

1. Mark your confusion.
2. Show evidence of a close reading.
3. Write a 1+ page reflection.

## An Open Letter About Female Coaches

By Pau Gosol, NBA player for the San Antonio Spurs, *The Players Tribune*, May 11, 2018

I want to tell you a little something about my parents.

I grew up just outside of Barcelona, a child of two highly successful professionals. My father was a nurse and my mother was a doctor. Naturally, I took to studying science — and after high school I even did one year of med school, before eventually devoting my time fully to basketball. I sometimes think about what would have happened if I had stuck with medicine and followed in my parents' footsteps.

I remember how people would often mistake my father as the doctor and my mom as the nurse — it happened more often than it should have, in my mind. To me, that my mother was a successful doctor ... this was just the norm. And don't get me wrong: I admired my dad's hard work and job as well. But I grew up knowing that my mom got into a more rigorous school and program, and thus she had the more prominent job. That wasn't weird, or a judgment in any direction. It was just the truth. And we never really thought twice about it.

Growing up, my brothers and I always admired this standard set by our parents.

And now that I'm an adult, and looking forward to being a parent in the near future myself, I realize even more how lucky I am to have been raised to that standard. It's a standard by which the only question worth asking — it isn't about if you're the right "kind" of person for your job. Rather, it's about how well equipped you are for the job.

In 37 years, I can honestly say, I've never once thought of my mom as a "female" doctor.

To me, she has always just been ... *a doctor*.

And a great one, too.

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The reason I wanted to start by telling you about my parents, is that their story makes me think about today's NBA. Specifically about how, in the 72-year history of the league, there has never been a female head coach. Even more specifically, it makes me think of Becky Hammon: a coach who has been the topic of much conversation lately, and who I've had the opportunity to play for in San Antonio.

But if you think I'm writing this to argue why Becky is qualified to be an NBA head coach ... well, you're mistaken. That part is obvious: One, she was an accomplished player — with an elite point guard's mind for the game. And two, she has been a successful assistant for arguably the greatest coach in the game. What more do you need? But like I said — I'm not here to make that argument. Arguing on Coach Hammon's behalf would feel patronizing. To me, it would be strange if NBA teams were *not* interested in her as a head coach.

What I would like to do, though, is knock down a few of the silly arguments and talking points against Coach Hammon's candidacy — and the larger idea of a female NBA head coach — that I've seen floating around.

The argument that I see most often is thankfully the one that's easiest to disprove: It's this idea that, at the absolute highest level of basketball, a woman isn't capable of coaching men. "Yeah, female coaches are fine coaching women's college basketball, or the WNBA," the argument goes. "But the NBA? The NBA is different."

First, I've just gotta tell you: If you're making that argument to anyone who's actually played any high-level basketball, you're going to seem really ignorant. But I also have a simple response to it — which is that I've been in the NBA for 17 years. I've won two championships ... I've played with some of the best players of this generation ... and I've played under two of the sharpest minds in the history of sports, in Phil Jackson and Gregg Popovich. And I'm telling you: Becky Hammon *can coach*. I'm not saying she can coach *pretty well*. I'm not saying she can coach *enough to get by*. I'm not saying she can coach *almost* at the level of the NBA's male coaches. I'm saying: Becky Hammon can coach NBA basketball. Period.

I'll tell you a quick story to illustrate my point. This year, in a practice a few months back, I was drilling the pick-and-roll with Dejounte Murray. It was a standard drill, just the two of us alone at one basket: I would set the screen and either pop out for the jumper or roll to the lane. If I popped, Dejounte would hit me with a chest pass. If I rolled, a bounce pass. Like I said, a very standard drill — we'll do this a million times.

But what I remember about this particular drill is that, at some point during it, Coach Hammon stopped us mid-motion. Coaches Hammon, Borrego and Messina walk over, and Becky says to Dejounte, "D.J., O.K. — your bounce pass? It's too low. You've got to hit Pau exactly where he needs it. Run that again." We then talk some more as a group about how I need the ball a little more precise, with a little more zip, so I could have a better chance to finish the action at the rim. And then we repeat the drill a few times, alternating from the left and right sides of court. Of course, Dejounte being Dejounte, he figures it out fast — and pretty soon we're flying through. But something about that moment has just always stuck with me. Just, like ... the level of knowledge of the game that Becky showed, you know what I mean?

She noticed a small detail out of the corner of her eye — and then instantly located both the problem and the solution. And not only that, but we were also able to communicate with each other in such a way that we got the result that we needed. It's a good reminder, I'd say, of the importance of communication between team members — especially at the NBA level. I don't think I caught another stray pass the rest of the season.

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Another argument that I've seen tossed around — maybe even sillier than the previous one — is that Becky rose to her current position because having her on staff was “good p.r.” for the Spurs.

*What?*

Seriously: *What?*

No. We're talking about the NBA here — a business where there's a lot of money on the line, and little patience for mediocrity. Also we're talking about the San Antonio Spurs, one of the most successful NBA franchises of this century: a system that has produced David Robinson, Tim Duncan, Manu Ginóbili, Tony Parker — and that's just the Hall of Famers. This is a team that won 50+ games for 18-straight seasons, and five championships in the last 20 years.

Would you really expect Coach Pop to develop his staff any differently than he develops his players? Of course not.

Pop's only standard for doing anything is whether it'll help us in just one way ... and it isn't getting good p.r. It's getting W's. And getting those W's The Spurs Way.

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O.K. — and then one more thing. It's almost too stupid to include here ... but at the same time, in another way, I also think it's pretty important. And it gets at something about this league, in the bigger picture, that I've been thinking about a lot lately.

It's this idea that, if there were a female head coach in the NBA, there would be some sort of ... “awkwardness in the locker room.”

Maybe you're laughing to yourself as you read that. And I get it. It's ridiculous. But I think it's worth taking seriously, too, for a moment — just in terms of how embarrassing it is for us as a league that this is something people are actually talking about.

First, as for the idea itself: I mean, of course it's a myth. Give me a break. There's really nothing to say about it even. The players dress in a certain area, and the coaches dress in a certain area. O.K.? And yes, I'm sure, within that coaches area, Becky has a private space. But the point is — it's not like you're seeing male head coaches sharing a space with players while they're changing. It doesn't happen. So all I can tell you is that from a decade and a half of personal experience ... this line of thinking — like I said, it's all just very ridiculous. In terms of the locker room, and in terms of behind the scenes, there really is no practical difference in this league between having a male or a female head coach.

But I also think it goes to something deeper than that, when people will make this argument — in a way that really bothers me. It goes to this idea that ... as we're making all of these amazing strides in society, in terms of increasing our social awareness, and making efforts toward ideas like diversity and equality, and just sort of creating this more inclusive world ... somehow sports should be an exception. It's this idea, for some people, that sports should almost be this haven, where it's O.K. to be closed-minded — like a bubble for all of our worst ignorance. And that as athletes, if we have any problems with the way things are, we should (as the saying goes) “stick to sports.”

So when I see arguments — or even jokes — that we shouldn't have female head coaches in the NBA because of “locker room” situations or whatever ... I guess it just reminds me that, for as much progress as we've made as a league over these last few years ... we still have a ways to go. Because let's be real: There are pushes now for increased gender diversity in the workplace of pretty much every industry in the world. It's what's expected. More importantly — it's what's right. And yet the NBA should get a pass because some fans are willing to take it easy on us ... because we're “sports”?

I really hope not.

I hope the NBA will never feel satisfied with being forward-thinking “for a sports league.” Let's strive to be forward-thinking for an industry of *any* kind.

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Last week, I don't know if you saw, but the Suns hired the first European-born head coach in NBA history, Igor Kokoškov. By all measures, this was a very cool piece of news for the league. But on a personal level ... man, I have to tell you: this was a special moment for me. It's been 17 years now since I was drafted — and yet I can still remember the comments from some of the people at the time. It was, *Oh, no ... you can't take a Euro at No. 3. That's craziness. Maybe later in the first round, yes. This kid has talent after all. But top five??? Top five ... there you're looking for a franchise player. Someone with a killer instinct, and leadership capabilities. And these Euro guys — they're soft, man. No, you can't take this kid at No. 3.*

And of course they did take me at No. 3. Now, you see European players going high in the draft all the time. It's just very ordinary. This year, with Luka Dončić, who knows — maybe it's another No. 1 out of Europe.

And it's really been the same with coaches. At first, no teams in the league are staffing up with foreign assistants. But then some innovative teams start to do it ... and they have success. And then you see the other teams start to follow. And now, Igor has the Suns' job as their head guy.

And I don't mean to compare Igor to Becky, because I don't think it's exactly the same. But I just think it's this beautiful thing, you know, to see the NBA begin to reflect the larger world. Because it's such a big world, isn't it? And I think any time you can expand your horizons, toward something new and meaningful ... it can only make you a better person.

Which is also why I'm so encouraged to see this league taking the lead on so many important issues. I see it when we're coming together over something as urgent as Black Lives Matter ... I see it when guys like DeMar and Kevin are being vocal and open about emotional wellbeing ... I see it when Adam Silver, our commissioner, is marching in an LGBTQ pride parade ... I see it when MVPs like Steph and LeBron keep showing the world that nobody is too famous to use their platform to stand up for what they believe in ... and of course I see it when a franchise like the Bucks is willing to give an interview for their head-coaching vacancy to a candidate who — male or female — absolutely deserves it.

I see it everywhere now in this league, and it fills me with pride.

Because to me, this league — it's a family. And one of the things that comes with being a family ... it's that you're the ones who can be the most critical of each other. You're the ones who can most tell it to each other like it is. Because at the end of the day, you know it's all love.

So what I would say to my NBA family right now, I think, is, Hey — let's all keep up the great work. Let's be proud.

But let's also not be satisfied.

Let's recognize that one protest does not mean we have solved the problem of racial inequality in this country. One parade doesn't mean we're doing everything we can for the LGBTQ movement. And one coaching interview doesn't mean we have solved the issue of gender diversity in our workplace.

A more complacent league, it might take a look at these accomplishments — and be comfortable saying, O.K., we did it, we're finished. But the NBA is not a complacent league.

It's a great league.

And to me, a great league would take a look at this, and say we've come a long way, and we've shown a lot of growth ... but there's still a lot more growing left for us to do. A great league would say, Yes, this is progress — but it isn't the finish line.

Wait and see. We're just getting started.

### **Possible Response Questions:**

- Pick a passage from the article and respond to it.
- Discuss a “move” made by the writer in this piece that you think is good/interesting. Explain.