

Hard Work, Heavy Travel

Perhaps one source of Blanks' confidence, and of others' confidence in him, is the certain knowledge that no one will outwork him. When asked about his hobbies, he has to think about it, then answers: "In this industry, it's very hard to not be working."

He thinks about it some more.

"I enjoy adventure that does not increase your chances of death."

An example?

"Trying to walk up Camelback."

He explains, not without a certain pride, "I'm over 40 years old, but you age in dog years in this business. I'm like 1.5 years for every year. I've got like 400,000 miles on me. I've been around the world a billion times."

That's because player prospects now pop up everywhere, from West Africa to Central Europe to the Far East, not to mention coast to coast in the U.S. It's on these various journeys that Blanks has found time for another semi-hobby: reading. His preference is nonfiction, but a stranger recently turned him on to the virtues of fiction.

"A lady on a plane told me it doesn't have to have happened to be true," he says. In other words, fiction can feature very real human experiences.

This simple, straightforward statement reveals some characteristics you'd desire from someone in the position of evaluating people: Number one, he listens. Number two, he allows his own pre-existing opinions to be influenced by what he hears.

His current favorite book is *Before I Forget*, by Leonard Pitts, the story of a black former R&B superstar of the '70s who discovers he's suffering from the early onset of Alzheimer's disease. "It changed my life," Blanks says.

Blanks also says he enjoys "new and random things if I have enough time." Randomness seems to play a surprisingly significant role in an individual so focused on his job. He likes to digress in conversation, calling it a "walkabout," in which he follows an idea, even if it strays from the central topic, just to see where it leads.

He also uses the term "walkabout" to describe his exploration of the fitness club business following his retirement from playing basketball in 1998. He considered fitness and the carwash business before ultimately joining the Spurs as a scout in 2000.

What significance does the willingness to walkabout have for an NBA general manager? Perhaps it's opening up to the unexpected. This can be critical in an environment where blue-chip prospects have been identified and coveted since high school, and it's often the unexpected finds, such as Suns backup point guard Goran Dragic, that can put a team over the top.

"Everybody is looking (for unknown talent)," Babby says, adding that "the question is, can you find it and can you spot it when you see it? The track record is clear on that (with Blanks)."

Clear to basketball insiders perhaps, but to the rest of us, the track record is an unknown. It is very difficult to draw back the curtain on the scouting process within NBA front offices, to identify who really advocated on behalf of specific players who panned out.

Babby would not identify a particular move or series of moves that proved Blanks' value to him, preferring to point to a generalized "body of work."

Blanks won't discuss specific successes either. "You won't ever hear me say that that was me. That's not what it's about for me. This is about winning, and winning is about 'team.'"

What obscures Blanks' record, at least from public view, is that he has never been a general manager before, and so he can't be judged on the cumulative effectiveness of his group. The buck never stopped with him. Suns fans can only assume that all this non-disclosure is evidence of outstanding accomplishment in scouting rather than its absence.

What we do know is that during his time scouting for the Spurs the team hit on four late first-round picks, a position that often doesn't yield an NBA career. These picks included Tony Parker, John Salmons and Leandro Barbosa. Similarly, while in Cleveland, the Cavs picked Shannon Brown on a 25th pick, Daniel Gibson on a 42nd pick, and J.J. Hickson on 19th pick. All are considered good choices in retrospect.

A more tangible element colleagues point to is Blanks' approach. "It's really about the process," Babby says. "You need to have the system in place to increase the likelihood that you're going to find those people and make the right decisions."

In particular, Blanks' system includes a greater reliance on analytics, which integrates more data-driven analysis into the scouting process. Traditionally the realm of number-crazed baseball folk, analytics is now becoming a buzzword in basketball.

"(Blanks) does a lot of things with analytics that will improve our organization," Gentry says. "It helps you eliminate mistakes more so than anything."

Predictably, Blanks doesn't want to reveal too much about his personal approach to analytics either, citing "trade secrets." But he does say, "I employ most of it - statistical, psychological and other forms of analytics." One example Blanks is willing to share is the concept of looking at historical data of players who have come through the draft and comparing their statistics to comparable current-day draft-eligible players to measure how good they might be in their NBA careers.

The Single Man

The impression of a man married to his work is solidified by Blanks' bachelor status, which he does not decry. "I'm mostly happily single," he says.

Not to say he doesn't have women in his life. Blanks has two daughters, Riley (20) and Bryn (17). (As for any previous marriages, Blanks states, "I can assure you that both of my children have two loving parents who care about each other's well-being and only want the best for each of them.") Riley attends the University of Virginia and is an accomplished photographer. Bryn plays volleyball and is a talented guitarist. In August, he traveled with them as well

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— SUNS GM LANCE BLANKS