of last year's team together. Phoenix is arguably the best situation for James, but one of the frequently made arguments against the Suns is majority owner Robert Sarver and his notoriously cheap reputation.

Mr. James, I implore you not to count out Phoenix because of Robert Sarver.

[Sarver certainly doesn't have many huge fans around these parts](#), but I'm going to argue that he's not as cheap as you might think (Heresy! After proposing a [Goran Dragic](#) trade earlier this week and now this, I am sure I am now the most hated man on BSotS). Let's take a look at how he has evolved as an owner during his tenure.

A Rocky Start

Sarver's first few years as owner were admittedly...questionable. He jettisoned a boatload of first-rounders, wouldn't pay up for [Joe Johnson](#), and traded [Kurt Thomas](#), along with two draft picks, in what has to go down as the most blatant salary dump in NBA history. These were all finance saving moves.

It wasn't a good start for Sarver, but take into consideration that he was taking advice from Bryan Colangelo, Mike D'Antoni, and Steve Kerr. Colangelo is heralded for some big moves throughout his career, but is for the most part vastly overrated as an executive. D'Antoni's big splash was to sign [Marcus Banks](#) to a \$21 million dollar contract. He also played a tight rotation, with rookies hardly ever getting playing time, so he wanted nothing to do with draft

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picks. Kerr was mostly forgettable during his tenure, though he struck gold (got lucky?) by replacing Shaquille O'Neal with Channing Frye in the summer of 2009 to drive the Suns back to the Western Conference Finals. Sarver certainly earned that cheap reputation in his early years, but he didn't exactly have the best executives surrounding him.

But we tend to forget that Sarver showed a willingness to spend after that. From 2008 to 2010, he paid luxury taxes for the team. The [Oklahoma City Thunder](#) have never paid the luxury tax. Sarver has not been afraid to dole out big contracts; they're just usually misdirected on players like [Hakim Warrick](#) , [Josh](#)

[Childress](#)

, and fan favorite

[Michael Beasley](#)

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Don't forget that max offer to [Eric Gordon](#) , either. It seemed like the necessary price at the time, but would have turned out to be a typical Sarver contract had New Orleans not matched. Sarver was again taking the advice of a bad GM, this time in Lance Blanks, but he at least demonstrated that he had abandoned his penny-pinching ways (As a side note, let the record show that Sarver insisted on signing Dragic over Raymond Felton, despite strong support for Felton among the Suns front office).

Edit: As MarkSmith pointed out in the comments, Sarver also offered A'mare Stoudemire a \$96.6 million dollar contract in the summer of 2010. It was a few million short of the \$100 million dollar contract he eventually received from New York, but more importantly, Sarver had the foresight to include minutes/games played requirements Stoudemire had to meet to guarantee the money. Crisis averted.

A Changed Man

Now, Sarver has a respectable GM in Ryan McDonough running the show. We have yet to see McDonough spend any of Sarver's money on any big free agents, but there's no reason to be discouraged. They have already stated their planned all-out assault on LeBron James. If that doesn't work out, however, look for the Suns to still spend big this offseason. During an interview with Arizona Sport's Gambo, Sarver expressed his hope and intent to go over the salary cap.

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"One of the interesting benefits we have this year is the cap hold right now on Eric is less than his market value. We're in a unique position this year if we can attract the right free agents or make the right trades, we have a chance to go significantly above the salary cap this year."

--Sarver, on KTAR/ArizonaSports620's Burns and Gambo show on June 26

Clearly, Sarver correctly sees Bledsoe's cap hold as something of a boon, which allows the team to spend up to the cap, and then resign Bledsoe. He's willing to spend the money, but also expressed caution to spend it wisely:

"One of the lessons I've learned is you can't just spend to spend. You got to make sure you're putting all of the right people in there, and not using all your powder on stuff that's going to get you mediocre."

At least Sarver can own up to his mistakes. He has spent a lot in the past, albeit on poor contracts. Sarver will undoubtedly spend that cap room with more prudence this time around, but he won't shy away from spending big if he has to. McDonough will help in this regard.

Sarver has definitely grown as an owner. Coming out of the gate, he exercised plenty of cost-cutting moves. He eventually realized you have to spend money to be good in the NBA, although he didn't at first know how to properly do so. He's learned the value of draft picks and youth as well, retaining all three of his picks this year. He just needed a little time to learn the ropes.

So, Mr. James, please don't count out Phoenix because of Robert Sarver. He had a bit of rocky start, and it took him a while to figure out how to spend money correctly, but he's on track now. He'll even let you pick the max free agent of your choice. And he's at least better than Dan Gilbert.