

**By Bill Simmons**

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Since I haven't written an NBA column in five weeks, thousands of frustrated basketball fans have been flooding me with e-mails and demanding their hoops fix. All right, maybe it hasn't been thousands, more like hundreds. Or maybe it was just six readers, my buddy House and Marc Stein. But still, it FELT like thousands of readers. That's the important thing.



Jonathan Daniel/Getty Images

The Sports Guy is forced to watch the college game if he wants to root for the Celtics.

Just know that I haven't been ignoring the NBA. I'm just a little depressed because the Celtics stink again. Fortunately, we stink to the point that we're now the leading contenders for the Kevin Durant-Greg Oden Sweepstakes. (Yeah, I know I put Durant first even though Oden is the consensus No. 1. Just know that I factored in the upcoming March Madness tournament when Durant averages a 35-13 for two straight weeks and nearly wins the national title by himself, followed by three straight months of, "Wait, this guy is a rich man's KG, he might be better than Oden!" stories and features. If you don't believe me, watch Durant for a few games. He's going to be very, VERY famous some day. You can say you knew him when.) Now I'm openly rooting against the Celtics and TiVo-ing every game involving everyone on Chad Ford's top 350.

Anyway, since I'm trapped in Celtics Hell, I needed something to carry me through the dregs of the NBA regular season. And you know what's kept me going?

The Phoenix Suns.

I watch all of their games. I rewind plays to see what they're doing and how they're doing it. I learn about basketball from them. I revel in their splendor, and I don't even think splendor is a word. They're the most consistently entertaining basketball team in 20 years. They have a chance to be historically good. You could be bouncing your grandkids on your lap someday and telling them that you watched the 2007 Suns.

Naturally, nobody's talking about them. Everyone's tired of hearing about Nash at this point, and since they don't have the best record in the league, there isn't any urgency to make a fuss about them. But if you care about basketball at all, if the sport has ever meant anything to you, if you remember the Magic-Bird Era fondly in any way, if you're remotely interested in watching a professional sports team peak ... then you need to follow the Suns. They're sniffing at true greatness. I'm not saying it will happen, just that it could. You never imagined that an NBA team could score 111 points a game, shoot 51

percent from the field, shoot 81 percent from the line, make 40 percent of its 3s, double as the best transition team since the Showtime Lakers and still manage to be half-decent defensively, right?

Well, it's happening. And it's an exceedingly relevant development for two reasons:

1. We're in a weird time in sports right now. There isn't a dominant football, baseball, basketball or hockey player. There isn't a dominant boxer. Our two transcendent athletes are a tennis player (Roger Federer) and a golfer (Tiger Woods). We haven't seen a dominant team since the Patriots rolled off 31 of 33 victories during their last two Super Bowl seasons ... and as much I loved that team, there was never a point where you could have definitively said, "That team is playing on a higher plane than everyone else." Ever since MJ retired (the second time) and the Yankees got old, there's been a greatness drought with team sports.

2. The last great basketball teams were the Lakers and Celtics from the mid-'80s. Both were blessed with selfless superduperstars (Bird and Magic), genuine Hall of Famers (McHale and Parish for Boston; Worthy and Kareem for the Lakers) and valuable role players (DJ, Ainge and Walton for Boston; Cooper, Scott and Green for the Lakers). And both teams reached heights that haven't been approached since. They were the last two teams that dominated in a competitive league and routinely submitted those occasional "not only are we winning this game by 25 points, just send the tape to Springfield after it's over" games.

In a related story, the Suns are 26-2 in their last 28 games. Here were their two losses:

**Dec. 22:** They lose to the Wizards in OT (144-139) in a game that Arenas tied with a 3-point play in regulation, then Nash missed a wide-open 3 that could have ended it.

**Dec. 28:** They lose in Dallas by two (101-99) when Nowitzki made a jumper with 0.1 seconds left.

With two reasonable breaks (Nash making the 3-pointer, Nowitzki missing the jumper), the Suns could be working on a *28-game winning streak* right now. I've mentioned that to three people over the last 48 hours and all of them said the same thing: "Wait a second ... whaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaat?????"

It's true. You can look it up.



Andrew D. Bernstein/Getty Images

Balancing the psyche of Shawn Marion is just one of the tricks up Steve Nash's sleeve.

I didn't see this one coming. When the Suns were limping along to a 1-5 mark in early November, I wrote that Amare Stoudemire's up-and-down comeback was screwing them up. Seeing them in person against the Clippers that week, they

looked about as happy as the family from "Little Miss Sunshine." How can you not have fun when you're playing with Steve Nash???? It's almost un-American. Umm, un-North American.

Just when things were looking bleak enough that a major trade seemed possible, four things happened that turned Phoenix's season around. First, the Suns stopped bringing Stoudemire off the bench, started him at center and rolled the dice with his "sore" knee. And guess what? He stopped sulking and started busting his butt on both ends. (Note: Stoudemire even admitted as much in Jack McCallum's story in Sports Illustrated a few weeks ago.) Second, they won a memorable triple-OT game in Jersey that kicked them into another gear. Every season has a defining game that gets a great team going -- for the '86 Celtics, it was the Christmas Day game when they blew a 25-point lead to the Knicks on national TV, spent two days sulking about it, then went on the NBA version of a cross-country killing spree (winning 20 of their next 22, including both Lakers games). The 161-157 game did that for the Suns. Third, Mike D'Antoni buried Marcus Banks (an indefensibly bad free-agent signing) and made Barbosa the backup point, which enabled the Suns to play quality guards at all times. And fourth, Diaw and Marion conceded the high post (and all those high screens with Nash) to Stoudemire and figured out other ways to get their stats.

If there's a potential land mine, it's the Marion-Stoudemire rivalry, an ongoing problem (as McCallum described in his book about the Suns) because of Stoudemire's enormous ego and Marion's insecurities about his underappreciated career (even though his talents are indisputably essential to everything the Suns do). If this were a rock band, Marion would be the drummer -- the guy who's killing himself every night and resigning himself to a couple of solos per concert. In fact, one of the reasons I couldn't endorse Nash's previous MVP candidacies was because no Phoenix star could be more "valuable" than any other Phoenix star; such a premise belittled the contributions of Stoudemire two years ago and Marion last season. Without Marion, the Suns wouldn't be the Suns.

Anyway, the Stoudemire-Marion issue could have killed this team -- hell, it still might -- but something funny happened while they were sorting everything out: Phoenix couldn't stop winning. After the 3-6 start, the Suns won an astonishing 15 straight, dropped two of three, then won another 10 straight (and counting). Once they started rolling over everybody, Marion accepted his new role as the drummer. For now. Let's see how he feels in five months. But as long as he's happy, Phoenix's top six players surpass anything we've seen since Magic-Kareem-Worthy-Cooper-Scott-Thompson/Green or Bird-Parish-McHale-Johnson-Ainge-Walton. Just look at these guys. It's insane.

**Barbosa:** He'd be the best guard on more than half the teams in the league right now ... unstoppable off the dribble and a first-team member of the Streak Scorer All-Stars ... learned to run the offense just competently enough that they could bury Banks ... they'll even run plays for him in crunch time (like the 3 that beat the Bulls) ... I think he's one of the best 40 players in the league, a slightly more efficient version of Ben Gordon ... by the way, he's their sixth man.

**Diaw:** Killed them in the first few weeks by showing up out of shape, now he's fine ... plays three positions and guards the best opposing low-post player, doubles as the second-best passer on the team (5.5 assists a game!), doesn't care about shots, moved to the wing for Stoudemire's sake and remained just as effective ... one of the most underrated back-to-the-basket guys in either conference, although the Suns rarely go to him in the low post ... also one of the only people I've ever liked from France ... shooting an eye-opening 54 percent this season ... I think he's one of the best 45-50 players in the league ... somewhere, Steve Belkin is reading this and saying to himself, "See, I told you Diaw and two No. 1s was too much!"

**Bell:** Doesn't care about shots, nails open 3s (42 percent) and covers the best opposing scorer every game (although his defense is slightly overrated -- quicker guys like Gordon give him problems) ... he's also their fiercest competitor ... if they don't need his defense in crunch time, they'll play Barbosa over him and he won't complain about it ... I once wrote that he played like Bruce Bowen after four drinks -- I'd like to revise that to "Bowen after two shots of tequila and a slap to the face" ... and if that's not enough, he clearly aggravates Kobe, which counts for something.

**Marion:** If you had to pick one forward in the NBA to run the floor with Nash, this would be the guy ... as long as he's happy, playing hard and feeling even mildly appreciated, the 2007 Suns are unstoppable ... I think he's one of the best 20

STATS DON'T LIE	
According to STATS INC, the Suns rank in the top-3 in the following offensive categories:	
Field Goals made (1st)	
Three-pointers made (1st)	
Free throw percentage (1st)	
True shooting percentage (1st)	
Two-point field goal percentage (1st)	
Three-point percentage (2nd)	
Assists (1st)	
Assists/turnover ratio (1st)	
Points per game (1st)	
Fast break points (3rd)	

players in the league ... by the way, did you ever think that Shawn Marion would go down as the greatest UNLV player in NBA history?



Looks like huge egos and microfracture surgery can't keep the Suns down.

Barry Gossage/Getty Images

**Stoudemire:** I'd say he's about 87 percent back, which makes him the second-best center alive (behind Yao and tied with Dwight Howard) and a top-20 player ... totally attuned with Nash on those pick-and-rolls ... improved his team defense and became an asset as a shot-blocker ... averaging a 20-10 over the past six weeks and starting to show "force of nature" signs again ... living proof that you CAN come back from microfracture surgery (although I still wouldn't recommend it).

**Nash:** I wouldn't have voted him MVP the past two years (when he did win), but I'd absolutely vote for him this year (when he won't win because nobody's prepared for a world where Steve Nash is a three-time NBA MVP). Here's the case for Nash in three parts:

**A.** When the Suns were threatening to implode early in the season, by all accounts, he kept them together almost singlehandedly (on and off the court). There isn't a more authentic leader in the league. He's the anti-Zach Randolph.

**B.** The more he plays with the same teammates, the better he gets. Now he's starting to resemble Gretzky during his Edmonton days -- not only does he keep finding guys for layups, dunks and wide-open 3s, he's finding them at consistently impossible angles. I have never, ever, EVER seen anyone run the point guard position like this on a day-to-day basis. Not even Magic and Isiah. If we ever kept track of assists that directly created a layup or dunk for a teammate, he'd be heading toward an all-time record.

**C.** Two months ago, I joked that Deron Williams looked like he went to John Stockton Summer Camp ... then it turned out that he actually DID spend the summer being tutored by Stockton. Now I'm wondering if Nash went as well. He rarely smiles and he barks at the refs more than he ever did. He gets testy with opposing players and teammates. Just like Stockton, he sets moving picks and trips defenders coming off screens (most famously to set up Barbosa's 3 that won the Chicago game). I don't want to say he's going to the dark side like Danny LaRusso during the Terry Silva Era, but there's definitely a nasty edge to his game that I can't remember seeing before.

Here's what happened: When Dallas eliminated Phoenix last spring, Nash probably spent a few weeks mulling over his career and everything that happened. He thought about the two MVP awards, realized he couldn't accomplish anything more other than winning a title, then thought long and hard about how to do it, ultimately cutting off his hair (feel the symbolism, baby!) and getting in the best shape of his life (remember, he wore down the last two springs). Then he showed up for training camp, realized the Marion-Stoudemire soap opera would be an ongoing problem, realized Diaw was woefully out of shape, realized Banks wasn't going to help at all ... and something snapped inside him. Exit, nice Steve Nash. Enter, icy Steve Nash. And he's been playing pissed off ever since. Eventually, everyone else fell in line.

Well, guess what? THAT'S AN MVP! That's what I'm looking for! Finally!



Losing to the Mavs last year did make Nash sad, it got him angry.

Barry Gossage/Getty Images

It's been a virtuoso season for him. Borrowing the same tactic that once worked so well for Magic, Isiah and Stockton, Nash uses the first 40-42 minutes to get everyone else going, then takes over in crunch time and looks for his own offense if the Suns need it. Sometimes he'll defer to a scorching-hot Barbosa, sometimes he'll feed Amare on those high screens, sometimes he'll post Diaw if there's a mismatch to be exploited, sometimes he'll slash-and-kick to Bell or Marion, but if he can get his own shot, and it's a good one, he's taking it. Over anything else, that subtle change in Nash's mindset -- basically, a complete refusal to accept anything less than a championship, even if it means some occasional selfishness -- kicked this Phoenix team into another gear. Remember when Nash scored 48 in the playoff loss to Dallas two years ago? He was horrified and even a little embarrassed afterward, right?

Now, he'd probably be pissed that he didn't get 50.

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That's the biggest difference between the 2006 Suns and the 2007 Suns, with Nash's haircut symbolizing everything -- they play with a chip on their shoulder. They want to run teams off the floor. They want to break their will. For instance, Cleveland came to Phoenix last Thursday for a nationally televised game, and since the Cavs had been playing well and showing signs of running away with the East, it looked like a good test for the cruising Suns. Instead, it turned into a nonstop layup line. By the end of the first half, Phoenix was winning by 26. And I learned three things from that game:

1. The Suns dismantled Cleveland *effortlessly*, like they were plucking wings off a butterfly or something. I don't even think they shifted past third gear the entire game. That was truly scary -- not for me but for everyone else in the league.
2. The Cavs were demolished to the degree that they can't be taken seriously for the rest of the season. This game was more one-sided than the Awvee Storey-Martynas Andriuskevicius fight.
3. There was one moment when everything kicked into a higher gear for the Suns and they started rolling off easy basket after easy basket -- really, it was breathtaking to watch -- and eventually, their fans stood up and just kept cheering and cheering, even during a break in the action, just to profusely thank the players for what was happening. And I was sitting on my sofa thinking, "During the Bird Era, this happened ALL THE TIME. They'd get it going, great things would happen, and we'd stand up and cheer and cheer because we couldn't think of another way to adequately express how fortunate we were other than to just start throwing money on the court. And now, it's happening in Phoenix and I'm jealous as hell."

Which brings me to my main point ...

It's nearly impossible to compare players and teams from different eras because the game continues to evolve in ways that nobody ever imagined. Tuesday night, I watched a triple-OT game between Texas and Oklahoma State where a 6-foot-11, 190-pound forward (the outrageously talented Durant, my current basketball obsession other than the Suns) scored 37 points on an eclectic mix of 25-footers, spin moves, jump hooks and drives to either side. He did everything *facing the basket*. He looked like a 6-foot-11 Tracy McGrady. Trust me when I tell you this: We've never seen anyone remotely resembling Kevin Durant on a basketball court before. If you stuck him in a time machine and transported him back to the Russell-Chamberlain Era, he'd probably average 55 points a game. Just the mere thought of his putting on a Celtics jersey makes me want to start sobbing with joy.



Barry Gossage/Getty Images

No one will be able to ignore the Suns this spring.

Anyway, because the game keeps evolving and improving, you can only compare the impact of players and teams relative to the time in which they played. Would the '86 Celtics have beaten the '96 Bulls in a seven-game series? Too difficult to say. For instance, Pippen would have guarded Bird in that series, and there wasn't anyone remotely resembling Scottie Pippen in 1986. So how could you know? Compare their relative impacts and it's a different story. The '86 Celtics were greater than the '96 Bulls because they excelled against tougher competition, they were invincible at home (50-1 at home if you include playoff games) and their top-six was better than Chicago's top-six. You will never convince me otherwise. But the one thing that separated those mid-'80s Celtics and Lakers teams from everyone after them was that sixth gear: You never knew when they would throw together one of those four-minute stretches, turn the game into a layup line and blow somebody off the court.

(In fact, that Celtics team was so loaded that they screwed around during games, almost like musicians jamming near the end of a song. During a recent NBA TV interview with Bird for the Legend's 50th birthday, Bill Walton and Bird reminisced about the time Bird set goals for their West Coast trip, decided he would average 42 points a game for the trip, then got bored midway through and decided to shoot all left-handed shots in Portland. And he did just that. This actually happened.)

Now the Suns are approaching that hallowed level and I never thought we'd see something like that again -- not with 30 teams, not with a salary cap, not with the lottery system, not when teams are so much smarter about not giving away future lottery picks for the likes of Don Ford and Gerald Henderson. If the Suns stay healthy, they should win 67-70 games and nobody should touch them in the playoffs except for Dallas, the one contender that can dictate a specific tempo and force its opponents to abide by it. Still, I can't imagine the Suns blowing a seven-game series -- not with their style of play (impossible to stop), not with the way they shoot free throws (everyone in the top six is over 80 percent except for Diaw), not with everyone they can throw at Nowitzki, not with Nash's new and improved killer instinct. Even their team defense has improved to the point that Barkley doesn't dismiss them anymore. They're a juggernaut with a terrific coach and no real holes other than a thin bench.

Of course, the Suns can guarantee immortality with one move: Thanks to the Diaw-Johnson trade, they own Atlanta's 2007 No. 1 pick unless it falls in the top three. Say they packaged that pick with Kurt Thomas' expiring contract and/or Banks' contract for one more blue-chipper. What would happen if they added Rashard Lewis or Mike Miller, gave one of them James Jones' minutes (20-25 a game), then went seven-deep the rest of the way? Starting Nash, Stoudemire, Diaw, Bell and Marion, with Miller/Lewis and Barbosa coming off the bench, nobody would play more than 38 minutes or less than 25, and there wouldn't be a bad shooter or a bad all-around player in the bunch. Five of the seven players would be

shooting over 40 percent from 3-pointers. They could go small, they could go big, they could play fast or slow, they could do anything they wanted. They'd be the Dirk Diggler of NBA teams.

Look, my NBA life is in complete shambles. My beloved Celtics might be the worst team in the league and I spend far too much time thinking about an 18-year-old kid in Austin who could save them some day. The Clippers are playing such uninspired, mediocre basketball that it's not even fun to attend their games, even as an unbiased observer. My favorite commissioner has endured some rare misfires and was recently pulled over for being drunk with power. The whole season has been a disaster. Other than Gilbert Arenas screaming "Hibachi!" and Isiah making one last boneheaded trade, all I have to look forward until next June's draft are the Suns and their quest for greatness.

So for my sake, make one more move, Phoenix. You owe it to Nash, you owe it to D'Antoni and the Suns fans, you owe it to me, and you owe it to every other diehard basketball fan who loves this game and never imagined we would see another invincible team. All 19 of us.