

as his mother, Clarice Blanks, to Dakar, Senegal, where he participated in Basketball Without Borders, the NBA's goodwill mission abroad. Once his work in Senegal was done, he took them for a vacation in Morocco and then Rome. (Add travel to that short list of diversions that don't increase your chance of dying.)

One cause that is particularly important to Blanks is the Ron Brown Fellowship, on whose steering committee he serves. The fellowship reaches out to African-American youth attending top universities, awards them scholarships, and trains them to become philanthropic difference-makers in their own right.

"I'm incredibly passionate about this," Blanks says. "I'm very interested in the youth and people who are motivated to be successful but may not have the resources. These kids are brilliant, and supporting them is a great way to give back."

Can They Win It All?

The Suns already are a good team. Last year, they reached the Western Conference Finals, losing to the Los Angeles Lakers, who went on to win the championship. So Blanks' mandate is a measured one, in his own words, to "go from great to greater."

Channing Frye, who's in his second year with the Suns and a product of St. Mary's High School in central Phoenix, sets fairly moderate expectations: "I'm sure he'll do whatever he needs to do in order for us to continue our success as a team," he says. "We have a system in place that we know works, so he's just got to do the best he can to continue to bring in good guys."

So Blanks is not being called upon to work miracles. Or is he? When you've just been to the conference finals, there's really just the NBA finals and a championship ring to shoot for.

Suns veteran forward Grant Hill says of Blanks: "This is a team that's had success but a team that has come up short, so he has a chance to make a mark on this team."

But can the Suns really improve on last season, even after losing leading scorer Amar'e Stoudemire? Can they actually win a championship, something this above-average organization has never done? (They've reached the league finals in 1976 and 1993, the conference

At a press conference in August, Suns President Lon Babby called Blanks a "basketball genius."



finals nine times and have 29 total playoff appearances.)

When the question is put to their new GM, he answers at first with optimism. "With the right effort, the right personnel, that would be my goal." But never one to be caught in bravado, he quickly adds: "I try not to be a prophet; there are so many elements and moving pieces in this business, it's hard to say who's going to be the next team."

But can it be done?

"I think it's very possible," he says. "Things have to align. It's an incredibly difficult thing to do. It ain't like walking up Camelback."

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