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Search for Bzdelik's successor starts to roll

Players could splinter if McClain not the guy

By Patrick Ridgell
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BOULDER — Colorado is in the market for a head men's basketball coach for the second time in four years, and administrators say the job is far more attractive now than it was in 2007 when Jeff Bzdelik came aboard.

But that could change.

CU's current players continue to stump for associate head coach Steve McClain to succeed Bzdelik, who was named Wake Forest's coaching position on Wednesday, calling it his "dream job" in the process. If CU hires someone besides McClain, the players, who went 15-16 last year and are expected to return most key parts in 2010-11, might splinter.

"It could," senior guard Cory Higgins said. "A couple of our players have said it publicly. That's something that could happen.

"I hope it doesn't. I hope we don't have to go down that path."

Athletic director Mike Bohn said CU will interview McClain, who continues to work but will not be named interim coach. Bohn promised nothing else.

"We have respect for Steve, and we will certainly look forward to an interview session with Steve, but in the end, we have to do what's right for the program long-term," Bohn said.

The basis on which CU believes its opening is attractive is the improvement in facilities that have occurred over the past three years. Plans for the new practice facility, scheduled to open around summer 2011, and increased interest — attendance jumped sharply in 2009-10 — add to the belief. And having a good core of returning players suggests immediate success is possible.

Still, the program is seeking a coach who will be the right fit. Bzdelik used to tell people he was not the right fit at CU. He wanted out of Boulder so much that he, not Wake Forest, will be responsible for the \$500,000 buyout to escape his CU contract, according to Wake Forest athletic director Ron Wellman.

"We do not pay buyouts, no," Wellman told the Associated Press.

Bohn would not comment on the buyout Wednesday.

CU paid Bzdelik a base of \$750,000 a year, plus incentives for player comportment and program success, according to the contract he agreed to in April 2007.

A search committee is in place. Associate athletic director Tom McGrath will chair it. Interviews are being scheduled now. Bohn declined to discuss specific names but called Northern Colorado coach Tad Boyle and former Metropolitan State College coach Mike Dunlap "intriguing candidates."

Bohn said no timetable exists for the hire, but that he's aware of the urgency. The spring signing period began Wednesday, and CU has no commitments. If forward Casey Crawford is carrying through with plans to skip his senior season, CU will have three scholarships to offer this spring.

Bohn first learned of Bzdelik's courtship with Wake Forest via a text message from former Buff Chauncey Billups on Friday. Since then, he has heard from Nuggets coach George Karl, former NBA and college coach Larry Brown, and Rod Higgins, Cory's father and the general manager of the Charlotte Bobcats. All offered thoughts on whom CU should hire.

The person who fits must have familiarity with CU, its hoops history and what it takes to grow, Bohn said. Bohn called the current administration's commitment to men's basketball "unprecedented."

"We have to find somebody that can seize that opportunity, that can take that equity that's been built over the last three years, not only in facilities and our infrastructure but also in our young men, and also the excitement and energy in our fan base in a 40 percent increase in attendance in our conference games," Bohn said. "That's all momentum. And we want somebody that can take advantage of that and keep pushing the rock uphill, rather than have it roll back on top of them."

Senior Levi Knutson said the he and teammates want a "player's coach ... somebody they can play hard for, somebody they can look up to and respect."

"The right coach is going to bring us to the NCAA Tournament as a group."

Bohn said CU wants to make the proper choices right now so that it can unite everyone — fans, boosters, players and administrators — involved.

"We have a tendency to allow things to divide rather than unite," he said.

"It's why we're spending so much time and trying to be as thorough as we can be and do all the different things we're doing — because we want to continue to unite and present a support level behind the program that gives us a chance, rather than continue to have factions that disappear from time to time."

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CU later! Bzdelik heading to Wake

By Patrick Ridgell
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BOULDER — Marcus Relphorde is about to play for his fourth head coach in five years.

Relphorde will be a fifth-year senior in 2010-11 on Colorado's men's basketball team, which today will officially lose its head coach, Jeff Bzdelik, when Wake Forest announces it has hired Bzdelik during an 8 a.m. news conference.

Relphorde began his career at Saint Louis, transferred to Indian Hills Community College and then joined CU last year. Changing coaches is nothing new for him.

"It's definitely a little shocking; I never thought he'd leave," Relphorde said. "But he has a history of every year flirting with, or thinking about, taking another job. So after really looking back on it, I guess it was something he had on his mind the whole time."

Bzdelik, who coached CU to a 36-58 record in three seasons, talked about coaching jobs with the Minnesota Timberwolves last summer and with the Chicago Bulls the previous summer.

Relphorde and his returning teammates met with athletic director Mike Bohn on Monday night to express their desire for CU to turn to associate head coach Steve McClain as Bzdelik's successor. McClain is popular with the players and is a good recruiter. He was the main recruiter for Relphorde, who had other offers. Relphorde believes McClain could make the transition smooth for everyone.

"I feel like if the right steps are taken as far as hiring coach McClain as the next coach that it can be a positive for the team and we'll end up doing good next year," Relphorde said.

"We've all had good relationships with him because he's pretty comfortable with us. The way he coaches and how passionate he is for the game, ... we feel like it can just continue on and we can improve on what we did last year."

McClain, 48 in August, spent nine seasons coaching Wyoming (1998-2007), where he compiled a 157-115 record.

Wake Forest will have to pay CU \$500,000 to buy Bzdelik out of his contract. If Bohn and CU conduct a national search for Bzdelik's successor, that money could be used to buy out a coach at another program. Names like Northern Colorado's Tad Boyle and Saint Mary's coach Randy Bennett have been reported as potential replacements.

Former Metropolitan State College coach and Nuggets assistant Mike Dunlap has been reported as a candidate to join Steve Lavin's new staff at St. John's. CU talked to Dunlap in 2007 about its opening then, but Dunlap withdrew from consideration, and Bzdelik was hired.

CU reported Bzdelik's interest in Wake Forest was due to family reasons. His daughter, Courtney, is a freshman at the North Carolina school.



Colorado head basketball coach Jeff Bzdelik directs his team against Kansas at Coors Events Center in Boulder on Feb. 3. According to sources, Bzdelik will be named the head coach at Wake Forest today. **Joshua Buck/Times-Call file**

While CU is not a traditional basketball power, it could be a more appealing job with the March 25 groundbreaking of a basketball/volleyball practice facility. Not much work appears to have been done on the facility since the groundbreaking, but Bohn said Monday that all contracts associated with the contractor are “moving along fine. Our timeline is right where we thought it would be.”

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