

"A fascinating and funny book,  
a fly-on-the-ball account of what  
life is really like in the NBA."

—Steve Rushin, *Sports Illustrated*

# :07

# SECONDS OR LESS



*My Season on the Bench  
with the Runnin' and  
Gunnin' PHOENIX SUNS*

**Jack McCallum**

# THE 2005-2006 PHOENIX SUNS

## MAIN CHARACTERS

### Players

**STEVE NASH**—#13, point guard; franchise go-to guy in more ways than one; earned second straight MVP award during season; laid-back but as skilled at delivering well-timed insult as he is well-timed assist.

**SHAWN MARION**—#31, forward; nicknamed Matrix for special-effects playing style; had several big games in playoffs; has longest tenure with team; sometimes feels underappreciated.

**RAJA BELL**—#19, shooting guard; newcomer to team but instantly part of in-crowd; buddies with Nash from time together in Dallas; has combustible temper but good guy; became postseason folk hero.

**BORIS DIAW (DEE-OW)**—#3, center-forward; newcomer to team; hails from France; argumentative but upbeat; newcomer to team but change of scenery helped won league's Most Improved Player award.

**AMARE STOUDEMIRE**—#32, center, injured in preseason and played only three games; cast in role of shadowy superstar for most of season; team wasn't always sure he was working hard on rehab, but future fortunes are tied to his comeback.

**LEANDRO BARBOSA**—#10, combination guard; known to everyone as L.B.; hails from Brazil; one of the quickest players in the league.

**TIM THOMAS**—#8, forward, picked up on waivers late in season; relentlessly upbeat; hits big shots; doesn't exactly distinguish himself with hustle.

**EDDIE HOUSE**—#50, guard, newcomer; never stops talking and never

stops shooting; key for positive team chemistry, though struggled late in the season.

### **Coaches**

**MIKE D'ANTONI (DAN-TOE-NEE)**—the head man; Coach of the Year previous season and finished second in 2005-06; has casual style of leadership but will show temper; playing and coaching legend in Italy; also became general manager late in season.

**MARC IAVARONI (I-VA-RO-NEE)**—D'Antoni's lead assistant; handles defensive strategy; won one NBA title as player; nobody works harder on film study but has a sense of humor.

**ALVIN GENTRY**—has more NBA coaching experience than anyone on the staff; a pro's pro with special knack for offense; keeps everyone loose with stories.

**PHIL WEBER**—gets down and dirty with players as clinician; prone to aphorisms; a bachelor whose Peter Pan lifestyle is the subject of gentle derision, as well as envy, among coaches.

**DAN D'ANTONI**—older brother of Mike by four years; first year on staff; playing legend at Marshall University; had kind of life they write country songs about but has settled down.

**TODD QUINTER**—lead scout so not around much until end of the season; his written observations are respected by the coaches; good guy whose high school hoops career was chronicled by author years ago for small Pennsylvania newspaper.

### **Front Office**

**JERRY COLANGELO**—president and CEO and seminal figure in the organization; sold the team but still involved in big decisions; suffered a personal blow when son left franchise.

**ROBERT SARVER**—second on masthead but now running the show as managing partner; made his money in banking; brash and forward, but trying to learn the game.

**BRYAN COLANGELO**—son of Jerry; was general manager until he left

to run Toronto Raptors in February after dispute with Sarver; widely respected around the league and not just for being Jerry's son.

**DAVID GRIFFIN**—promoted to veep of basketball operations after Colangelo left; savvy talent scout with photographic memory about prospects; also very funny.

**JULIE FIE**—head of public relations; been around so long she's comfortable traveling with mostly males; professional enough not to cheer but slyly pounds the table when things go wrong for Suns.

### **Staff**

**AARON NELSON**—head athletic trainer; Steeler fan who rubbed it in after Super Bowl victory; quick-witted and acerbic enough to be a coach.

**NOEL GILLESPIE**—team video guru who sits in on every meeting and is like an assistant coach; he may have screwed up a clip during the season, but the author never saw it.

# THE BACKSTORY

*A few weeks before the 2005–06 NBA training camp began, I called Julie Fie, the Phoenix Suns' ace director of public relations, to propose a story idea for Sports Illustrated. I would be with the team throughout training camp as an "assistant coach" and would then write a story about my experiences. (I may have even said "quote marks around assistant coach" during our conversation.)*

I was looking to do something different, something from the inside. In my twenty-five years at *SI*, which included two decades of following the NBA, I had covered everything from BASE jumping to the world championship of squash, but had never engaged in participatory journalism, unless you count having Shaquille O'Neal back his 350-pound ass into me to demonstrate how he doesn't commit offensive fouls.

Julie said she'd check with the authorities—general manager Bryan Colangelo and coach Mike D'Antoni—and get back to me.

I homed in on the Suns for a variety of reasons, not the least of which was Fie. I had known her for two decades and considered her one of the best in the business, not to mention someone who might actually think it was an idea that would fly. I automatically crossed out a couple dozen or so other PR directors who would either dismiss it out of hand or worked for a head coach who would rather push a mule cart down Broadway while wearing a thong than open a window into the inner workings of his team.

I also knew Colangelo and his father, Jerry, still the team's CEO and president. I knew D'Antoni and his assistant coaches, though not all that well, from interviewing them for a story I had written about the Suns during the previous season. I knew assistant coach Todd

Quinter well—I even wrote a few stories about him three decades ago when he was a high school basketball star in Nazareth, Pennsylvania—but, as the team's chief scout, he was away from the team much of the time. I knew Steve Nash and Shawn Marion, the team's veteran stars, though neither was what I would call a professional confidant. I thought they were good guys who might not mind a notebook-carrying dilettante; obviously, any such project would need the blessing of the team's superstars, tacit or otherwise.

The other reasons were purely pragmatic. First, the Suns were probably going to be good; unless a team is *profoundly* bad, like, say, the expansion New York Mets or the 2005–06 New York Knicks, it is almost *always* better to write about a winner. Winning teams are happy, happy teams talk, talk makes stories. Further, the Suns were coming off of a positively revolutionary season during which they had become one of the most entertaining shows in sports. D'Antoni, having spent most of his playing and coaching career in Italy, did not subscribe to the prevailing NBA wisdom that a fast-break team cannot succeed, and so he built a team around Nash that ran like hell and tossed up three-point shots like so much wedding confetti. And, though no one suggested that D'Antoni and his staff didn't work hard, they seemed to be serious about the idea of not taking themselves seriously. In short, they seemed like good guys to hang with.

Julie called back forty-eight hours later and said, "Buy a pair of sneakers. You're on the staff." So to speak.

There are certain stories that just work out, that through some weird alchemy present a combination of factors that trigger positive feelings in the reader. The preseason "assistant coach" story in *SI* was one of them. Judging from the letters, e-mails, and personal comments I received, people enjoyed the inside perspective, the lively interplay (especially the insults) among the coaches, the details of how players and coaches work together, what the coaches say about other teams,

and the participatory/Walter Mitty aspect of the story, i.e., the outsider-amateur getting the chance to do what the insider-pro does. Along with allowing me total access to practices, meetings, and meals, the coaches let me participate in drills here and there. On the first day, Marion nailed me in the face as I held the ball during a shell drill, and I felt I belonged.

Soon after the story ran in *Sports Illustrated*, I was asked to expand it into a book. I had doubts as to whether it would work. As friendly and open as the coaches had been in early October, when workouts and scrimmages were held far from prying eyes, they were not about to allow me to muck up drills during the regular season. But perhaps they would once again grant me the same unfettered access and that would be the essence of the book. The publisher said, "Give it a try." I called D'Antoni and he said, "Sure." It was almost that simple.

I had written one "season-with" book (*Unfinished Business*) after spending a considerable part of the 1990-91 season with the Boston Celtics. I rode the team bus, collected stories from players such as Larry Bird and Kevin McHale, and just generally spent a lot of time hanging around. It was "inside" but not in any way, shape, or form like this would be. I didn't fly with the team when it went charter. Coach Chris Ford didn't invite me to coaches' meetings. I was not allowed into the locker room when the rest of the media wasn't there. I couldn't attend closed practices. So this would be an entirely different book.

When I showed up a couple of weeks into the regular season to begin my research, D'Antoni took, literally, ten seconds to brief the team on the colossal significance of my presence. "You remember Jack from the preseason," D'Antoni said at the beginning of an off-day practice. "He's going to be with us a lot of the time working on, I don't know, a book or something." That was it.

Rarely was I asked to keep something off-the-record. As the man in charge, D'Antoni would usually be the one to say, with a

smile, "I'll kill you if this is in the book," or, more seriously, "Don't put this in." But considering the hours and hours I spent with the team from November to June, the requests were entirely reasonable. They came to trust me (I think) and further believed that (a) transparency is the best course, and (b) we don't say that many controversial things anyway.

The season turned out to be, in a word, memorable. It's the only word I can come up with. Going into the season, the Suns looked weaker on paper than they did last season because two starters, Quentin Richardson and, most significantly, Joe Johnson, had been traded. Their leading scorer, Amare Stoudemire, went down with an injury in training camp and missed all but three games. Their supposed lone defensive presence, Kurt Thomas, missed the last two months of the regular season and played only a few garbage-time minutes in one playoff game. Their instant offense off the bench, Leandro Barbosa, missed twenty-five games with various injuries. Their fire-and-brimstone guard, Raja Bell, managed to get himself suspended for an elimination game against the Los Angeles Lakers. On it went.

But they *always*—*always*—seemed to have something in reserve. Just when it appeared that Nash had played himself into a state of utter fatigue, he would summon up some uncommon effort and hit a shot down the stretch. Just when it appeared that Marion was out of sorts and frustrated by having to guard bigger opponents, he would break loose and win a game almost by himself. And the franchise players were by no means the only source of miracles. Consider: During the playoffs, Phoenix got no fewer than three game-saving or game-winning shots from players (Bell, Tim Thomas, and Boris Diaw) who weren't even with the team last season.

More to the point, they did it *their way*. By returning to the "old" way of playing, they in fact did something very new. By going



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back, they moved the game forward. By looking to the past, when teams acted instead of reacted, they were revolutionary.

Truth be told, the Suns advanced further than I thought they would. When you're close to a team, you see not only their strengths but also their weaknesses, of which the Suns had many. You see the process at work, how long and difficult it is, how many minidramas have to play out, how many extraordinary moments have to be coaxed out of players, who, like everybody else on this planet, suffer crises of confidence from time to time. Off the court, the players and coaches were pretty ordinary guys; on it, they did some pretty extraordinary things.

The parameters of my access were simple: I went where the coaches did. I attended their meetings, accompanied them to practice, and sat in the coaches sections of the plane and the bus on road trips, usually next to Dan D'Anconi, the older brother Mike had brought aboard as an assistant. But for me, a journalist who for four decades has been on the outside looking in, nose pressed to the glass, it wasn't that simple suddenly becoming an insider.

I never walked through the Suns' training room, verboten to anyone except team personnel (more than once I saw a player's agent chased out of there), without feeling that I didn't belong, even though everyone welcomed me. I set all kinds of rules for myself. I wouldn't accept an employee pass, and, instead, spent a considerable amount of time snaking my way by any means possible into US Airways Center (which, before January 6, was known as America West Arena) for early-morning coaches' meetings. Yes, I ate the food on the team plane (but not too much), drank the bottled water in the coaches office, and plucked grapes from the pregame fruit plate. But I tried not to avail myself of the postgame buffet that sat, appetizingly, on a table in the locker room.

I went to great lengths to prevent my fellow journalists from seeing me step off a bus or get into a locker room before the prescribed press time. I literally dove for cover when NBA-TV filmed practices at which journalists were not supposed to be in attendance. I was able to insinuate myself behind the bench for many games but refused to adopt what Phil Weber, an assistant coach, calls “the State of the Union look” (white shirt, red tie) to help sell the idea to security guards and other arena personnel that I was actually a coach.

During the season, I wrote about the Suns for *Sports Illustrated* only once—a long piece about Steve Nash, in which he came across glowingly but no more so than if I hadn’t been with the team. (I hope that’s the case anyway.) When it came time to vote for end-of-the-season awards, I thought of recusing myself but finally decided I could vote fairly. I put Nash in third place (behind Detroit’s Chauncey Billups and Cleveland’s LeBron James) in the voting for MVP and put D’Antoni second behind San Antonio’s Gregg Popovich for coach of the year. Nash won anyway. D’Antoni finished second, jokingly making the claim, whenever I was in earshot, that “one vote for Popovich span the whole process upside down in some weird way,” preventing him from winning for the second straight year.

I didn’t hang out with the players much when the coaches weren’t around. For one thing, it’s not like their first thought was, “Man, we really want some fifty-six-year-old interloper dude going clubbing with us.” But there is also a precise line of demarcation between players and coaches. You can’t sit in on all the coaches meetings, then try to pass yourself off as some sort of special-exempt player. There were many times, however, when I would just sit in the locker room and listen to Eddie House’s nonstop rap or chat with Shawn Marion, Kurt Thomas, James Jones, or Pat Burke about nothing at all. They are good people, and I enjoyed our conversations.

I had a good enough relationship with a couple players, Nash and Raja Bell in particular, that I could give them a gentle amount of grief, and they could certainly give it back. On the day the team

photo was taken, the coaches insisted that I get into one just for posterity's sake, and, as I stood there, silently urging the photographer to hurry up and snap, Nash said, "Okay, be careful. The spy's in the picture." On the one occasion that I did pilfer a chicken finger from that postgame buffet, Nash caught me. "Jack, I hope you're paying for that," he said with a couple of other reporters around.

In the interest of full disclosure, I did two things that I wouldn't normally do as a journalist: I got Nash to autograph a jersey for a charity auction and Raja Bell to autograph for my sister-in-law. She thinks he's hot.

Going into the project, I was curious about one thing in particular—how do professional coaches deal with losing? I had coached an eighth-grade team for several years, and, though I don't consider myself a particularly competitive person, the losses would gnaw at my insides, keep me up nights, and have me on the phone for hours with my assistant coach trying to deconstruct what went wrong . . . with a bunch of thirteen- and fourteen-year-olds. What must it be like when the stakes are high? A basketball coach makes so many decisions during a game—substitutions, out-of-bounds plays, defensive alterations, time-outs—that any single one of them can have an impact on the result.

The answer turns out to be: The losses do indeed take a heavy toll. Coaches don't sleep well. They beat themselves up. They look terrible in the morning. They catch colds. They suck on candy. They drink too much caffeine. They snap at each other. Sometimes they order onion rings and French fries together. Then they come in the next day and do it again.

I flew back to Phoenix with the team after it had lost a 140–133 triple-overtime game to the Knicks in New York on January 2. The referees that night had suffered from a case of Madison Square Garden-itis. The Knicks shot fifty-four free throws compared to just

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sixteen for the Suns. Had Kurt Thomas not been called for a phantom foul with eight seconds left, the Suns would've won in regulation. It could hardly have been a more agonizing loss, especially since it came to an inferior team. Security at the private airstrip in Newark took forever. It was raining. The plane didn't take off until 1:15 a.m. Some players had brought along their families (they do that on a few road trips per year) and babies were wailing. I felt like wailing, too, and couldn't imagine how badly I would've felt had I been the one presiding over this godforsaken evening.

"Five hours of freakin' misery awaits," said D'Antoni as he boarded the plane. Then he and his assistants fired up their portable DVDs and watched the game, over and over and over, consigning themselves to their own personal small-screen hell.

Yet, no Suns coach—no coach I've ever known, in fact—wants to give up the life. The highs are too high. Though I never in any way, shape, or form considered myself a member of the team, I understood that feeling for the first time.

For at least seven months a year, NBA coaches spend as much as eighteen hours a day together. And the goal is to spend more—by advancing to the Western Conference finals, the Suns' coaches were together almost constantly from the second week of September until the first week of June. Part of the reason I was accepted into their fraternity, I theorize, was that I supplied relief, a diversion from the never-ending mission of *figuring it out*, a buffer when they got sick of each other.

They have no secrets. If one assistant dozes off on a plane or in the coaches' office, one of the others will pull out a cell phone and snap an unflattering photo of him. They rag each other endlessly about their packing "systems" on road trips and celebrate wildly when one or the other of them forgets socks or brings two different shoes. They shower and dress in locker rooms where space is at a premium and personal fashion peccadilloes become conversational fodder. Weber, for example, tucks his shirt into his undershorts, "a tip I

picked up in *GQ*," he says. "Maybe it works in the magazine," says Dan D'Antoni, "but not in real life."

(AUTHOR'S NOTE: "D'Antoni" alone will refer to Mike D'Antoni.)

One day Weber and Dan told me how much pleasure they get out of watching Alvin Gentry take his morning vitamins because it is so difficult for him. I wanted to see it, so we spent fifteen minutes surreptitiously tailing Gentry around the training room as he juggled the pills in his hand and made the conversational rounds. Finally, he grimaced, put a pill on his tongue, took a long slug of water, and violently tilted his head back to get it down. We burst into laughter.

"Let me guess," he said, "you jackasses have been following me."

Studying a coaching staff would be rich material for an industrial psychologist. A delicate political game is played every day, even on staffs as close-knit as the Suns'. Coaches are by nature intensely competitive, their lives defined by the joy of winning and the agony of that alternative eventuality. But they have to find a way to get along, to consider each other's opinions yet make themselves heard in the eternal battle to gain traction within the organization. "There is an almost subconscious vying for attention," concedes Iavaroni. "You want to feel indispensable, you want your credit. But you have to subjugate that for the good of the team."

There is a distinct separation between the head coach and his assistants. Every day it is the head coach who must deal with the owner, the front office, the media, and the cold arithmetic of wins and losses. To the public, the most important person in the franchise is the star player; within the franchise, the most important person is the head coach. It's not even close. "You slide down two feet on that bench," says Gentry, who was once a head coach, "and you just *feel* the difference in pressure."

A head coach has to act like the boss, even a head coach with the easygoing and casual personality of D'Antoni. It might seem like a small matter, but in seven months with the team I never saw

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D'Antoni, who is still in good shape, take a shot at the basket or do anything remotely connected to playing. Never. Before and after practice, I frequently shot around with the other assistants (I finished the season with a humiliating 3-13 H-O-R-S-E record against Iavaroni) and watched as they traded shots with and even got into some one-on-one work with the players. But D'Antoni was always the overseer. "Well, hell, why would I want to embarrass myself in front of guys who are the best players in the world?" he said when I asked him about it. My theory, though, is that he held off because, in some small way, it sets him apart. *This is my gym, my practice, my team.*

The theoretical role of the assistant is to give the head man enough information so that he can make his decisions, find his "comfort level," as Weber puts it. But an assistant has to sense when the head man has enough information and doesn't want to hear anything else. "I want every one of my coaches to say whatever the hell they want to say," says D'Antoni. "I want to hear everything. But if I don't follow what they say, I don't want to hear about it afterward." He rarely did. The Suns coaches move forward.

"Having been a head coach and an assistant," says Gentry, "I've seen it from both sides. It's tempting to just throw out suggestions aimlessly when something goes wrong. 'Hey, let's go trap this pick-and-roll.' But if you trap it and they throw it to somebody else and he hits a three, the assistant is not the one who has to explain it. That's on the head coach. That's why you just have to shut the hell up sometimes."

Countless teams have been ripped apart by assistants who curry favor with the star players or the general manager. "Getting your guy fired by backstabbing him," says Iavaroni, "is the most common way to get a head job." Over an entire season, I never saw one instance of that in Phoenix. That doesn't mean it didn't happen or won't happen, particularly if the team starts to lose. But I didn't see it. There were countless times when I was certain that one or a couple of the assistant coaches weren't in complete accord with D'Antoni's game-plan

decision. But they never gave off a whiff of their doubt to the team. "Doug Collins used to have a saying when we were in Detroit," says Gentry. "'Agree or disagree in the room, but, when the meeting's over, align.' We always align."

It was fascinating to watch the interaction of the coaches with each other and with D'Antoni, and he with them. Weber, for example, is below both Iavaroni (the designated lead assistant) and Gentry (the former head coach) on D'Antoni's pecking order, yet he is the assistant most likely to chat up D'Antoni immediately after a timeout is called. It's just Weber's personality. ("White Noise," Gentry calls him.) Iavaroni was schooled in a more formal process in Miami under Pat Riley. "I would never go right to Pat and say, 'Coach, I think we need to do this.' I would make a case with Stan Van Gundy [Riley's lead assistant]. And if Stan thought it was valid, then he would take it to Pat."

Iavaroni knows that D'Antoni doesn't share his insatiable appetite for video, so he reflexively semi-apologizes for it in advance. "I have a lot of clips here, Mike, so any time you want to stop me . . ." The assistants respect each other's territory. During a plane ride between Toronto and Detroit on April 1, Gentry, watching the replay of a game, catches Phoenix's quicksilver guard Leandro Barbosa jumping around on defense when he should just be guarding his man. He tells Dan D'Antoni about it, so that Dan, who had become more or less Barbosa's personal coach, could go back and discuss it with the player. Iavaroni, the de facto defensive coach, feels free to discuss that aspect of the game with any player. But if he happened to catch, say, a flaw in Boris Diaw's shooting, he would tell Weber about it, and Weber, Diaw's shooting coach, would be the one to bring it up.

If any of the assistants detected what they considered to be a major problem with the offense, they would certainly tell D'Antoni about it first, particularly if it involved Nash. Nash and D'Antoni are like quarterback and offensive coordinator. But D'Antoni respected the relationships—Iavaroni and the big men, Weber and Diaw, Dan

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and Barbosa—the assistants had with individual players, too. And D'Antoni would often count on Gentry, who has the gift for getting along with everyone, to talk to Marion or encourage one of the reserves who hadn't played much.

Part of my motivation for doing the original *SI* story was to demonstrate that NBA coaches do, in fact, coach. While football coaches are venerated for both their acumen and their organizational skills, and baseball managers are cast as mystics, able to turn around the course of a season simply by calling a pitchout, pro basketball coaches are victims of the worst kind of stereotyping. The average sports fan, even some NBA fans, believe that coaches roll out the balls, players pick them up and start firing, and that pretty much constitutes the essence of what the coach does, until one day he gets fired with a year or two still left on his contract. (Or, in the case of Larry Brown, four years with \$40 million left.) To watch D'Antoni and his assistants disprove the flawed conventional thinking was a unique privilege.

Some readers may object to the occasional rough language, but this is what sports sounds like. There are faculty meetings, Boy Scout get-togethers, and, Lord knows, sportswriter bull sessions at which the language is ten times rougher than at a meeting of the Suns coaches or a locker room conversation among players. And if I had been looking to write about indecorous behavior on the road, I chose the wrong team, certainly the wrong coaching staff. Unless you call ordering both onion rings and French fries at Johnny Rocket's perverse—and you might—this was a strictly PG season.

Writing in the first person is an implicit act of narcissism, particularly when you are not the focus of the story. But the "I" voice does slip in once in a while and my only excuse is that it was unavoidable. Over time the book became an intensely personal experi-



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ence, much more so than anything I've ever worked on. I witnessed more than half of the regular-season games and all except one of the playoff games live. That meant I spent quite a lot of time in "America's Sweatiest City," as Phoenix was declared by a publication called *LiveScience*, although from November to April it felt pretty damn good. I went on a dozen road trips and ate countless meals with the coaches. Night life was at a minimum, but Dan D'Antoni and I would share an adult beverage from time to time and solve most of the world's problems. When I wasn't with the team, I followed the Suns through the NBA-TV package, the Internet, and once, while en route to a New Year's Eve party, on satellite radio.

Around the league, I had to accept the joshing I got about my affiliation. P.J. Carlesimo, the San Antonio Spurs' assistant coach, saw me once and said, "Hey, there's the Suns' houseboy." I had no retort.

Family and friends eventually got a case of Suns stroke, too. Chris Stone, my editor at *SI*, had a lot of general NBA business to talk over with me but our conversations invariably began with Phoenix. "You pick up anything about their offense this week?" Chris might ask. Or, "Did Eddie House say anything funny?" My brother-in-law's wedding took place on the night of Game 7 of the playoff series against the Lakers, and I felt terrible about missing it. But when I reached the bride and groom by telephone to congratulate them, their first words were, "We saw the last part of the game in the bar at the reception. Awesome!" They may have had a glass of champagne or two by then.

Most emotionally invested was my wife, Donna, who in thirty years of marriage had never made a single comment about a player or game. One December morning when I was out in Phoenix, I awakened to find this e-mail message from her: "I think that Diaw's really going to be a player!" That's when I knew this was something different.

## ***THE BACKSTORY***

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It was a fortuitous bonus that the season turned out infinitely more interesting than I thought it would. The postseason was so long and intriguing that the backbone of the book consists of those final six weeks of the season. And so we begin at the end.

- Jack McCallum  
August 2006  
Stone Harbor, N.J.

# PROLOGUE

**Phoenix, June 3, 2006 . . . . .**  
**GAME 6, WESTERN CONFERENCE FINALS**  
**DALLAS 102, PHOENIX 93**

*It wasn't until the end—the very end—that Steve Nash truly failed. Through seventy-nine regular-season games (he missed three with injuries) and three enervating playoff series, twenty games, Nash had not always played superbly, but he had always played nobly, attempting to fulfill the myriad responsibilities he had as the Phoenix Suns' point guard and cocaptain. But now, when it was time for him to respond to a question from coach Mike D'Antoni . . .*

*Steve? You got anything?*

The question hung in the air in a hushed Suns locker room in US Airways Center. Shawn Marion, the Suns' other cocaptain, a reluctant talker even in the best of times, had already offered a couple of the requisite banalities. *It was a great season. It was great playing with all you guys. Let's come back strong.* Platitudes, really, but nobody expected anything else. Platitudes are the lingua franca of sports, and, anyway, this was the time for platitudes. D'Antoni himself and Suns' owner Robert Sarver, two men accustomed to holding a stage, had already addressed the group and nothing they had said would ever find its way to Bartlett's.

D'Antoni: "All right, guys, unbelievable job. You guys gave everything you had and you should be proud."

Sarver: "I'm really proud of you guys, given the setbacks we had this year. You guys brought it every night and you won your division,

fifty-four games, took it all the way to here. But we're gonna be even better next year, come back hard, and you guys did a great job and thank you very much."

Actually, neither D'Antoni nor Sarver thought for a minute that *everyone had given everything they had*. But the Suns, collectively, achieved much more than anyone thought they would and, over the last eight weeks, had done it so dramatically. The Suns had finished the season with one word attached to them: *resilient*. So the message delivered by coach and owner, really, was the only one that made sense.

*Steve? You got anything?*

How many times during this eventful season—which included injuries, overtime nightmares, a fracture between ownership and front office, battles with referees, a couple of postseason miracles—had Nash dribbled himself into exhaustion, as he had in the dying moments of this season-ending loss to the Mavericks? How many times had he stood in the Suns' locker room, either before a game or at halftime, urging his teammates to get out early and warm up, preparation being one of the principal reasons for his unlikely rise to the top? How many times had he envisioned his Suns beating the Mavericks (the team that two summers ago had let him walk into free agency and into the eager arms of the Suns), the kind of sublime vengeance only a competitive athlete could understand?

*Steve? You got anything?*

How many times had Nash conversed with either D'Antoni or one of the Suns' other four assistant coaches about strategy, most of those talks predicated toward tweaking an offense that, over the past two seasons, had revolutionized the NBA, even as it left the franchise one agonizing step from a shot at a championship? How many practice jumpers had he launched, trying always to further refine a sweet stroke that was partly responsible for his rise to prominence among the NBA's point guards?

*Steve? You got anything?*

## PROLOGUE

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For Nash, the season had been bittersweet, as every season is for players with unquenchable ambition and unrealized championship hopes. More sweet than bitter, to be sure. But frustration, doubt, and failure had been dogged companions from October to June, particularly for one so competitive as Nash. Win a second straight Most Valuable Player award . . . but deal with the doubters who say it should've gone to LeBron James, Kobe Bryant, or Dwyane Wade, players with more spectacular athleticism, as well as the whispers that his skin color (white) had something to do with the honor. Play well . . . but play always in pain, too—a congenitally creaky back, tight hamstrings, sore knees, wobbly ankles. Achieve so much as a team without an injured Amare' Stoudemire, an integral part of last year's team . . . but worry that Stoudemire's return next season will upset the delicate chemistry that had been built with new additions such as free-agent shooting guard Raja Bell and multipositioned Atlanta Hawks castoff Boris Diaw, benign additions to the locker room. Be happy for good pal and former Dallas teammate Dirk Nowitzki, whose outside shooting had helped throttle the Suns, and who was going to represent the West in the Finals . . . but be sad that Nowitzki, with whom he had twice broken bread during this Western Conference playoff, had beaten him to the big stage.

*Steve? You got anything?*

Since Nash arrived in Phoenix (the team that had originally drafted him in 1996 and for which he had played the first two seasons of his career before being traded to Dallas) in the summer of 2004, appearing at his introductory press conference in a pair of golf shoes (the only hard-soled kicks in his closet), he had become the face of the franchise, a face so popular that assistant coach Alvin Gentry once opened a box addressed to him to find a short note, a basketball, and an instant camera. "Could you please get Steve Nash to sign my ball and take a picture of him doing it?" was the plea.

There is not a face like it in all of American pro sports. Nash more closely resembles street urchin than street baller, hollow eyes,

## PROLOGUE

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long nose, long, straight hair that he brushes away from his eyes and hooks behind his ears, sometimes in mid-play. Nash reads books, dabbles in lefty politics, has a *BOYCOTT V&A* sticker plastered to his SUV, and tosses out a little Zen from time to time. "I don't like to build maps," he told me one day at practice after I had asked him if he has a favorite spot on the floor to shoot from. He's Canadian, too, giving him automatic legitimacy as a peace-loving anticapitalist. And so a certain counterculture ethos had settled in around Nash, and, by extension, the Suns.

But the idea of Nash as a symbol of something—the Indie Point Guard, the First Counterculture MVP—in fact obscures the central truth about him: He is first and foremost a gym rat. He doesn't fit in basketball around reading Karl Marx; he reads a little Marx and shoots a million jump shots. Only such a player could lead the D'Antoni revolution.

In the summers of his teen years, D'Antoni, the son of a celebrated high school coach in West Virginia and the younger brother of an outstanding player who is now on his coaching staff, played six hours a day. That included three hours of solitary ballhandling and shooting drills—the hard part that he loved—before three hours of playing pickup games at night. Lewis D'Antoni never pushed his youngest son or gave him much instruction—that came from older brother Dan—but he did free him from summer jobs so he could play ball. When D'Antoni got to Marshall University, he was the one who rounded up every member of his team in the off-season and bugged them about showing up at three o'clock for pickup ball in the gym.

Twenty years later, that's what Nash was doing at Santa Clara University. He and his buddies would be sitting around at night, chilling, talking sports, music, and women, and, when *SportsCenter* came on, that was the signal for Nash to get off his butt. "I felt uncomfortable being comfortable," says Nash. "I'd call the team manager, get the key to the gym, call some teammates, and go shoot for a couple hours."

The careers of player and coach hardly run parallel. Nash maximized his talents, hardened his body, toughened his mind, and, over the last two seasons, played point guard at a level at which only the pass-first greats of the game—Magic Johnson, Bob Cousy, John Stockton—were mentioned. D'Antoni, also a point guard, played in only 130 NBA games, and 50 more for the St. Louis Spirits of the old ABA, and always rued a certain lack of mental toughness, and a dubious outside touch, that kept him from really making it.

But in another time, perhaps, Nash would've been forced to follow the road less taken on which D'Antoni eventually traveled to basketball greatness. D'Antoni came into a league with only seventeen teams (there are thirty now) and precious few roster spots. He was a bit player for two seasons, went to the ABA briefly before the merger with the NBA, then came back with the San Antonio Spurs and got cut. A vision of his future pro basketball life passed before him—a career of splinters and garbage minutes and running the other team's offense during practices, and that was only if he *did* make it back with a team.

So D'Antoni, about whom there was nothing Italian except his surname, packed up and went to Italy to recharge his basketball batteries. He came back for one more try at the NBA, then abruptly left again, and made this break final. He then spent the next ten years blazing his name across European basketball, the Magic Johnson of Philips Milan, the most famous team in the Italian League. He didn't look or act anything like Nash—he has boyish features and a West Virginia aw-shucks approachable demeanor, none of that mysterious Canadian reticence—but, like Nash, he had that ineffable something known as *style*. Italy loved him. He loved Italy. And most of all he loved to play. His coach, Dan Peterson, coined the phrase *spizzare sangue*—spit blood—to describe how he wanted his team to play. D'Antoni spat blood. Nash spits blood.

As much as they like and respect each other, and have interests outside of sports, basketball is the central—really the only—connec-

tion between D'Antoni and Nash. And when they came together for the first time in the 2004–05 season, the results were electric. Without Nash, the Suns had averaged 94.2 points during the 2003–04 season; with Nash running D'Antoni's offense, they averaged a league-best 110.4. The Suns had won twenty-nine games in 2003–04; with Nash running D'Antoni's offense, they won sixty-two. It was one of the most dramatic turnarounds in NBA history, engineered by a point guard from a hockey nation and a coach who had spent most of his professional life in a country known for pasta and ass-pinching.

When Stoudemire, who averaged almost twenty-seven points per game last season, went down with a knee injury in training camp last October, the supposition was the Suns could not possibly score at last season's clip. D'Antoni insisted they were going to average 110 points, nay, *needed* to average that to be successful. His stated goal was to win fifty games and make the playoffs. They won fifty-four and had the fourth-best record in the NBA. And they came close to 110, too, leading the league with 108.4 points per game and setting all-time records in three-point shots taken and made.

It wasn't as if D'Antoni had invented anything; rather, he had reimplemented a run-and-gun style that had been popular into the late 1980s. It is astonishing the degree to which the casual sports fan has it wrong about the NBA. As with the perception that coaching is little more than rolling out the balls, the casual fan perceives the NBA as a bunch of listless underachievers running around aimlessly, tossing up bad shots, ignoring the rudiments of dribbling and passing, and treating defense as if it were to be avoided like the chipped beef special at Denny's. In point of fact, quite the opposite was going on—too little running, too much stodgy offense, too many defensive schemes, an overcoached product that had removed much of the spontaneity of the game and put a premium on isolation alignments designed to get one player the ball and turn his four teammates into statues.

That's what D'Antoni wanted to change. And so he became the prophet for the new version of run-and-gun, and Nash was the apos-



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