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colorado basketball

Bufs face problems but future bright

CU lacks tradition and an intense fan base in the tough Big 12, but there are signs of hope.

By John Henderson
The Denver Post

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Guard Alec Burks is one of two top backcourt stars returning to Colorado next season and one of the reasons the CU program is seen as being on the upswing. (Jamie Squire, Getty Images)

Jeff Bzdelik left Boulder last week to a chorus of jackhammers being used to build a new practice facility. Five returning starters bid him a sad adieu. The few hearty Colorado boosters who've noticed Bufs basketball showing signs of relevance wonder what's next.

So will the next coach.

All the candidates whom athletic director Mike Bohn has contacted asked the same question: How good is the Colorado basketball job?

It's a good question that gets as many different answers as Kansas gets prep All-Americans. The consensus? A tough job, possibly the hardest in the Big 12, but a much better one than it was just three years ago.

"I think CU is a job with challenges," said Colorado State coach Tim Miles, who plays Colorado every season. "Look at recruiting and the amount of prospects (in Colorado) and the volume of play at the Big 12 level. There's not a steady diet of those types of players (in-state)."

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On the other hand, Bzdelik said, "I think the University of Colorado is a great opportunity for the next coach. I really, truly believe that the program is on a great path for postseason play next season and many consistent winning seasons to come."

Colorado basketball has been relevant on the national scale once since the 1960s. That's when Chauncey Billups arrived from George Washington High and led the Buffs to the second round of the 1997 NCAA Tournament, their only first-round NCAA victory since 1963.

Since 1990, CU has produced only one NCAA Tournament team and two NBA draft picks. Its basketball budget of \$3.95 million is in the

bottom three of the Big 12, and this past season's average attendance of 6,267 was last in the league.

One big problem for whoever gets the CU job is finding talent. Colorado produced only three Division I scholarship players a year ago, continuing a trend that hasn't changed much in recent years.

Bufs coaches are constantly in airplanes instead of cars. Bzdelik said he once took six flights over a 48-hour period to see two prospects.

"The problem is the good ones (in-state) we do produce we didn't get," Billups said. "We've had some really, really good players, but for whatever reason we didn't get them."

The reasons are many, including a void of tradition, a lack of TV exposure and a fan base that thinks the college basketball season starts in March. The Colorado-CSU rivalry game on Dec. 10, featuring two up-and-coming programs, drew only 5,293 to Fort Collins.

"I think the general public is lukewarm to colleges (locally)," Miles said. "We've primarily not been successful on the national level. Sonny Lubick did it for CSU football. (CU football coach) Bill McCartney won a national championship. They raised the level. We need to do the same."

The going gag among many inside college basketball is that CU "is 13th in the Big 12."

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Thanks to Bzdelik, that's not true anymore. The Buffaloes were picked to finish last this past season but went 6-10 in league play and finished 15-16 overall.

Nebraska, meanwhile, went 2-14, and Oklahoma nose-dived to 4-12 and faces mass defections.

Colorado's immediate future appears bright, with five returning starters, including two legitimate NBA backcourt prospects, senior-to-be Cory Higgins and sophomore-to-be Alec Burks.

Said ex-Buff Jamahl Mosley, a Nuggets assistant coach who likes what he sees of the talent enough to want the job: "It's great, and more people are wanting to come there. It's a gold mine."

Added Bzdelik: "The players in the program right now are talented, intelligent and great citizens. I'm telling you what, the state of the program right now is awesome."

If it's so "awesome," why did Bzdelik leave for Wake Forest? He said his decision had more to do with family ties in North Carolina, yet it's also Wake Forest vs. Colorado. One school has consistently produced NCAA Tournament teams, and CU hasn't.

But more objective sources, such as ex-players in the NBA, echo Bzdelik.

"Right now it's on its way to be in a good position," Billups said. "So now is the time to get it."

Many believe Colorado began digging its way out of the hole when it recently began digging a hole for the \$10.5 million practice facility. It's due for completion in August 2011.

"It's important," Billups said. "It shows that you're committed, that basketball is a big deal. For so long, Colorado basketball has not been a big deal. We're trying to change that."

The top three candidates to replace Bzdelik, Buffs assistant Steve McClain, former Metro State coach Mike Dunlap and Northern Colorado head coach Tad Boyle, are familiar with the program's issues.

To them, it's a great job. It will be up to one of them to prove that to the rest of the country.

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How CU stacks up in Big 12 men's basketball

Arena Att. NCAA NBA In-state D1 Big 12 record
School Budget* Cap. (2009-10) Bids# Picks#
signings '09 2000-2010
Kansas \$8.2 16,300 16,433 11 11 5 146-30
Texas \$7.9 16,755 14,629 11 9 78 125-51
Texas A&M \$6.2 12,989 9,889 5 4 78 75-91
Oklahoma \$5.4 12,000 10,650 8 3 7 112-64
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Baylor \$4.6 10,284 7,457 2 0 78 56-120

Missouri \$4.5 15,061 10,349 6 5 12 93-83

Iowa State \$4.3 15,000 12,491 3 4 10 86-100

Nebraska \$3.96 13,595 9,964 0 0 1 63-113

Colorado \$3.95 11,064 6,267 1 2 3 62-114

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