

## **Popovich's solace: His human index card hasn't left Spurs yet**

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MIAMI — Before he climbs a Finals podium, or before he sits down for a television interview, Gregg Popovich will often hand his wallet and about a half-dozen index cards to someone on his staff.

Losing the wallet would be acceptable. Losing the index cards wouldn't be.

The cards include plays, ideas, reminders.

Or, as a Spurs assistant joked, "They are his magic beans."

This describes Popovich and how he has worked. He has his system, with his kind of people at his side, and he also has patterns that comfort him. That's why this Finals is the end of so much he has known.

He's losing the human version of his index cards.

He's losing Mike Budenholzer.

To fans tuning in to see Game 2, Budenholzer will be invisible. But when various Spurs shade toward LeBron James, or when Chris Bosh is left open at the 3-point line, it is likely Budenholzer had something to do with it.

This begins with video work, and this began for Budenholzer when he was a high school senior. Then, in 1988, Popovich asked Budenholzer to come play for him at Pomona-Pitzer.

Budenholzer says he wasn't recruited, exactly. "He told me he'd like to have me," said Budenholzer, "and we'll see how good you are when you get here."

Popovich tells the Spurs about the same.

Before Budenholzer could play for him, Popovich left to assist Larry Brown in San Antonio. But Budenholzer made sure to stay in touch. The son of a coach, he knew what he wanted to do. So when Popovich went to Golden State, Budenholzer asked if he could observe.

"I told him if he wanted to do something," Popovich said Saturday, "go back in the film room and put those pick-and-rolls together for me. And don't talk to me, don't ask for tickets, don't speak to anybody. Just do the film and go home. And no money, by the way."

Who could pass that up?

After college, Budenholzer played in Denmark, where he also coached. He was enjoying that, with plans to stay longer, when Popovich called to see if he was interested in coming to San Antonio to work for money.

Popovich already had offered the video coordinator position to someone else. But if this person didn't want the job, would he?

"I told him I'd be there the next day if the position became available," Budenholzer said.

What followed is the longest-running, continuous bench partnership in today's NBA. Budenholzer first learned the video side, then replaced Dave Cowens on the sidelines two years later.

R.C. Buford has known Popovich longer. But Budenholzer has been there every night in every huddle, every trip, every time there was a crisis.

Such as in 2005 in Detroit. Then, in another Finals, with the series tied 2-2, there were arguments. There were also loud ones.

Later, a story quoted someone anonymously saying Popovich needed Budenholzer then more than anyone in the organization, player or staff.

The someone?

Danny Ferry, who recently hired Budenholzer in Atlanta.

Budenholzer's basketball IQ is a reason. He's broken down so much video, he offers Popovich a brain that is seemingly online.

The strategy for these Finals is part of that. It's a group effort, and the Spurs probably learned more Thursday night than anything else they had done previously.

Still, the assistants are assigned to study opponents before the season starts. Budenholzer drew the Heat.

But Budenholzer does more than advise. He reflects Popovich's foundation. When strategy has been tweaked so much that no one can recognize the original plan anymore, Budenholzer is there to remind his boss of the basics.

An example: Popovich likes to tell the media that basketball is a game of mistakes. If defenses were perfect, he says, the scores would be 10-8.

"But in the heat of the moment," said one assistant, "he really does think we should shut them out. He doesn't like any plan where the other team scores."

Budenholzer is there to remind him of reality, too.

Budenholzer laughs about that, and he says he and Popovich don't argue as much as they used to. Another assistant understands why.

"There's an unspoken understanding between those two," he said.

Budenholzer expects everything to be fine once he is gone. Brett Brown has also been integral, and his work as Australia's national coach has added to his résumé. He likely will fill Budenholzer's role next season.

Still, Popovich admits he already wonders what it will be like without someone he calls “a confidante for a long time, a really trusted professional and friend all at the same time.”

From Popovich: “It's been a long time that we've been together, and it already feels a little bit weird. When I see him sitting there, and I know he's not going to be there next season, I know I'll miss that.”

Popovich won't miss that for as long as these Finals go, however. He will still hear technical options, and he will also hear common sense, and he will hear it from a voice he has trusted through every championship.

For the final time, his human index card will be there.