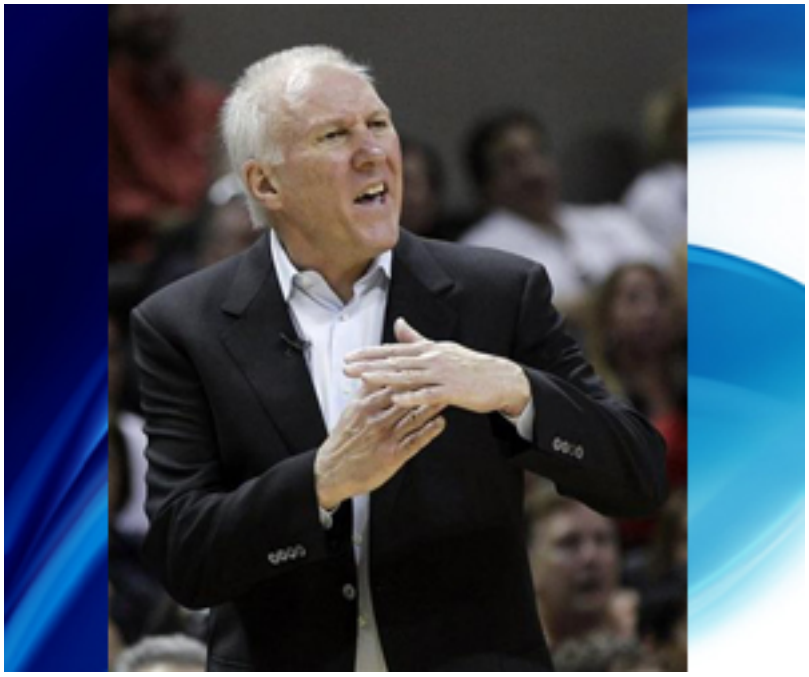

"Timmy just wants to get minutes," Popovich said. "He's just trying to ingratiate himself."

SAN ANTONIO (AP) -- Gregg Popovich can't win like the old days. No longer can the San Antonio Spurs simply feed Tim Duncan the ball, let their defense do the rest and ride that game plan to NBA championships.

But the new way Popovich has them winning isn't bad, either.

That acknowledgment came Tuesday when Popovich was honored as the NBA's Coach of the Year after leading San Antonio to 50 wins and the No. 1 seed in the Western Conference. The Spurs defied naysayers who have written them off as too old since their last title in 2007 and did so in a lockout-shortened season that tested every coach when it came to managing minutes and finding practice time.

"If you can draft David Robinson and follow that up with Tim Duncan, that's a couple of decades of very, very possible success unless you just screw it up," Popovich said. "So it's hard to take credit when circumstances have gone your way so consistently."

Popovich also won the award in 2003 when San Antonio won its second of four championships, and he might be headed for a fifth ring if the Spurs keep this up. They're doing it partly thanks to a supporting cast of rookies and former NBA no-names that Popovich has turned into a surprise frontrunner.

He whipped them into winners quickly. After a bumpy 12-9 start, the Spurs lost just seven more games the rest of the season.

"Pop has done a terrific job molding a mix of experience and inexperience," Spurs general manager R.C. Buford said.

Popovich received 77 first-place votes. Chicago coach Tom Thibodeau was second (27), Indiana coach Frank Vogel was third (7) and Memphis coach Lionel Hollins was fourth (6). Boston's Doc Rivers and Denver's George Karl each received a vote.

Thibodeau, last year's recipient, said a case could be made for Popovich to win every season.

"I'm happy for him. They've had a great season," Thibodeau said. "The way he runs an organization, you can't say enough about him. The thing I really admire about him is I had an opportunity to meet him 20 years ago, and he's the same guy today that he was then. All the success, the championships, he has not changed one bit."

The Spurs practiced Tuesday before the NBA made the afternoon announcement. All-Star Tony Parker, who might be having the most complete season of his career, later tweeted congratulations to the only NBA coach he's ever known.

Not that Popovich, one of the NBA's most famously mercurial and colorful coaches for 16 seasons, is likely to be found on social media.

"Well deserved!!!" Parker wrote.

The season loomed as one of Popovich's toughest projects yet. Besides Duncan, 36, and Manu Ginobili, 34, growing another year older, the Spurs started the year with much of the same roster that fell in the first round to the up-and-coming Grizzlies last spring.

But Popovich, who is also team president, looked in unlikely places to keep San Antonio's championship window from shutting. Although he typically keeps rookies on a short leash, Popovich put forward Kawhi Leonard in the starting lineup by midseason and has kept him there for the playoffs. Swingman Danny Green, who the Spurs have previously cut multiple times, found his way into the starting lineup and emerged as a surprise offensive spark.

Popovich also steered the Spurs through what has typically been a death knell for them in recent years: injuries to their Big Three. Ginobili missed nearly half the season after breaking his hand, yet San Antonio still kept winning without their playmaking guard.

Popovich was aggressive as ever in keeping his stars healthy. He willingly surrendered 11-game winning streaks twice by playing without Duncan, Parker and Ginobili to avoid wear and tear. When he didn't play them in Portland, a disgruntled fan chided Popovich in a letter for denying his family the chance to see three of the NBA's biggest stars in person.

Popovich wrote the fan back. He understood, "but I have a different priority, a different responsibility. That rules for me."

Duncan has said that kind of decision-making has made this Popovich's best coaching season yet.

Popovich deflected the praise.

"Timmy just wants to get minutes," Popovich said. "He's just trying to ingratiate himself."

Popovich has a record of 847-399 since 1996, making him the league's longest tenured coach with the same team. He is one of only five coaches with four or more NBA championships, joining Pat Riley, Phil Jackson, John Kundla and Red Auerbach, whom the Coach of the Year award is named after.

A case also could've been made for Thibodeau to repeat as winner. The Bulls tied the Spurs with an NBA-best 50 wins even with reigning MVP Derrick Rose hampered by injuries all season.