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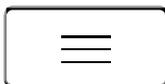
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Hawks spurred to another makeover

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Atlanta Hawks general manager Danny Ferry, right, introduces Atlanta Hawks new coach Mike Budenholzer at Philips Arena Wednesday morning in Atlanta. JASON GETZ / JGETZ@AJC.COM

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BY [STEVE HUMMER](#) - THE ATLANTA JOURNAL-CONSTITUTION

The San Antonio-ization of Atlanta gained considerable speed this week when a former Spurs player/executive brought in the current Spurs top assistant to coach the Hawks.

General manager Danny Ferry and his new hire Mike Budenholzer – Bud to his buds – have a long history with San Antonio's only major league franchise. Given that the Spurs are playing for a fifth NBA title in 14 years, it is a connection to trumpet.

What next in the name of importing San Antonio-style success to Atlanta – or San Atlanta, if you will.

Imagine an overrun Spanish mission close by the World of Coke.

Alas, one does not simply inhale another team's accomplishments, like secondhand smoke. Over the course of the 2012-13 season, three coaches with San Antonio ties – Avery Johnson, Mike Brown and Vinny Del Negro – were fired. Another, Orlando's Jacque Vaughn, won all of 20 games.

Trying to transplant the Spurs Way is a complicated operation, each case delicate and fraught with variables. And that comes directly from the source.

"You guys are the Atlanta Hawks. You are not the San Antonio Spurs," said Gregg Popovich, the NBA's longest-tenured head coach, on his 17th season in the Alamo City. As if we needed to be reminded of that fact.

"All the things that might have worked here, that doesn't mean they will work there. I think Bud is going to take the things organizationally or fundamentally that are sound for basketball. These things win and lose, it doesn't matter where you are. After that, you take on the Atlanta character – whatever the skill sets are, the players, the fan base, ownership's vision – and adjust accordingly."

What Popovich has in San Antonio is almost impossible to rebuild upon the shifting sands of the NBA. He's been there forever. Spurs general manager R.C. Buford has been a permanent part of the team since 1994. Over that same span, the Hawks have had six head coaches (including Budenholzer) and four general managers. Stability and a patient faith in their method is the cornerstone of the Spurs Way.

Budenholzer, 43, cut his teeth on that ideal.

Lucky is the man who has one Pop to guide him. Truly blessed is the man with two.

Budenholzer's birth Pop, Vince, coached high school and community college basketball in New Mexico and Arizona for a quarter century. In 2005 he was inducted into the Arizona Sports Hall of Fame. The next time Popovich saw Vince after that, he dropped to one knee and began bowing in exaggerated reverence.

Mike came along as the last of seven children, the fifth boy, and the only child interested in following dad's coaching lead. He was the one following Vince to the gym in the afternoons, although he never actually played for his father in high school.

The hand-off from one Pop to the other began when Popovich recruited Budenholzer to Division III Pomona-Pitzer (Calif.) out of Holbrook (Ariz.) High School. Then the coach ran off to join the NBA, as a Spurs assistant, before his recruit arrived for the 1988 season.

"He wasn't that good. I knew I had to leave," Popovich joked. "Which means he could be a hell of a coach. I always figure we who couldn't make the league become coaches."

Budenholzer and Popovich reunited shortly after Budenholzer graduated, and the young guard got one season of playing and coaching abroad (Denmark) out of his system. Living in the San Francisco area with no other prospects, Budenholzer took a call from Popovich, then a Golden State assistant – and jumped at the offer to help out put together practice video for the Warriors.

What a glamorous offer it was.

"I told him, 'Don't talk to me, don't ask for tickets, just give (the finished video) to me and leave me alone,'" Popovich said.

"He did that for a whole year. He wasn't hired; he just did it to get his feet wet."

In 1994, after Popovich had returned to San Antonio as general manager, he went looking for Budenholzer again. Calling back to Arizona, Pop II reached Pop I. And spoke words any father would long to hear.

"I still remember how he put it: 'If you can get hold of him, I might just hire his (expletive),'” Vince Budenholzer recalled.

"He kind of became Pop's boy," Vince said.

So, did he mind handing over his son to another Pop?

"No. We didn't mind at all going to all those championships," Vince said.

After only two years as video coordinator, Budenholzer moved to the Spurs' bench as the lowest ranking

assistant coach. He then inched steadily to the spot immediately to Popovich's right.

Initially impressed with Budenholzer's innate feel for the game, Popovich came to rely more and more upon his assistant, especially in matters of personnel and practice management.

"As time went on we were more co-head coaches than anything else," Popovich said.

He credits Budenholzer with being the driving force behind the 2011 draft-day trade that sent point guard George Hill to Indianapolis for small forward Kawhi Leonard. Both players have emerged as important pieces in this postseason.

Hill was a Popovich favorite, but behind Tony Parker, he'd have little opportunity to blossom in San Antonio. To the end, Popovich resisted the deal. "(Budenholzer) made me pull the trigger, and it has been a great trade for both teams," he said.

A major aspect of the San Antonio Way is free and open – and if need be, loud – debate, a sort of full-contact Socratic Method. A yes man is considered not worth the air used to inflate a basketball. Budenholzer and Ferry both are staunch adherents.

One advantage San Antonio possesses that no one else ever will is one of history's notable power forwards. "No matter how you slice it, Tim Duncan makes a lot of the things we did look pretty good," Popovich said.

"Organizationally, we do some really good things, but after those fundamentals you have to know who your people are and you have to adjust. (Budenholzer) is going to be able to do that."

What Duncan, nicknamed the Big Fundamental, embodies is the style of play that made San Antonio a consistent, if not exactly glamorous, champion. Smart, solid, unselfish, concerned more with substance than style. All the things that work against NBA TV ratings.

Describing his experience in San Antonio, as a player in 2000-03 and two stints in the front office, Ferry said, "You felt like you were a part of something bigger than yourself, more so than other places."

The Hawks new coach seems to fit that template.

"I'm definitely not a sexy hire. Luckily that wasn't on Danny's priority list," Budenholzer said smiling.

During Wednesday's brief media gathering in Atlanta, before Budenholzer returned to San Antonio to finish out the NBA Finals, he often underscored two of Popovich's traits that he most wanted to bring with him to the Hawks. An uncompromising competitive spirit and a genuine affection for his players.

Beyond that, the Spurs Way is the product of overall intelligent design, be it the ability to find a Tony Parker in France or a Manu Ginobili in Argentina or the appreciation for a well-turned pick-and-roll. And for this hire to

work, that will have to become the Hawks Way, too.

Ferry politely mentions that there has been much about the recent Hawks to be commended. At the same time, his model for making them better will borrow from a franchise in south central Texas.

“We will have to build a corporate knowledge here on how we want to play,” the GM said. “There will have to be a reminder every day, to put an arm around the players, hold them accountable to make hard cuts, to set good screens. Ultimately you want a team on the floor that has great habits, that does things hard and does things smart.”

Turning the Highlight Factory into the International House of Fundamentals has but begun.

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And then it comes down to a ping pong ball. There is no San Antonio Way without Tim Duncan. Good thing Billy Knight didn't have that pick.

5:33 p.m. Jun. 1, 2013



Missouri1983

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It should be interesting.

12:36 a.m. Jun. 2, 2013

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