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Mike D'Antoni and the Lakers Are a Victim of Coach's Own Stubbornness



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Jan 30, 2013

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The [Los Angeles Lakers](#) were the easily biggest winners of the offseason, bringing in an impressive coup headlined by Steve Nash and Dwight Howard that many believed would usher in the championship reign of yet another super team.

Halfway through the season, though, the Lakers have been anything but winners.

In the summer, it almost seemed as if the Lakers were playing [fantasy basketball](#) by constructing a roster featuring four future Hall-of-Fame players in Nash and Howard as well as Kobe Bryant and Pau Gasol. The front office seemed to pay little attention to real team building, failing to identify the kind of system the team would play and recruiting role players to fit that system.

Former coach Mike Brown's decision to implement the Princeton Offense this season ultimately cost him his job, but at least last season he incorporated the "Twin Tower" concepts so effective with the Spurs when he was an assistant coach, using Gasol and Andrew Bynum in a way similar to how Gregg Popovich had used Tim Duncan and David Robinson.

Brown was ill-suited as the Lakers' coach, but Mike D'Antoni, currently 12-20 along L.A.'s sidelines, could not be a poorer fit for this team. These Lakers do not mesh well together, but not because they lack talent. The flaw lies in D'Antoni's offensive system.

As coach of the [Phoenix Suns](#), D'Antoni won hundreds of games by playing Amar'e Stoudemire at the five, flooding the floor with shooters, and letting Steve Nash lead a quick pace. His system calls for a fast-paced style of play with knock down shooters on the perimeter.

This Lakers team is severely mismatched for D'Antoni's system and resembles nothing like one of his typical rosters. In Phoenix, D'Antoni had high-flying athletes such as Leandro Barbosa, Shawn Marion, Raja Bell, a younger Nash, and a healthier Stoudemire.

The Lakers lack the type of personnel of his teams with the Suns, which despite having a roster perfectly woven with his system, still lost in the Western Conference finals in consecutive seasons. He produced a lot of glamour, but no gold-not even an [NBA](#) Finals appearance.

The Lakers' veteran, slow roster is more suited for a half-court, inside out game focused on execution. Only Nash fits D'Antoni system, but at age 39, he is much older and slower than during his MVP years.

The team instead features two big men in Gasol and Howard who need the ball in the post. D'Antoni, though, has little to no track record of success with true centers.

When given Shaquille O'Neal in Phoenix, D'Antoni had difficulty using him correctly and eventually left the team because Shaq did not fit his offensive vision. Similarly, D'Antoni failed in New York in large part due to his inability to construct an offense based on Stoudemire and Tyson Chandler crowding the paint.

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In fact, the biggest takeaway from D'Antoni's prior coaching stints is that he can only succeed if the players fit the system; he will not change it to fit them. He is a "system coach" in the truest sense of the moniker. He knows how to coach his system, but not how to coach his players.

D'Antoni's devotion to his system illustrates why he recently benched Gasol for the smaller, more athletic Earl Clark. His system is also forcing management to [consider compromising their size advantage](#) by moving Gasol or Howard to acquire outside shooters and athletic swingmen.

Instead of sitting players such as Gasol and Antawn Jamison, D'Antoni should focus on helping them regain their stardom. He needs to adapt to their style of play and not force this team-full of veteran players who have engrained their habits-to adapt to his style.

In the ideal scenario in which Phil Jackson were hired instead of D'Antoni, the Lakers would have played through Gasol, Howard, and Bryant in the post, emphasizing the strengths of the team's franchise players. Even Jackson's supposedly rigid Triangle offense would have granted Nash, who felt restrained by the Princeton Offense, the freedom to probe the defense.

D'Antoni, on the other hand, is a coach who fundamentally does not believe in post play. In effect, he sees back-to-the-basket centers as nothing more than intrusive roadblocks in the lane.

As part of the Knicks, D'Antoni voiced that [he was not a fan of a possible pursuit of Howard](#) as the big man angled for a trade from the [Orlando Magic](#). He told the front office stories about how the coaches of USA Basketball loved Chandler, and that the Knicks would be wise to stick with Chandler instead of bringing in a traditional low-post center such as Howard.

Moreover, whereas Jackson's eleven rings have earned him the authority and confidence to call out any player, D'Antoni has been unwilling to criticize Howard, painfully aware that when he tried to make Carmelo Anthony play within his system in New York last year, the Knicks quickly forced him out and chose the player over the coach.

D'Antoni has long been non-confrontational, a coaching personality unbecoming a team filled with several players accustomed to serving as the offensive focal point. On the other hand, the Lakers under Jackson instead would have had a leader of men to manage these egos.

Short of the Lakers completely overhauling their roster, D'Antoni and this Lakers team can only rise up from the basement of the Western Conference if learns to adapt to his players.

He needs to take note of how Erik Spoelstra tweaked schemes in Miami until he learned what worked best. It took a season longer than expected for Spoelstra to figure out that his team performed best with a small-ball lineup and defensive pressure, but he did it eventually and has a ring to show for it.

He could also glance at the Brooklyn Nets, whose early struggles have vanished ever since P.J. Carlesimo took the coaching reins from Avery Johnson and tailored the team's tempo to the team's athleticism and talent, or even at Lakers interim coach Bernie Bickerstaff, who simply stepped back and watched his team play freely and fluidly before D'Antoni imposed his system.

Just halfway through a single season, D'Antoni has been an unequivocal failure. There is no middle ground, not with a franchise so accustomed to legends, banners, and trophies.

For the Lakers to succeed, they need to help Howard regain his dominance and flank him with Gasol as opposed to quarantining the Spaniard to the three-point line. They need to slow down their offense and enable Nash and Kobe to rest their tired legs.

Only this is the wrong coach, wrong leader, and wrong system to lift these sinking Lakers.

1. Ben Golliver and Rob Mahoney. "[Give And Go: Gauging Dwight Howard trade possibilities for Lakers](#)", Sports Illustrated.
2. Adrian Wojnarowski. "[Forget Kobe vs. Dwight, the Lakers will pay for doubling down on failed D'Antoni-Nash reunion](#)", Yahoo! Sports.

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