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BOYS BASKETBALL

Breaking barriers

Former All-State guard Woodward has taken the challenge at Prairie coaching the boys team

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WIND POINT — She was a little more reserved at first, treading cautiously in her new environment. It was an environment that was a little imposing because there was always the danger she would be dismissed simply based on her sex.

But Sammie Woodward never wavered as a first-year assistant coach on The Prairie School boys basketball team. And as the days and weeks passed, she became increasingly comfortable sharing her wealth of wisdom with teenagers who became increasingly convinced she was worth their time.



Woodward

Of course, Woodward has been worth their time. Who wouldn't listen to someone who earned fourth-team Associated Press All-State honors at one of the smallest programs in the state and who was named the All-Racine County Player of the Year as a senior at Prairie in 2016? Who wouldn't tune in to someone who was a three-year starter at Carthage College while earning academic All-American honors with a 4.0 grade-point average?

Sure, Prairie coach Jason Atanasoff made a cutting-edge choice last summer when he brought in Woodward to join his staff. One simply does not see many female coaches on high school boys basketball benches.



Atanasoff

But through her first three months on Atanasoff's staff, Woodward clearly has proven she belongs. She's been an asset, not a detriment.

"I would say that some of my teammates were doubtful at first, but once they got a chance to pick her mind, they realized she's a great coach," junior guard Kaleb Shannon said.

Not to mention an outstanding athlete who is only 24 and is still in playing condition. In fact, it might have been her prowess on the basketball court that connected with Prairie's players as much as her knowledge of the game during those crucial first couple of weeks.

Atanasoff recalls a practice early in Prairie's season when Woodward walked onto the court to do a little practicing of



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Sammie Woodward discusses defense with fellow assistant Jersey Eickhorst Jan. 24 during a Prairie boys basketball team practice at the Johnson Athletic Center.

what she was preaching.

"I remember the first day after two days of tryouts," Atanasoff said. "We put her in charge of her first drill, which was a ballhandling drill. That first day, which was Wednesday, Nov. 17, she started doing examples of what she wanted them to do for ballhandling and you could just kind of see the boys get wide-eyed.

"They were like, 'Holy cow! This girl knows what she's doing! She knows what she's talking about!' She was doing multiple two-ball drills, through the legs, behind the back, push-pulls, stuff that some of our boys couldn't even do. And then she would do shooting drills and she

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Sammie Woodward on Becky Hammon

Becky Hammon made history in 2014 when she became an assistant coach with the San Antonio Spurs of the NBA. She remained in that position until recently, when she became coach of the Las Vegas Aces of the WNBA. What are Sammie Woodward's thoughts about Hammon?



Hammon

"I think everyone is starting to respect them more and I think Becky Hammon kind of paves the way for us. I know she just took a job in the WNBA, which is amazing for her, but part of me wishes she would have continued in the NBA, continued to light that torch and pave the way for the rest of us."

— Peter Jackel

COMMENTARY

Badgers building toward greatness

Wisconsin have sights on conference crown

The University of Wisconsin men's basketball team is tied for first place at the midway point of Big Ten Conference play and, no, that's not a sentence I thought I'd be typing when the 2021-22 season began back in November.

But it's no fluke, either, and a 66-60 win over Minnesota on

Sunday afternoon captured the essence of why the No. 11 Badgers have reached the point where they can be considered legitimate title contenders.

It's a group that flirts with danger but seems to know when to buckle down and do whatever it takes to win games. Of course, it helps to have a shining star leading the way and sophomore wing Johnny Davis, who finished with 16 points and career-high 15 rebounds, simply refused to let the Golden Gophers walk out of the Kohl Center with an upset victory.

"Good win," UW coach Greg Gard said. "None of them in the league are easy and this is another testament to it."

Can the Badgers (17-3, 8-2 Big Ten), picked to finish 10th in the Big Ten in a preseason poll of reporters who cover the conference, pull off the unthinkable and capture their second title in three seasons?

Yes, but it's going to be difficult. While finishing at 15-5 should be enough to win at least a share of the crown and even 14-6 might do the job, getting to that point is the trick. UW has five road games remaining

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PACKERS

Keys to the offense handed to Stenavich

JASON WILDE
Lee Newspapers

GREEN BAY — The Green Bay Packers' coaching staff shuffle continued Sunday, with more changes on the horizon.

It began with the Chicago Bears making official what had been expected for several days: The hiring of Packers quarterbacks coach/offensive passing-game coordinator Luke Getsy as their offensive coordinator under new head coach Matt Eberflus.

Getsy will call the Bears' offensive plays under Eberflus, an opportunity he would not have gotten had he stayed in Green Bay and replaced departed offensive coordinator Nathaniel Hackett, who was officially named as the Denver Broncos' new head coach on Friday. Head coach

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2022 WINTER OLYMPICS

Returning to the ice and spotlight

Wisconsin's curling stars embrace 2018 fame, prep for 2022

TODD D. MILEWSKI
Lee Newspapers

U.S. Olympic curlers get their time in the national spotlight every four years, when the sport appeals to the curiosities of the viewing public.

It was that way four years ago for Becca and Matt Hamilton and Nina Roth, athletes who made it to the Games after honing their skills at the Madison Curling Club. It's that way again this year for the McFarland-based trio.

The Hamiltons still are fueled by a sibling rivalry that gets stoked at every chance. Roth still



M. Hamilton B. Hamilton

is driven by details.

But much has changed for them in the space between the 2018 and 2022 Olympics — in recognition, in family and in team roles.

"The biggest thing is the opportunities and the doors that have opened for us," Matt Hamilton said in an interview alongside his younger sister. "We're both

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REBECCA S. GRATZ, ASSOCIATED PRESS

Team Shuster's Matt Hamilton celebrates his team's victory over Team Dropkin during the third night of finals at the U.S. Olympic Curling Team Trials at Baxter Arena in Omaha, Neb., on Nov. 21, 2021.

Woodward

From C1

would shoot just as good, if not better, than all the boys with the men's ball.

"I feel from that moment forward, there were no questions asked."

But why the boys team? Wouldn't it have been a more natural fit to join first-year Prairie coach Abby Jaramillo on the girls team? Why did Woodward choose to follow in the footsteps of Becky Hammon, a former longtime assistant with the NBA's San Antonio Spurs, and try coaching the opposite sex?

"Jason Atanasoff and I have always had a good relationship and I really admire how he works with his student-athletes and really builds his relationships with them," Woodward said. "I just thought I could learn a different dynamic of coaching from him that I haven't seen in the past."

Prairie set a program record for victories last season after going 24-4 and advanced to the WIAA Division 4 championship in La Crosse. A position on Atanasoff's staff opened last summer when Ryan Thompson left to replace



GREGORY SHAVER, JOURNAL TIMES FILE PHOTO

Prairie's Sammie Woodward saves the ball against Catholic Central Jan. 19, 2016 at Prairie's Johnson Athletic Center. Woodward was named fourth-team Associated Press All-State and the All-Racine County Player of the Year as a senior.

Nick Bennett as coach of defending WIAA 3 champion St. Catherine's.

One day, as Atanasoff was considering replacements, Woodward appeared as his door. After serving for one season as a graduate assistant coach

under Tim Bernero at Carthage, Woodward felt she was prepared to take this unusual step.

She also wanted to earn money to continue her pursuit at Carthage of a masters degree in education with an emphasis in

sports leadership. Why not go back to where she first established herself in basketball, gain a part-time position in Admissions and perhaps put her foot in the door for a fulltime job at Prairie?

"With Sammie, she actually approached me," Atanasoff said. "I thought she might want to try girls. She had such a nice career here playing for Melody Owsley and we were going through a coaching change with Abby Jaramillo, but she specially wanted to coach with me and (assistant) Jersey Eickhorst and I didn't think twice about it."

"She was a very good player and she was a gym rat her whole life. The thought of her being a female never even crossed my mind."

Considering Prairie graduated several key players from last year's team, including All-State forward Antuan Nesbitt (who recently transferred from Northern Michigan to Carthage), Woodward has had ample opportunity to teach.

The Hawks are 7-9 and have lost three of their last four games. But Woodward has stayed the course, patiently watching practices every afternoon

in a low-key manner and offering occasional suggestions on a team that includes two freshmen and two sophomores.

Yelling is not her style. Connecting with players with sound advice is. That's what Bernero saw during the one season Woodward was on his staff.

"Sammie was consistent in her work ethic as a player and that carried over to her as a coach," Bernero wrote in an email. "She absorbs information and is a willing learner, which helps you learn about different ways to help your players. She's also very driven to succeed and a great competitor."

The challenge for Woodward was winning over her players. She's starting to believe that she has.

"It's definitely a different dynamic," she said. "I think I was a little bit nervous about that, especially being a younger girl who recently graduated from college. I think that was hard, like, 'How am I going to get their respect?'"

"I was working as a graduate assistant at Carthage last year, so I was working with girls who almost saw me as their role

model. I knew it was tough, but the kids here are great. We've already built great relationships and they're definitely respecting me more day by day, I think."

Junior center Ashe Oglesby, Prairie's leading scorer and rebounder, can attest to that.

"She helps our team a lot," he said. "She was probably a little more hesitant to speak her mind, but as the season's gone on, I feel she's given her opinion a lot more. I really like what she's brought to our team and I'm happy she's here."

So is Eickhorst, a hold-over on Atanasoff's staff who is close with Woodward.

"They've never given her a hard time and if they would have, they would have heard from either Jason or I," Eickhorst said. "She has an excellent basketball mind and she knows what she's talking about."

Where does Woodward hope this position could take her?

"I haven't thought too much about it," she said. "I do think that one day I'll be a head coach of some sort. I'm not sure if it's going to be one the men's side or the women's side."

Packers

From C1

Matt LaFleur calls the Packers' offensive plays and will continue to do so.

Hackett and LaFleur both being their respective teams' play-callers in turn



Stenavich

left Packers offensive line coach/offensive run-game coordinator Adam Stenavich with a decision to make: Move his family to Denver, where a source said Hackett wanted him as his coordinator, or stay in his native Wisconsin and accept a promotion from LaFleur. A source confirmed multiple reports that Stenavich opted for the latter and is staying put.

Near midseason, Pack-

ers quarterback Aaron Rodgers gave Stenavich a ringing endorsement, saying, "'Steno' is a fantastic coach. He's not just a good man, but he's a really bright coach. And I think he's got a future above offensive line coach, for sure."

Hackett, Getsy and Stenavich helped the Packers rank No. 1 in scoring and No. 5 in total offense in 2020 and ninth in scoring and 10th in total offense in 2021.

Meanwhile, wide receivers coach Jason Vrable, who also could have pursued the Broncos' offensive coordinator job, also plans to stay with the Packers, a source said Sunday. Tight ends coach Justin Outten could be the next Packers offensive staffer whom Hackett could hire away.

The Athletic reported Sunday that Luke Butkus, the nephew of the iconic

Bears linebacker and Pro Football Hall of Famer Dick Butkus, will move up to the top offensive line coach spot after serving as Stenavich's assistant the past three seasons.

Like Stenavich before him, Butkus, 42, has never been a head NFL offensive line coach, having been an assistant line coach with the Bears, Seattle Seahawks, Jacksonville Jaguars and Packers. He was the lead offensive line coach at his alma mater, the University of Illinois, from 2016 through 2018 before accepting the job with the Packers.

Whatever they do elsewhere on the offensive staff, the Packers will

have to replace Getsy as the quarterbacks coach, and they could lure another team's QBs coach with the inclusion of the passing-game coordinator title if they don't intend to include that title in a promotion for a current staffer.

NFL Network reported Friday that LaFleur was planning to interview Philadelphia Eagles quarterbacks coach Brian Johnson for the offensive coordinator position. It's unclear whether he wants to make a lateral move and come to Green Bay for a job beneath coordinator.

The Packers also reportedly interviewed Los Angeles Chargers tight ends coach Kevin Koger, who was on LaFleur's staff in Green Bay in 2019 and 2020 as an offensive quality control coach, but that was also an offensive coordinator interview, according to NFL Network.

Polzin

From C1

against opponents who are a combined 30-19 in Big Ten play, a challenging stretch run that begins Wednesday when it visits co-leader Illinois.

Even if they manage to go 2-3 in those games — trips to Michigan State, Indiana, Minnesota and Rutgers also are on the docket — the Badgers may need to run the table at home and that would require finishing off a season sweep of Purdue.

"We're building, we're moving in the right direction," senior guard Brad Davison said when asked to assess UW at the halfway point of conference play. "That's

always the goal is to stack wins ... and find new ways to win sometimes. Sometimes it's hitting 3-pointers, sometimes it's going inside, sometimes you've just got to grind it out, kind of like today. It takes a team effort."

My biggest concern — and I don't think I'm alone here — is that a lack of bench production will catch up with UW. There's also the related issue of Davis and Davison having to log heavy minutes because this team becomes rather pedestrian when either of them are on the bench.

The reserves contributed five points, two rebounds and two assists in 36 combined minutes against the Gophers, which isn't nearly enough. Davis and Davison came into the day averaging 36.2 and 34.9 minutes per game in Big Ten play, respectively, and both were on the floor for more than 37 minutes on Sunday.

UW finds itself in the midst of a stretch of five games in 13 days, a busy schedule that became more condensed when Nebraska's COVID-19 issues led to a game against the Badgers last week being pushed back two days.

February is typically when tired legs can become an issue and Gard already has started to limit the workload of his heavy-minute players on the days between games.

"At this point, there's no time to be tired," Davis said. "It's just about taking care of your body, eating right, getting enough sleep."

The challenge for Gard might be convincing Davis and Davison to take their

foot off the gas pedal a little bit in practice. Gard joked Davison "doesn't need to run through a brick wall" on those days between games and Davis is cut from the same cloth.

"We definitely have a target on our back," Davison said, "so you've got to show up and play and work hard in every game but also every time in the weight room, every time in practice because the difference in a good and great team ... is getting better every day."

Gard believes the Badgers can improve. In fact, he said, "I think we can get quite a bit better." It's sometimes easy to forget UW has a true freshman point guard (Chucky Hepburn) and another starter (sophomore center Steven Crowl) who is essentially a freshman because he played limited minutes last season.

Both are ascending players — Crowl, in particular, has shown off some dandy moves in the post of late — and could play pivotal roles in a run to a title if they can avoid hitting a wall over the next five weeks.

One other concern with this team is it tends to make things a little too interesting. In baseball parlance — yes, it's an odd analogy for an athletic department without that sport — UW is really good at closing games but struggles in middle relief. The Badgers should be proud of their 10-1 record in games decided by six or fewer points, but letting opponents back in games is going to come back to bite them at some point.

The Badgers led by as many as nine points in the second half Sunday but still found themselves in another nail-biter. While some of the credit goes to Minnesota for knocking down at least three contested 3-pointers down the stretch, UW also got a little sloppy on both ends of the court.

The game was tied at 60 when Davis — the Badgers' version of Mariano Rivera — stepped in to close the deal. He outscored Minnesota 6-0 over the final 130 seconds and also grabbed two rebounds, including one on the offensive end with UW clinging to a two-point lead, during that sprint to the finish.

"I was just thinking of getting a bucket at all costs," he said. "At that point in the game, every bucket is crucial so I just made sure I delivered."

It was another signature stretch to add to Davis' case for national player of the year, another sentence I didn't think I'd be typing three months ago.

Jim Polzin is a columnist for Lee Newspapers.

Curling

From C1

considered like pseudo celebrities."

What's the life of a pseudo celebrity? Matt Hamilton has played in golf events that also have included NFL players past and present, sometimes with the gold medal he brought back from South Korea in 2018. He now appears regularly on an afternoon radio show on ESPN Madison.

Becca Hamilton has been featured on an NBC football broadcast from Lambeau Field, something for which her brother insisted that he "must have lost my invitation in the mail."

"Right after the (2018) Olympics, I felt like everyone recognized us in Madison at the airport and in passing," Becca Hamilton said. "And now, this go around, we're back in the forefront again. Having a lot of people following us and supporting us, private messages on social media and things like that, it's just nice to know how many people are supporting us here in the Madison area."

Matt Hamilton's Instagram feed isn't just a tribute to his bold sense of style. It shows some of the celebrities he has met along the way since 2018: actor Matthew McConaughey, swimmer Michael Phelps, Bucks coach Mike Budenholzer, boxer Canelo Álvarez and comedian Cedric the Entertainer among them.

"Some of the opportunities that present themselves when you are on

the forefront is just really neat," he said. "Just the experiences we've gotten to share together and have ourselves have been pretty incredible and something we won't soon forget."

Time to adapt

Roth and her husband, Tony, welcomed their first child in February 2020, just



Roth

before the COVID-19 pandemic hit the U.S. The timing of the changes was difficult in that it forced a lot of quick

adapting for the Roths. But it also was a blessing, Nina Roth said, because of the extended period of time she got to spend at home with her son.

Being adaptable has been a benefit in both family life and curling for Roth, who was skip of the 2018 U.S. women's team. She backed away from that role while she took time off after her son was born and Tabitha Peterson stepped in.

When she was ready to come back, she knew it was going to be in a different spot.

"When I stepped away to have my child and Tab had an incredible season, we didn't want to change that momentum," Roth said. "She was doing very well. And so when I came in, I said if you want to keep skipping, I have no problem with that. I want to be here to support you. And here's why I think that I could be a very good third for this team. And everyone bought into that change and that's helped

us to have continued success."

With Peterson at skip, Roth at third, Becca Hamilton at second and Tara Peterson — Tabitha's sister — at lead, the team swept the final series at the Olympic trials in November.

Some in high-level curling might have looked at a move from skip to third as a demotion worthy of a search for a new team to lead, Matt Hamilton said.

"I think for Nina to be big enough to see the writing on the wall that Tab's had the shots, all the intangibles that you need to be a skip, for Nina to step back to third and accept her new role is really awesome for her," he said. "And it made that team better."

The U.S. women's team with Roth and Becca Hamilton didn't qualify for the Olympic tournament playoffs in 2018. Roth took away an important realization that she said she'll use this year.

"Yes, the Olympics is special, but at the end of the day it's the same competition," she said. "It's the same rocks, same ice and same people that we play all year long. The comfort in knowing that, really, once we hit the ice, nothing is going to be different, that'll help calm those nerves."

Pushing each other

The nerves were high for Becca Hamilton at the Olympic trials, but she already had qualified with Roth and the Petersons. It was her brother's team that made her panicky.

Three of the four players from the men's team



Butkus