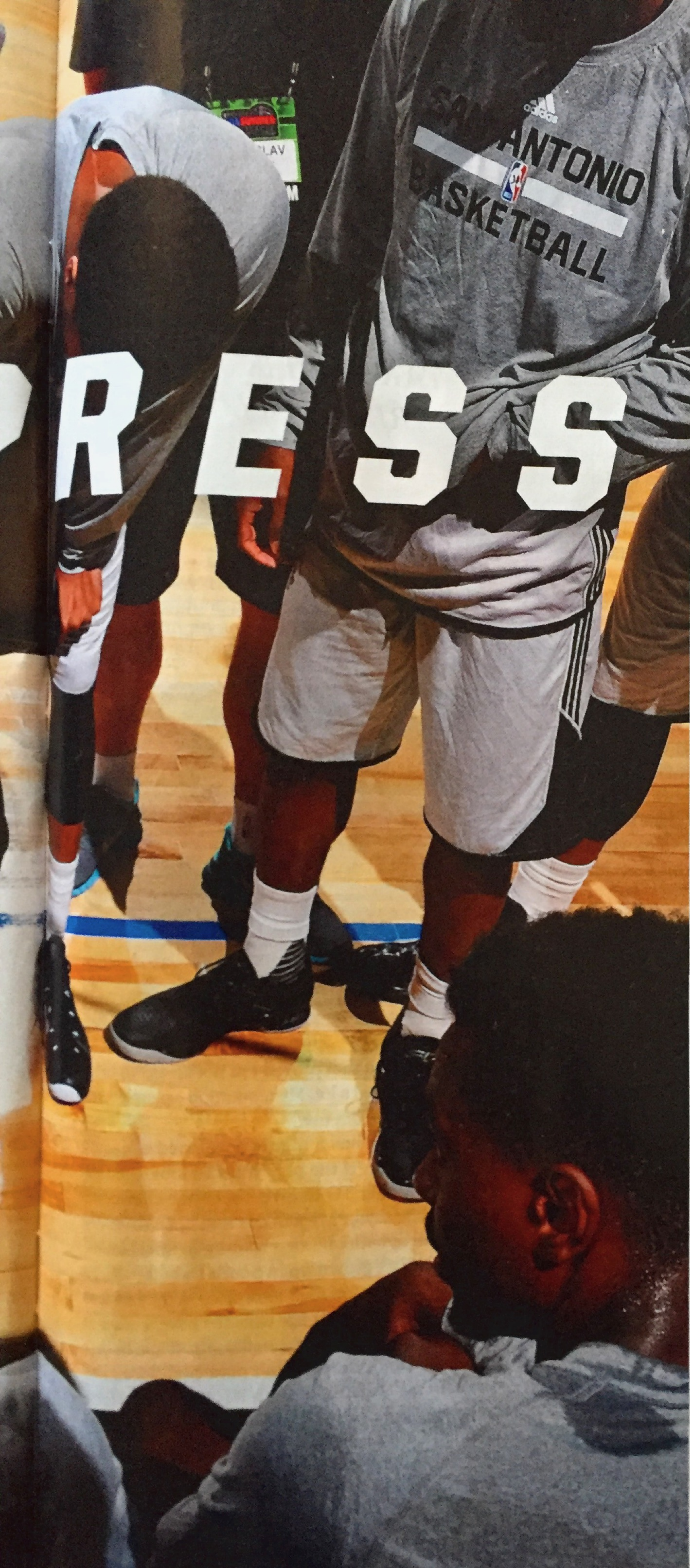




PONYTAIL EXPERIENCE

*Before her pioneering role as an NBA assistant, **BECKY HAMMON** was an overlooked recruit in South Dakota and an underestimated point guard in the WNBA. Nothing has come easy for her, and she wouldn't have it any other way*

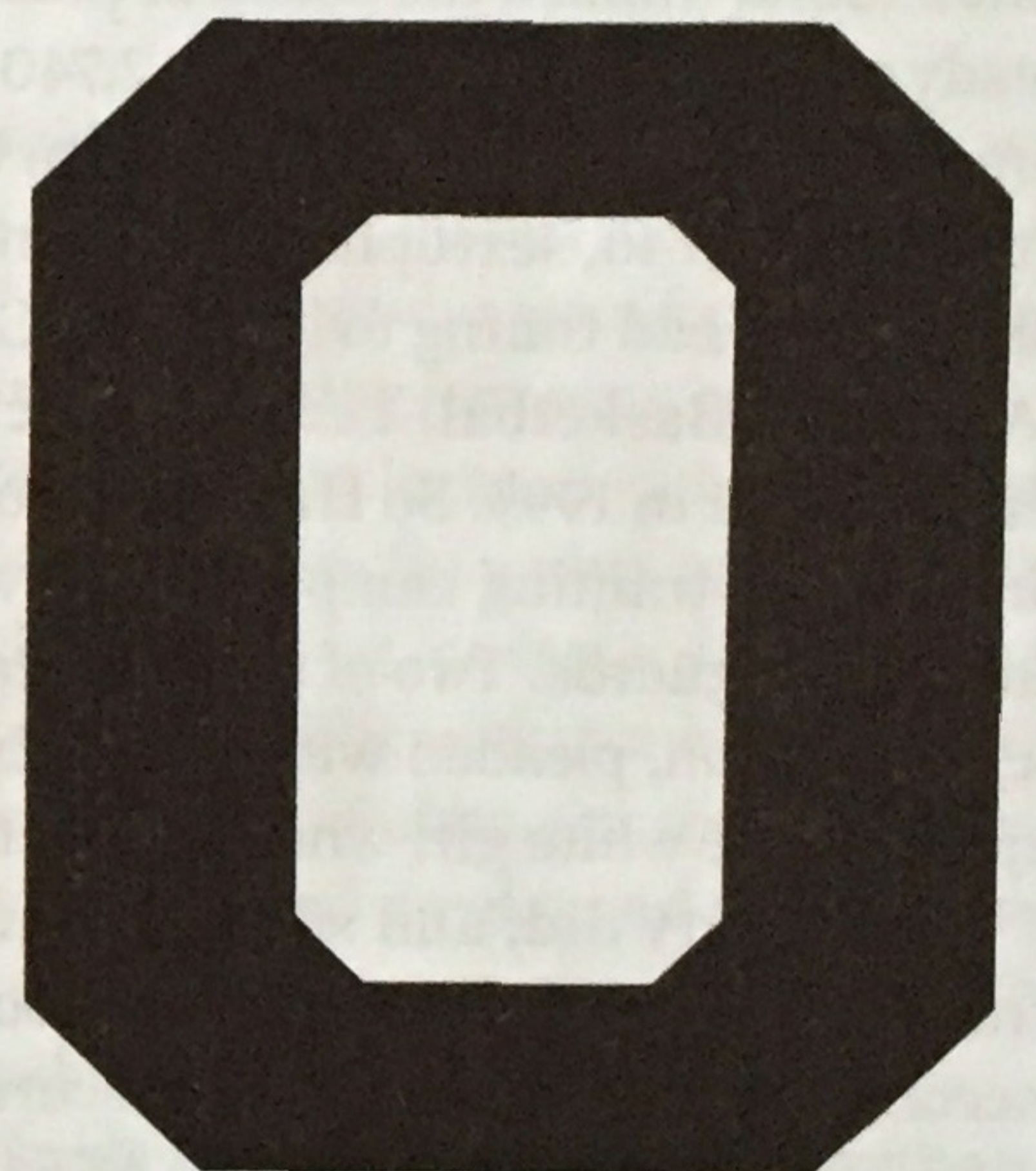


A GOOD LOOK

By going back to the drawing board for a last-minute play last summer in Las Vegas, Hammon gained respect from her coaching peers and from the Spurs.

BY ALEXANDER WOLFF

Photograph by
David Dow/NBAE/Getty Images



ONE MOMENT in one game in a risk-taker's city is all it took for Becky Hammon to transform herself from feminist novelty into an NBA head-coach-in-waiting.

The city was Las Vegas. The game, against the Knicks last July, was Hammon's first in charge of the Spurs' entry in the NBA's premier summer league. And the moment—with possession, down three, 23 seconds to play—tested San Antonio coach Gregg Popovich's decision 11 months earlier to make Hammon the first woman to serve as a salaried, full-time assistant for a major pro sports team.

The Las Vegas Summer League is a cross between cattle call and last-chance saloon, with all the Wild West untidiness those analogies suggest. A coach's first challenge is to keep a player from turning every scarce moment with the ball into an advertisement for himself. "She reminded us to just bring those Spurs habits to Vegas, to play D and play with one another," recalls forward Kyle Anderson, the sole holdover from the franchise's wintertime A team. "And—one thing that's big in San Antonio—she did a great job coaching out of timeouts."

So it was that Hammon drew up a play, then watched with alarm as Anderson and an assortment

of rookies and free agents minced through their first steps. "I could see that they weren't quite sure what to do," she says. "I probably didn't explain it well enough." Eight seconds later, she called another timeout.

Hammon reiterated what she wanted—"a punch play," where the ball goes into the post and out again, followed by a "misdirect flare screen." That's when it finally presented itself, what's known in the trade as a good look. . . .

WHERE HAMMON is involved, the smooth path seldom presents itself. Or, as she once put it in a blog post, "a rose has to push through some fertilizer (or another word for fertilizer, lol) to get to the sunlight to blossom." As a senior at Stevens High in Rapid City, S.D., she found most Division I schools turned off by her 5' 6" frame and backwater pedigree. "Average white girl," thought Tom Collen, then an Arkansas assistant. Several years later Collen found himself the coach at Colorado State, where Hammon was already well on her way to scoring 2,740 points, more than any WAC player, male or female. She led a program that had never reached the Top 25 to the Sweet 16, sextupling attendance in the process.

But she had the bad timing to leave Fort Collins right after the demise of the American Basketball League, which flooded the market with experienced talent in 1999. So Hammon took a free-agent flier as one of 20 invitees at the training camp of the New York Liberty, who already had four veteran guards. Two of them, co-captains Teresa Witherspoon and Vickie Johnson, pleaded with management, as one of them put it, to "keep that little white girl who keeps getting up when we knock her down." The Liberty did, and soon Hammon began to trace a steady path: from spot duty off the bench as a rookie, to double-figure points in her second season, to team leader in scoring and shooting percentage in her fifth—before tearing her right ACL. "I've had 17 NBA All-Stars, and nobody drove and finished better than Becky Hammon," says her coach for six summers in New York, Richie Adubato. "Michael or Kobe or [Derrick] Rose could elevate and slither, but Becky is 5' 6" and only jumps an inch. When she drove you couldn't see her in the crowd in the lane—just the ball coming out of there and into the basket."

In April 2007, just after turning 30 and suffering a bad left-ankle sprain, the Liberty traded her to San Antonio. There she logged eight more seasons with the Stars and, in 2011, was named one of the top 15 WNBA players of all time. Throughout her career she supplemented meager WNBA wages by playing winters in Italy, Spain, Israel and Russia—a country that crops up in her story again and again.

In 2007, Hammon completed her finest WNBA season to date, finishing second in the MVP voting, the highest among American players. But she wasn't included in the initial U.S. player pool for the 2008 Beijing Games, and though she was eventually invited to try out, her agent confirmed with USA Basketball that she wasn't in serious contention to make the team. So to fulfill a childhood dream of playing in the Olympics, she chose to become a Russian citizen. "She didn't say no to USA Basketball," says Chicago Sky coach Pokey Chatman, who coached her at Spartak Moscow Region. "They didn't say yes to *her*. But I don't think she ever came out and put it that way."

The U.S. coach, Anne Donovan, called Hammon's decision "not patriotic." Yet Hammon regards it as an inflection point in her life. "I know I can take a lot of crap when I follow my heart," she says. "To that point I represented the very all-American girl next door, with the ponytail from

"I KNOW I CAN TAKE A LOT OF CRAP WHEN I FOLLOW MY HEART," HAMMON SAYS OF HER DECISION TO PLAY FOR RUSSIA IN THE OLYMPICS. "I'M NOT AFRAID TO TAKE A RISK. AND I RISKED A LOT."



SILVER LININGS

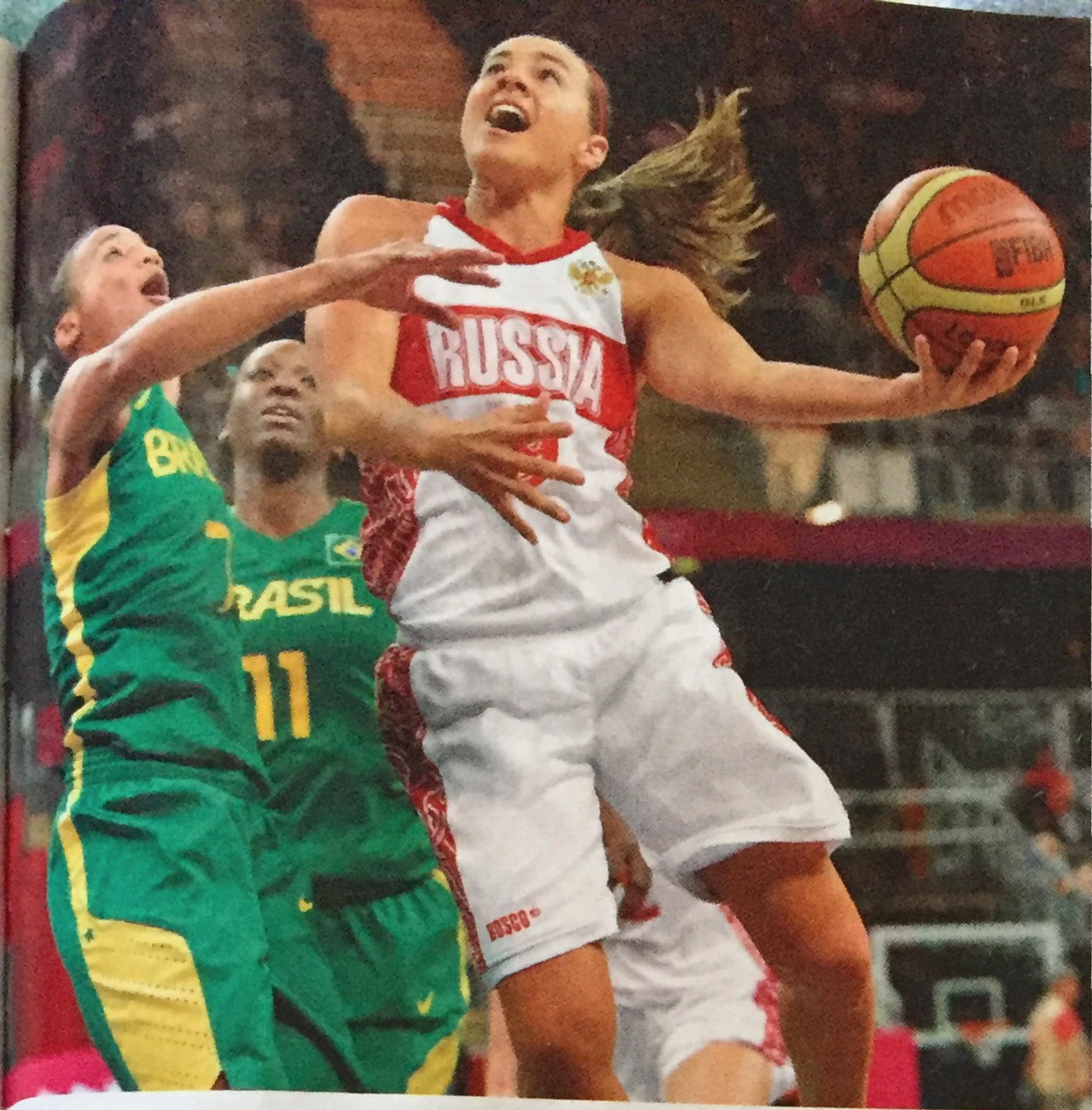
If Hammon hadn't had to try out for the Liberty and been snubbed by Team USA, she might never have joined the Spurs as an assistant.



the Midwest. But that proved I'm not afraid to take a risk. And I risked a lot. My reputation—people said terrible things about me."

But Hammon has a highly developed sense of the silver lining. If the play you call looks shaky, you take another TO to give it a better chance to work. As she says, "My journey had been divinely orchestrated, with one step leading to another."

If she hadn't grown up in South Dakota, where the basketball season then took place in the fall and recruiters gave it a miss, she wouldn't have landed at a Rams program aching for leadership. If she hadn't gone undrafted, she wouldn't have been forced to refine the skills that made her a WNBA legend. If she hadn't hurt her ankle, she wouldn't have been traded to San Antonio and crossed paths with Popovich. If she hadn't been snubbed by Team USA, she wouldn't have become a basketball Russian, which synced up with the



academic interest of the Spurs' coach, a Soviet specialist at the Air Force Academy—which would have meant that, when the two found themselves seated next to each other on a flight back from the London Olympics in 2012, they might have been left with nothing to talk about but basketball. Of Hammon and basketball, Popovich already knew plenty; instead they covered just about everything else, which gave the famously worldly Pop his first nuanced sense of her.

Hammon's decision to play for Russia impressed him all on its own. "It was pretty brave, because you knew there'd be people of the ilk of 'That's unpatriotic or shortsighted,'" he says. "It's not about any of that. It's about being a competitor and living a life that lasts not very long, and taking advantage of all life's opportunities without hurting anybody else. She seizes the day."

That the two happened to be in the same row on the same flight—that was just happenstance, right? "I don't think that anything," Hammon says, "is happenstance."

RAPID CITY was founded one night in 1876 when 11 men around a campfire took honest stock of their lot. Their dreams of finding gold on what is now the western fringe of South Dakota had come to nothing. So they raffled off 11 plots of land among themselves, pledging to "lay out a Denver" for the Black Hills. It was a better bet after a lesser one failed to pay off, but a risky one just the same.

Marty and Bev Hammon arrived from Minnesota a century later in the same prospecting spirit. With Marty assigned new territory as a regional sales rep for a fire sprinkler company, the family moved into a trailer park with daughter Gina, son Matt and infant Rebecca Lynn. Several years later the Hammons built a house with 30,000 acres of

the Black Hills National Forest spilling from its door. "Becky would be sitting on the stairs waiting for me to get home from work, and we'd go out and have an adventure," says Marty, who would take neighborhood kids along too. "I promised to never bring 'em back clean."

By the time she turned 12, Becky had learned to hunt pheasant and grouse and handle a shotgun—an heirloom Browning over-under 12-gauge. With Bev brushing the snarls from her hair after a day at what friends called Camp Marty, Becky picked up the nickname Beckaboo, which eventually morphed into Boo-Boo, then Bubba. On snowmobiles, three-wheelers and four-wheelers she crossed creeks and transited ravines, developing the fearlessness, sense of balance and what she calls "overall general alertness" that helped her thrive as a point guard.

During family trips to the Florida Keys, Becky would swim with manatees and dolphins and sometimes sharks, spearing fish for dinner. "If we were all camping, she'd tell us what to do," Popovich says. "She's one of the few women I know who could have survived pioneer days and lived off the land."

In 1993, when Becky was 16, Marty started his own fire sprinkler business. He took out a second mortgage. He paid the penalty for dipping into his IRA. For seven months he didn't see a paycheck. Matt Hammon and his siblings bought out his father three years ago, and Rapid Fire Protection, Inc., is now a \$24 million-a-year business with 170 employees. "My dad has a very fearless approach to life," Becky says. "He's smart but not afraid to take risks."

Throughout her childhood Marty had supplied his daughter with reality checks. He first disabused her of dreams of dunking. Then he explained why she'd never play in the NBA.

"I didn't," he says, "say anything about coaching."

HAMMON'S TEAR of her left ACL, in July 2013, couldn't have been better timed. It came shortly before the Spurs assembled for training camp and led Popovich to offer her unlimited access to the team's inner sanctum. "Because I respected her so much, when she got hurt I thought, This young lady can't just sit around all year," he says. "I wanted to see what else was there."

At Colorado State she had been an exercise and sport science major with a concentration in teaching and a coaching minor. Breaking in as a WNBA benchwarmer, Hammon got her first look at pro ball as a coach

sees it, learning to assess how a game's rhythm and flow might be altered or exploited. She was already friendly with her Spurs counterpart at point guard, Tony Parker. "She knows when to speak and knows when to shut up," Popovich has said of Hammon, a description that reminds former teammate Rebecca Lobo of the player who had the ability to connect in any corner of the Liberty locker room: "In a coaching situation, just like in a social situation, she knows how to fit in."

Popovich liked another thing about her. "It was just a kick to watch her play, chewing her gum and directing traffic," he says. "She exuded leadership on the court, and players reacted to that. R.C. [Buford, the Spurs' general manager] and I never gave it a second thought. We just did it."

Her hiring became official after that year's apprenticeship and her final WNBA season the following summer. NBA rules mandate that she sit behind the bench because she's not one of Popovich's top three assistants. But there's no duty her boss doesn't trust her with, whether preparing a scouting report or putting a player through an individual workout. She blends seamlessly into the practice-court tableau, except for the occasional splash of color in a headband that pops from the ambient silver and black. "At the beginning I was concerned," Ettore Messina, Popovich's lead assistant, says. "How can we joke? How can we curse? But she's perfectly *there*, and not because she wants to act like a man. She's a woman with a touch of class. In Italian we have the word *femminilità*, meaning the class of a woman. She has that, even in a men's environment."

Hammon credits the WNBA with professionalizing her through the rigor of weight work and film study. The league also helped her earn respect from NBA players, notwithstanding what she calls "the Joe Schmoes" who might still deride the league. "LeBron James and Chris Paul, they watch it and enjoy it," she says. "Especially the young guys, many of them watched me play. But the biggest was Pop. He and R.C. saw me run a thousand pick-and-rolls. A pick-and-roll is a pick-and-roll no matter who's running it."

"Character is genderless. Leadership is genderless. If you're a great leader, you're a great leader. Patience, service, the ability to listen—either you have it or you don't."

Months after that Las Vegas fortnight, Anderson can still hear Hammon telling him not to "get too cute out there." That sound, he says, "is the voice of authority. I hear it regardless."

Hammon could have any women's coaching job she wants right now, WNBA or major college, but she's in the second year of a two-year deal with San Antonio. "I'm in a great learning space, and this year I'm so much more comfortable," she says. "Then, we'll see."

THAT SHOT Hammon engineered at the end of her first game in Las Vegas, a three-pointer from the corner, failed to go in. Afterward she received a consolatory text from her former Stars coach Dan Hughes: *You did what great coaches do. You gave your players a chance to win.* That didn't keep her from revisiting her mistakes through a sleepless night. But over the rest of the competition the Spurs won six straight, including four by five points or fewer, even coming back from 15 down in the second half to beat the Hawks in the semifinals. After they tripped the Suns 93-90 for the title, Hammon's players made the ultimate gesture of acceptance, giving her a Gatorade dousing—although with no cooler handy, the shower came in the form of a dozen players emptying a dozen bottles. It was a Ham-

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COUNTERPOINTS

The friendship between Parker and Hammon dates back to her playing days in San Antonio, and it has her fitting in seamlessly with the Spurs.



monesque moment, making the best of the situation.

Popovich cites the hug that Anderson, the summer league's MVP, fixed her with after the final. "That was heartfelt and genuine and told me a lot," he says. "That's the new generation. Kyle is 21 or 22, and not too cool to do that."

Months later, the day after being named coach of the U.S. men's team for the four-year cycle following next year's Rio Olympics, Popovich sat in his office at San Antonio's AT&T Center and fielded a question: Might there be a place on his U.S. staff for the former point guard of Russia's women's team?

Popovich stiffened as if he had just spotted a Craig Sager sport coat at 10 paces. He began ticking off politic disclaimers. And then he permitted himself a smile. Perhaps he suddenly realized that he might not want to transit the badlands of international basketball without his own Laura Ingalls Wilder. "It is," he said, "a pretty cool thought." □