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Budenholzer deals with double-duty

By Steve Aschburner

CHICAGO – Long characterized as a “copycat” league for trends ranging from basketball strategies to hiring practices, the NBA has a new move that everybody’s getting in on: Coaches doing double-duty as general managers, presidents of basketball operations or other titles vested with personnel control.

The latest to take all that on is Atlanta’s **Mike Budenholzer**, who had decision-making responsibility dropped in his lap last week in the fallout from the Hawks’ front-office mess. GM **Danny Ferry**, beleaguered after making racially charged comments about free agent **Luol Deng**, took an indefinite leave of absence, and Hawks CEO **Steve Koonin** appointed Budenholzer to be the team’s head of basketball operations for now.

His circumstances are unusual, but Budenholzer joins the likes of the Los Angeles Clippers’ **Doc Rivers**, Minnesota’s **Flip Saunders**, Detroit’s **Stan Van Gundy** and of course San Antonio’s **Gregg Popovich** in holding added clout beyond their work on the court.

Until Rivers beefed up his role last year when he moved from Boston to L.A., Popovich was more of an exception. Most teams in recent years preferred to separate the powers, believing that a coach focuses on tonight (win the game) while a front-office exec thinks about tomorrow, next season and several years after that.

So is this the start of a new trend? A pendulum swing?

“I don’t know, those pendulums seem like they’re always swinging,” Budenholzer said Thursday in Chicago, in town for the annual NBA coaches meetings. “There are a couple of people who have done that, and obviously Pop’s been doing that for a long time, with **R.C. [Buford]**, Spurs GM to Popovich’s president title] doing a ton. Those two together have been just an amazing combination. So I don’t know.”

The long-established view that the jobs should be kept separate has led to some coaches, hungry for more input on their teams’ architecture, finding themselves on the sidewalk. The most recent example: **Jason Kidd**, whose power play in Brooklyn wound up with Kidd coaching in Milwaukee and coach **Lionel Hollins** slipping in beneath GM **Billy King** in the Nets’ flowchart.

“A lot of people question it,” Saunders said. “Agents especially — they don’t necessarily like someone having that much control over their clients. Because as a coach, you can basically dictate how much you’re going to pay a guy.” By growing or limiting a player’s role, that is.

Saunders added duties in the opposite direction from Budenholzer and Rivers — he was the Timberwolves’ basketball boss when he appointed himself as head coach for 2014-15, taking over for

the retired **Rick Adelman**. But Saunders made his NBA bones on the sideline, coaching Minnesota, Detroit and Washington for 15-plus seasons.

“I believe, if you look at many of the successful football teams, they were built that way,” Saunders said Thursday. “Look at **[Bill] Parcells**. **[Bill] Belichick**, he’s got total control. Then in our sport, look at the success that Nellie **[Don Nelson]** had — he pretty much ran the whole thing [in Milwaukee, Dallas and Golden State]. Then **Pat Riley**’s situation, when he pretty much ran a lot of those things.”

Just as Popovich has “nurtured” Buford to work in concert on personnel matter, Saunders, Rivers and Van Gundy also have titular GMs or other execs to tackle salary caps, administer scouting and handle other chores that would pull them away from player development and game preparation.

“The best thing about it is,” Saunders said, “I believe in most organizations when you have a falling out, the tendency is there’s a relationship that is lost between the coach and the owner. Because maybe they don’t all have the same agenda from management to the coaching staff. Well, when somebody is your coach *and* your president or GM, he’s going to talk to the owner. So there’s never going to be a disconnect on what the message is.”

Rick Carlisle, Dallas Mavericks coach and president of the National Basketball Coaches Association, said the added power and work aren’t for everyone.

“In my case, I’m not looking to do that. I love my owner **[Mark Cuban]** and I love my GM **[Donnie Nelson]** — my GM and I go back 30 years as friends,” Carlisle said. “I want to concentrate on my craft. But I applaud these other guys for taking on the other responsibility.”

“If you get a great coach like Gregg Popovich or Doc Rivers or Stan Van Gundy and you have the opportunity to meld those two positions into one guy who is high-quality in so many areas, if you’re an owner, you should go for that. More than anything, it’s pointing to the vortex of the connection between the coach and GM. The fact that some owners are looking at this and saying, ‘These two jobs should be one and the same’ highlights the importance of coaching.”

No one, however, is saying it’s easy. The consensus is that a GM has less-grueling days and better job security than his head coach. Saunders adapted comfortably to that last season, his first in the role with Minnesota, though coaching competitiveness still coursed through his veins.

In Budenholzer’s case, it comes just one year into his head coaching tenure with the Hawks, with the true impact of the front-office mess ([analyzed well here](#) by our **Sekou Smith**) still to be felt. The longtime Spurs assistant has a lot coming at him, on the brink of training camp.

“There are extra things you have to do to prepare for camp and the season,” Budenholzer acknowledged. “But we’ve got a great group. So there’s more work but I think we can manage it. The team, for the most part, is in place. That’s the most important thing.”

Growing up in the NBA in the Spurs organization — Ferry logged valuable time there, too, under Popovich and Buford — helped prepare Budenholzer for this beefed-up role. “It’s something where I

spent 19 years in that kind of a set-up,” he said. “To whatever degree I can be comfortable, I wouldn’t feel that now if I hadn’t spent all those years around that in San Antonio with Pop and R.C.”

Asked where he would turn with questions, he said: “Oh, Pop and R.C. have always been open to me. I’ve obviously learned a ton from them and I’ll continue to.”

And if rivalries of the NBA prevent his Spurs pals from helping too much?

“I’m sure if I cross the line unintentionally,” Budenholzer said, “they’d say, ‘You’re a big boy, you’re going to have to figure certain things out for yourself.’ “