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NBA 1994-95 PREVIEW

Suns to shine in toughest division

Don Smith
 For the Oregon Daily Emerald

1. Phoenix Suns. In probably Charles Barkley's final NBA season, Suns' GM Jerry Colangelo should be credited for doing much to help Sir Charles capture the league championship that has eluded him his entire career. Colangelo had an extremely busy offseason, and his efforts will be fruitful for the Suns as Phoenix should hold off Seattle and capture the Western Conference title and eventually the NBA Championship. The key acquisition for Phoenix is forward Danny Manning, who, combined with Barkley, will give the Suns the NBA's best pair of starting forwards. Manning is an excellent scorer (over 20 ppg last season), as well as a fine passer. Wayman Tisdale also came to the Suns over the summer, and may start at center due to Oliver Miller's departure. Tisdale shot .500 last season as a forward, and is a productive scorer and rebounder. Kevin Johnson, A.C. Green and Dan Majerle round out the core of the Suns — and all are worthy of All-Star consideration. **Key to the season:** Coach Paul Westphal has an unenviable task in trying to balance the minutes of all his quality players. Expect trouble if minutes become a problem for Manning, Tisdale or Majerle.

2. Seattle SuperSonics. A relatively quiet offseason should lead to a slight decline for Seattle. The Sonics traded leading scorer Ricky Pierce to Golden State for Sarunas Marciulionus, who cannot score at Pierce's level and is frequently injured. Marciulionus is a tough competitor, however, and will help the team maintain its intensity. Shawn Kemp is poised for a superstar season. Kemp's on-court relationship with point guard Gary Payton is vital to the team, as these two form the heart of the Sonics. Payton is coming off his first All-Star season and figures to shine again this campaign. The most important Seattle SuperSonics, however, is head coach George Karl. Karl has taught his team to play smothering defense and work together as a unified force. Though Karl often comes into conflict with his players, they respect him and listen to his orders when it matters the most. Despite the many positives regarding the Sonics, they are not likely to be able to surpass the Suns and capture their second-straight Pacific Division crown. **Key to the season:** Kendall Gill complained before this season about not receiving enough minutes per game last season. Karl must find a way to appease Gill or he will be a problem all season.

3. Golden State Warriors. No team in the NBA has more talent than the team from Oakland. Unfortunately, no team is more injury plagued. Tim Hardaway is one of the top-three point guards in the league and returns this season after sitting out all last year with a knee injury. Just as Hardaway returned, however, forward Chris Mullin suffered a knee injury and will miss a significant portion of the coming year. So it goes with the Warriors, who somehow manage to be dangerous despite the myriad of injuries. Latrell Sprewell has become the top gun in Oakland, earning All-NBA First Team honors last year. The sweet-shooting guard should continue to rise to the top of the league and will combine with Hardaway to form the NBA's best back court (with apologies to Portland's Clyde Drexler and Rod Strickland). **Key to the season:** Chris Webber, who is currently a contract holdout, must sign a contract and join the team early. The Warriors are decidedly softer without Webber occupying the lane. The key addition of Rony Seikaly will also help.

4. Portland Trail Blazers. This is a season of questions for the Blazers, as a number of issues surrounding the team remain unclear. Will Chris Dudley provide the answer defensively in the middle? Is Clyde Drexler really back to his 1991-92 level of play, or will he experience a decline? Can

Clifford Robinson remain dedicated to playing basketball, or will his contract difficulty create a problem? Who should receive more playing time: Harvey Grant, Jerome Kersey or Tracy Murray? And what about P.J. Carlesimo? All these conflicts need to be resolved over the next nine months, and the success of the team hangs in the balance. The likely result will be a winning season, but early elimination in the postseason. **Key to the season:** Defensive specialist Dick Harter has come to the Blazers as an assistant coach. If Harter can get the entire team to play inspired defense, Portland could be the surprise team of 1994-95.

5. Sacramento Kings. The comeback player of the year in the NBA is already decided. Point guard Bobby Hurley almost died last year in an auto accident, suffering collapsed lungs and a severed trachea. This year, he appears to be returning to the Kings' starting lineup. Hurley's amazing comeback will be an inspiration to the Kings and will reflect in the win column. Former Portland General Manager Geoff Petrie has also signed some decent free agents, such as forward/center Frank Brickowski and forward Alaa Abdelnaby. With All-Star Mitch Richmond anchoring the team, the Kings should finally begin a slow rise. However, the Kings will need a good measure of luck to grab the fifth spot in the Pacific. **Key to the season:** The late signing of draft pick Brian Grant. Grant provides solid rebounding and should be an important part of the Kings' scheme at the center position.

6. Los Angeles Lakers. Can the Lakers really fall this far? They can, but improved effort by certain team members would keep this from occurring. The top man for Los Angeles this season should be forward Cedric Ceballos, who showed flashes of brilliance in Phoenix over the past few seasons. Ceballos should be the top scorer for the Lakers, and a top rebounder. If Anthony Peeler can remain healthy, he should be able to provide offensive punch as well. Together with second-year man Nick Van Exel, Peeler forms one-half of a potentially dangerous scoring combination. The one player who really needs to dedicate himself to hard work this year is Elden Campbell. Campbell possesses plenty of talent but has yet to make use of his gifts and develop into a force in the league. Center Vlade Divac had his best season last year, and should have another fine campaign. **Key to the season:** Development of young players. Peeler, Van Exel, George Lynch and rookie Eddie Jones are all talented players. Their growth as players is vital to the future of the franchise.

7. Los Angeles Clippers. It simply doesn't get worse than this. The Clippers are a poor team anyway, and playing in the Pacific will really mean trouble for them this season. Look for the Clippers to win fewer than 20 games and possibly resemble the Dallas Mavericks of the past two seasons in ineptitude. Poor management is to blame for the Clippers' slide as several key figures are gone. Danny Manning left last season in a trade with Atlanta for Dominique Wilkins. Wilkins, who became a free agent last summer, quickly departed Los Angeles for Boston, leaving the Clippers nothing to show for Manning's departure. Had Clippers' management agreed to deals with Portland, Miami or one of several other teams interested in Manning, they could have acquired young players who could not leave at the end of the season. In addition to Wilkins, guards Ron Harper and Mark Jackson are also elsewhere this year. Harper fled to Chicago, while Jackson was traded to Indiana for Pooh Richardson, Malik Sealy and draft choices. **Key to the season:** The best player left in Los Angeles is draft pick Lamond Murray. If he develops quickly and adapts to the NBA game, he could quickly become a top NBA player and the leader of this team.

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