

Pittsburgh sports psychologist keeps Bucks thinking positive

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By Dan Gigler, Post-Gazette Staff Writer

Who knew that if the Milwaukee Bucks advance to the NBA Finals, the team's most crucial bench player might be a petite, 49-year old woman from Pittsburgh?

After squandering a 16-point lead Wednesday night, the Bucks found themselves facing elimination, down, 3-2, to the Philadelphia 76ers in the seven-game NBA Eastern Conference final, and ripe for criticism regarding their mental lapses.

After the game, NBC announcer Matt Guokas speculated: "If only [the Bucks] had kept their composure."

"Now it's Milwaukee's job to pick themselves back up," color analyst Bill Walton added ominously.

Enter Dr. Carole Kunkle-Miller.

Kunkle-Miller, a clinical psychologist and certified sports psychologist who lives in Mt. Lebanon, has helped the Bucks make a run for the NBA Finals with an unorthodox brand of goal-oriented personal coaching.

Described as a "Life Line Coach," Kunkle-Miller works with players to eliminate distractions and mental blocks to enhance their performance.

"I don't give advice, but rather I lead to solutions," she said of her innovative combination of reinforced positive thinking and visualization.

"If people come to see me and think they're going to a 'shrink,' they're wrong," she said. "I'm not a 'shrink.' I'm an enlarger."

A mutual friend put Kunkle-Miller in touch with Milwaukee head coach and Penn Hills native George Karl, who was seeking a motivational edge for his players. She immediately hit it off with Karl, interviewed for the job and began working with the team in January.

"So much of coaching is motivation and positive energy and setting goals and standards to meet on a daily basis," Karl said. "Carole is a director in that area."

Age, sex, the insulated world of sports celebrity, million-dollar salaries with egos to match and a difference in race could have been Dikembe Mutombo-sized roadblocks to Kunkle-Miller.

"The first time I addressed the team, I said to them, 'You're probably wondering what a short white lady from Pittsburgh is doing here,'" said Kunkle-Miller, who stands 5 feet 1.

Bucks guard Lindsey Hunter, an African-American, joked, "That's OK, our coach is short, white and from Pittsburgh," referring to Karl.

"I try to connect to common human factors," Kunkle-Miller said.

"I've successfully worked with a budding opera star and the chief financial officer of an Internet company and I'm not well versed in opera, finance or the Internet," she laughed.

"You and I might have a bad day at work and no one would notice. We aren't on TV or written up in newspapers or magazines," she explained of the performance anxieties players might face.

With even NBA reserves earning huge paychecks, the average sports fan might have little sympathy for a player taken off of his game by media scrutiny. Nonetheless, big demands follow big money, and Kunkle-Miller said such factors can hinder a player from showing his "true athletic brilliance" in a game.

If, for instance, Bucks star Ray Allen were mired in a slump, she would have him visualize great past performances.

"In that situation I'd ask what's going on in your mind? What are the psychological obstacles?"

"I'd tell him to go back to his best game and go over the details. How do you recreate the situation? How did you feel inside? How did your body feel? What blocks are there?"

Though she lives and practices in Mt. Lebanon, she makes frequent trips to Milwaukee and is able to work with players via cellular phone, fax machine and e-mail.

During this series she faxed players instructions to envision the color red and themselves having a "red-hot hand" when shooting the ball. She closed with a quote from the late author and marathon training expert George Sheehan:

"If you want to win anything, erase yourself and your life. You have to go berserk."

She's even added a parochial Pittsburgh flavor to her hands-on sessions with the team.

"In person we've talked about affirmation -- the idea of repeating a goal and making it happen," Kunkle-Miller said.

In one exercise she prodded Karl to finish a song.

Kunkle-Miller started off, "The Bucs are goin' all the way," -- lyrics from a Pittsburgh Pirates fight song, circa 1960. Karl, a lifelong Pirates fan, finished every word and note.

"I told him to sing it everywhere, including the shower," she said.

Though the song referred to a different team, the message is no less applicable to these Bucks.

Even in conversation, Kunkle-Miller prefaces future events with, "When the Bucks win ... " -- never an "if."

"Its a coaching of the mind, like an assistant coach that helps work on technique or a strength coach helps with conditioning," Karl said.

"We're trying to put together the best medical and physical basketball program in the NBA, and the little things make a difference."

Although Milwaukee will have home-court advantage tonight, it will need added mental leverage to contend with Allen Iverson and the 76ers.

And, if and "when" the Bucks advance to the NBA Finals, Los Angeles Lakers Coach Phil Jackson, dubbed the "Zen Master" for his incorporation of Buddhist and Eastern philosophies into his coaching methods, will face an unlikely foe in the psychological battle for the NBA's top prize -- a short lady from Pittsburgh.

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