



Onboard with game plan

Ann Strother's savvy court knowledge seen as plus for CU women

By B.G. Brooks

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For years on basketball courts scattered from Colorado to Connecticut and points beyond, her decisions were split-second, resolutions reached more through reaction than thought.

And that might have been why Ann Strother was agonizing so greatly about this one: way too much time to think, way too much time to plot the pluses and minuses.

She had been offered an administrative job by Kathy McConnell-Miller, who did her homework in sizing up Strother for what she was, is and could become in relation to McConnell-Miller's University of Colorado women's basketball program.

McConnell-Miller wanted an answer. So did Strother, who at the time was loving life in Spain while weighing a career in professional basketball against a yearning to prepare herself for a life after hoops likely to include coaching.

"I called Kathy to tell her I wasn't going to take the job and she didn't answer," Strother recalled. "I thought about it for another day, called her back and took the job.

"It really was that close, yeah."

Told about her near-miss in landing Strother - CU had whiffed on her as a recruit after a superb high school career at Highlands Ranch - McConnell-Miller laughed aloud and said, "I would have talked her into it.

"If she was sitting on the fence that softly, I would have swayed her. She's going to be a great coach; we're blessed she decided to come. I think she's given up a lot as far as her playing career, but now she's got the best of both worlds."

Believe the most is being made of it.

Strother, an engaging, humble 23- year-old (she will turn 24 on Tuesday) who blanches at being reminded of the star power she exudes, came aboard at CU in October as McConnell-Miller's director of basketball operations.

But she's oh, so much more.

She can relate

Aware of Strother's stellar four years at the University of Connecticut, where she won two national championships, and a budding career in the WNBA (Indiana Fever), CU's players see her as a role model and resource, an ally and confidante.

"With her history, her background and what she's accomplished in her career, she's in a unique position," said Buffaloes senior guard Susie Powers, a teammate of Strother's at Highlands Ranch and an opponent for two seasons at Notre Dame before Powers transferred to CU in 2005.

"She's able to relate to us because she's younger and close to our age. She can approach us in a manner that the rest of the staff cannot. With her winning record and her awards . . . playing overseas, in the WNBA, all that experience is very helpful."

Added sophomore point guard Whitney Houston: "I look up to her. She's a sweet person. Some people (with her background) would come in kind of cocky and arrogant, but she's not like that at all. She's down to earth, just a real cool person. If I need

anybody to talk to, I'll go to her."

Strother, a psychology major at Connecticut, concedes to feeling her way through the business side of her job description, but McConnell-Miller is willing to let her new hire pace herself. Strother, though, wasn't hired to be a nonentity who plots trips, checks itineraries and distributes meal money.

McConnell-Miller doesn't want her to be the face of the program, but she is a face familiar to anyone who has followed women's basketball. And that face now can be identified with CU. It can be a draw with obvious benefits, particularly in-state.

"You always want to surround yourself with people who can help you," McConnell-Miller said. "Every time I've made a hire, I felt like I've identified what my needs were.

"Our strongest need here is to relate to the Colorado players. I just couldn't find one better player who could relate . . . than Ann Strother."

Praise from Auriemma

The hiring process started with McConnell-Miller speaking at length with Strother's college coach, Geno Auriemma, who gave Strother the kind of performance evaluation one might expect of a four-year member of the dean's list and former Kodak All-American.

"To me, Ann Strother is a perfect example of someone who came in as a freshman and was never afraid to take the big shot, to have the ball in crucial situations," Auriemma said. "Some kids are just different and they have it in them. She does."

"Geno and I are great friends," McConnell-Miller said. "I had spoken with him at length about her background as a player, what she was like as a recruiter, how she was in the community, with the fans, and every answer, every response, I just knew she was somebody that I could work with every day. And, ultimately, I knew the players could identify with her.

"You think Colorado (girls high school) basketball, you think of Ann Strother. All these players grew up idolizing her. I wanted Ann to come in and see what Colorado was like from the inside and share with this entire state how wonderful a place this is . . . academically, socially, administratively. . . .

"I could say it until I was blue in the face, but when Ann says something to a 13- or 14-year-old, any future players, there's an open ear. She's got huge credibility (and) there's no doubt her being here makes a difference."

Strother, though, seems slightly reluctant to be pegged as a recruiter, saying, "I just love being here and love college basketball. I'm just enjoying the opportunity and being back in a college atmosphere. I'm not really in a position to be recruiting; I'm just taking it all in right now."

But long term, could her presence sway in-state players to CU?

She's humble, not naïve.

"If it does, that's great," she said. "But I think (prospects) are getting a lot of great things from this university and this basketball program and coaching staff. I'm just happy to be a part of it. If I can make a difference in influencing kids to be in this program, then I'd be honored to make a difference."

Seeing the world

Finally getting Strother to CU to become a possible difference-maker presented her with a dilemma. After the conclusion of the WNBA season (May through early September), she was playing overseas, seeing parts of the world (Siberia, Spain) she might never have seen otherwise and generally enjoying where basketball was taking her.

"I saw all of Russia and it was so interesting, but the basketball team (Shelen, based in Krasnoyarsk) was not as strong as I thought," Strother said. "It's hard to go from winning so much in college to playing in Siberia with a team that didn't win games."

With her team in Spain more competitive, Strother believed she had settled into a full-time, year-round hoops routine. Then McConnell-Miller called, and it all changed.

"Kathy and the coaching staff, my family being in Colorado, and getting to see coaching and the business side of the program, behind the scenes, so many things just put it over the edge for me to come home," she said.

But Strother has no second thoughts about making that second call to McConnell-Miller.

"It's all starting to come together," Strother said, adding that the summer WNBA opportunity is present, as are chances to work on her game and conditioning at CU.

She has been able to play in lunch-hour pickup games and get in as many workouts as her schedule allows, and there never is a shortage of strength and conditioning types who want to work her out.

"More than you would believe," McConnell-Miller said.

Blending pro, college

Strother isn't alone in coupling the

WNBA with work on a college campus.

Temple head coach Dawn Staley only recently announced her retirement as a player from the Houston Comets, and Strother said a number of college assistants still play professionally. But she believes her job and others in college basketball held by women with WNBA ties will eventually come under scrutiny by the NCAA.

Strother believes the WNBA, conceived in April 1996, presents a goal for high school/college players and "definitely shows just how far (women's pro hoops) has come."

It can go further, as evidenced by a new eight-year contract signed in July with ESPN/ABC that will run through the league's 20th season, in 2016. Strother hasn't a clue what she might be doing then, but bet on it being basketball-related.

"I really do have the best of both worlds," she said.

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One-on-one with Ann Strother

*** Your outside interests?**

"I'm just so happy to be back in the United States, go to movies, go outside, have a puppy - just talk to people. I didn't know Russian, didn't know Spanish . . . there's so many things in the United States you take for granted when you're overseas."

*** Growing up, whom did you want to emulate?**

"I guess the one (basketball player) everyone had in mind was Michael Jordan. I used to watch all of his games when he was with the Bulls. But my dad (Ken) was probably the person I looked up to most."

*** Your favorite music?**

"I like all kinds of music. I don't really have a favorite, even a favorite singer."

*** If you weren't involved in basketball, what would you be doing?**

"I really can't imagine that. . . . Basketball's been such a big part of my life. My freshman year, I went into the nursing program. But I didn't have time to do both. If I had to guess, I'd probably be working in a hospital, working with kids or something like

that. But I can't imagine life without basketball."

*** Your take on the rise in athleticism in women's basketball?**

"I'm only two years removed from college and I think there's a big difference now. Candace Parker and Sylvia Fowles are dunking in games . . . that's just incredible. I don't know if I ever thought I'd see the day that happened. Athletically, it's really coming along."

The Strother file

*** Age (date of birth):** 23 (Dec. 11, 1983).

*** Position:** Guard/forward.

*** Height:** 6-foot-3.

*** Hometown:** Castle Rock.

*** High school:** Highlands Ranch.

*** College:** University of Connecticut (psychology major).

*** WNBA team:** Indiana Fever.

Resume highlights

* 2002 Naismith, *USA Today*, Women's Basketball Coaches Association, *Parade Magazine* and Gatorade National High School Player of the Year; won back-to-back state championships at Highlands Ranch.

* Dean's list (four years).

* First-team All-Big East Conference 2004-05, 2005-06; Kodak District I All-America team 2004-05, 2005-06.

* Seventh all-time career scorer at UConn (11.9 average).

* Second UConn player to have 1,600 points, 600 rebounds, 400 assists, 100 steals and 100 blocked shots in career.

* Huskies won three Big East titles and two national championships during her four years.

* WNBA: second-round pick by Houston (2006), traded to Phoenix, then to Indiana.

Giving back

About a year ago, Ann Strother started a nonprofit called Outward Bounce. First project: raise about \$8,000 to build an outdoor basketball court in Costa Rica.

The idea was born when one of her sister's friends, who lived in the country, called Strother and asked "if I could make something happen. I had been trying to figure out a way to give back and help kids . . . this is a way to do that."