

Woelk: Bzdelik 'proud' of his years at Colorado

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Jeff Bzdelik has spent virtually every waking moment the last couple of weeks trying to acquaint himself with all things Wake Forest.

But he admits he still can't get Colorado off his mind.

It was three weeks ago today that word about Bzdelik's possible departure from Colorado became public. A couple of days later, Bzdelik was saying goodbye to the Buffs and hello to the Demon Deacons -- and CU officials were looking for a basketball coach to continue to build on what Bzdelik started in Boulder.

That in itself is a rarity.

Usually, when CU officials are looking for a basketball coach, they're trying to find someone who can build from scratch, someone who can sift through the rubble and find something -- anything -- on which to begin a foundation.

But Bzdelik's three-year tenure proved to be a fairly uncommon one in CU annals.

Bzdelik left the program in much better shape than when he inherited it. New coach Tad Boyle has a running start (at least by CU standards), and the enthusiasm and excitement around the program is on the upswing.

That's some consolation to the man who called leaving Colorado "maybe the toughest decision I've ever had to make."

"It was painful," Bzdelik said. "But what I hope people realize is that no one is bigger than the program, including the head coach. Right now, the program is primed to realize the vision that we had three years ago, and that vision is this: To win, to go to the postseason and do so without compromising the moral and academic integrity of the University of Colorado."

"I take great pride in knowing that I played a small part in that, and I'm thankful for the people who helped."

No doubt, there are some folks out there who are critical of Bzdelik, saying he left before he finished the job. That's understandable.

But even the critics must admit this much: Bzdelik did help lay the groundwork for success.

The basketball team's Academic Progress Rate is in good shape, a far cry from when he took the job. Losing scholarships is no longer a threat. The team's grade-point average improved from 2.0 to 2.9 during his stay. Facilities were improved dramatically, the talent level of the players took a major step up and attendance last season increased almost 40 percent.

"I hope CU, the community and the student body continue to support the program with the passion and energy they displayed over the last couple of years," Bzdelik said. "No doubt, the players deserve it. They're the heart and soul of the program."

"But there are also so many people behind the scenes who are important, and will continue to be important to the program's success. They are the people the public doesn't see, but they are the people who kept that vision in place. They worked their tails off to get to help make CU men's basketball relevant again. Support staff, alumni, students -- all those people are so important, and I want them to know how much we appreciated everything they did."

More than a decade ago, I wrote a scathing commentary when CU football coach Rick Neuheisel bolted for Washington. I questioned his loyalty and his integrity.

But in retrospect, as I've watched coaches hired and fired on seeming whims, I realize there are two sides to that equation. Loyalty goes both ways. Athletic directors must look out for their constituents; coaches must look out for their families and

careers.

Simply, when a great opportunity arises, it's not easy to dismiss. Bzdelik saw an opportunity to coach in the ACC, to make a move that was good for his family and one that provided career stability.

So he took that opportunity -- but not without some personal anguish. Just when he was ready to see three years of hard labor provide some reward, he left.

What was clear when we spoke Thursday morning was that Bzdelik still occasionally wrestles with that decision. He made the move for all the right reasons, but there's still an emotional corner that wonders what might have been had he stayed.

"When I finally made the decision, I knew this: I kept my integrity intact and I know that we did things the right way," Bzdelik said. "The program embodies what CU stands for, and the people who helped do that are still there.

"Now, as the emotions calm down, part of me still wants to be there. I have a terrific opportunity at Wake Forest, and it's a great challenge. But I'll always have a deep attachment to the University of Colorado ... I just won't be there physically."

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