

CU's Smith has no reservations in reserve role

Buff senior enjoying sterling season off bench

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Boulder Daily Camera

Posted: 12/09/2009 11:50:00 PM MST

The circumstances might break the spirit of most seniors.

Bianca Smith's minutes per game are the lowest they've been since her freshman year with the Colorado women's basketball team. A starter every game last season and for the majority of her career, Smith has come off the bench this season as a pair of freshmen have entrenched themselves in starting roles.

And yet, Smith can't help but smile these days. The 5-foot-9 shooting guard from Missouri City, Texas, is having the most fun she's ever had as a Buffalo.

The Buffs, after all, are 6-1 heading into Friday's 7:05 p.m. game against Colorado State in Fort Collins.

And there's a quiet optimism within the program that this could be the year the squad turns the corner and breaks through with the first NCAA tournament appearance under coach Kathy McConnell-Miller.

"This is my last year and I just want to win as many games as we can," Smith says. "And if coach feels like I need to come off the bench to do that, then that's what I'll do."

That Smith is putting up the best offensive numbers of her career also doesn't hurt.

Despite coming off the bench, Smith is the team's second-leading scorer with 12.4 points per game while averaging 23.6 minutes. And she's shooting 41 percent (20 for 49) from behind the 3-point arc. She's also on pace for the most steals of her career. "It's not a big deal for me," Smith says of coming off the bench. "I want to do whatever I have to do to help my team win, and I think I've been doing that."

McConnell-Miller has asserted all season long that she likes the scoring punch she's able to bring off the bench with players like Smith and Kelly Jo Mullaney.

But the coach has also been happy to take some of the defensive load off of Smith that she had to carry last season. With taller freshman Meagan Malcolm-Peck in the starting lineup doing a serviceable job of guarding opponents' power forwards inside, Smith has been better able to stay out of foul trouble and keep from wearing down - making her a more potent offensive threat.

McConnell-Miller says she's never had to address with Smith the issue of coming off the bench. While Smith might not be starting, her minutes played are fourth-most on the team.

"If you take notice, she's been on the floor at the end of most games," McConnell-Miller says. "I think that's the most important for Bianca is that she's on the floor at crunch time."

"She's handled it like a champ."

Smith's handling of the freshmen has also been key to the team's success. If a younger player is out of position on defense, often it's Smith helping straighten things out and offering encouragement when mistakes are made.

"She really took us under her wing and showed us what you have to do, how hard she works," Malcolm-Peck says.

Smith admits that she's had to train herself to stay focused at the start of games while she's on the bench. But that extra attention to what's happening on the floor has also helped her recognize opponents' tendencies and weaknesses so that she's ready to exploit them when she comes into a game.

So far the formula has been reaping big dividends.

Smith is fifth on CU's career chart for 3-point field goals made with 195. If she stays on her current pace this season, she'll easily move into second by the end of the regular season and could pass Shelly Sheetz (252) for first.

Smith, who set the CU record for most treys made in a season with 80 her sophomore year, needs just three more to pass Kate Fagan for fourth place on the career list. Jenny Roulier is just eight ahead of Smith for third.

But while she admits it's an honor to be approaching such company, Smith says her only focus right now is trying to get the Buffs to the postseason - no matter the numbers beside her name or her spot in the lineup.

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