

Thorburn: Buffs have little room to move up in Big 12

By Ryan Thorburn Camera Sports Writer
Boulder Daily Camera

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The story of Colorado basketball is getting old.

Believe me. I'm the one person who has been standing outside the visitors' locker room to document the Buffs' 20-game road losing streak against Division I opponents ... loss after loss after loss.

Cory Higgins is tired of answering the same questions. Nate Tomlinson, out of answers 10 games into his sophomore season, was willing to take suggestions from a reporter about how to turn the trend around after the Colorado State fiasco.

And Jeff Bzdelik was surprised as anyone at Moby Arena last Thursday night that CU was unable to match the intensity or play with the same passion and aggressiveness as the Rams during a 15-point defeat.

There is no question in my mind that these Buffs -- with Higgins (second in the Big 12 in scoring) and the addition of freshman Alec Burks -- are a better and more entertaining team to watch this season.

The problem is the Big 12 appears to be stronger and deeper than it has ever been.

After three consecutive last-place/20-loss seasons, there is nowhere for the Buffs to go but up. But who are they going to climb over in the standings?

Kansas and Texas remain No. 1 and No. 2, respectably, in the Associated Press poll.

Texas Tech, a team that was picked ninth in the preseason Big 12 coaches poll, is ranked 16th. The Red Raiders are 9-0 for the first time since 1929.

Kansas State checks in at No. 17 after notching two wins against ranked non-conference teams in the same season for the first time since 1958.

Texas A&M has played a difficult schedule and is No. 23 in the AP poll, despite losing to undefeated New Mexico (now No. 19) and West Virginia (now No. 6).

Oklahoma State and Baylor received votes in this week's poll. Nine of the conference's 12 teams have either been ranked or received votes this season.

"We've got to publicize this league as a basketball league," Red Raiders head coach Pat Knight said during Monday's coaches teleconference with the media. "We shouldn't be sitting there on selection Sunday worrying about getting six teams in (the NCAA Tournament).

"We should always get six teams in and maybe a year like this we should get seven."

Iowa State is certainly capable of making a run at an NCAA Tournament bid now that Craig Brackins is surrounded by a talented cast.

Missouri, despite losing many of the key players from last season's Elite Eight run, might end up creating some March Madness again with Mike Anderson's "40 minutes of hell" style of play.

Oklahoma had a head-scratching three-game losing streak earlier in the season, but national player of the year candidate Willie Warren and Co. have turned things around and are coming off an impressive overtime win at Utah.

Nebraska, which has established an identity as a program that plays great defense under Doc Sadler, has defeated two Pac-10 teams (USC and Oregon State).

That pretty much leaves CU locked in the basement. The Buffs might still be a young team, but this story is getting old.

Oh Henry!

Kentucky super freshman John Wall is getting a lot of media exposure after some brilliant performances against UConn, Indiana and others on national television.

But you get the feeling KU coach Bill Self wouldn't trade his freshman phenom, Xavier Henry, to Lexington even if he could.

"Xavier has been a model of consistency, and you don't see that very often from freshmen," Self said. "John's gotten a lot of attention, and deservedly so, but Xavier's numbers are very similar."

Wall is averaging 18.1 points, 7.1 assists and 4.1 rebounds for the No. 3 Wildcats. Henry is averaging 18.1 points and 4.1 rebounds but only 1.8 assists.

Of course, the Jayhawks also have a starting point guard by the name of Sherron Collins (13.3 ppg, 4.4 apg). Not to mention center Cole Aldrich (12.0 ppg, 9.6 rpg).

Non-conference dominance

The Big 12 is 91-20 (.820) in non-conference play, including 5-1 against Associated Press top 25 opponents. The 20 losses are the fewest of any league in the country.

"We feel the Big 12 is the best conference in America, and in order to prove that you have to win games like that," Baylor coach Scott Drew said of the Bears' win at Arizona State. "Road wins really bring a team together ... I think Nebraska got it started with their road win at USC, and from there the Big 12 really took care of business."

The Big 12 has clinched the Hardwood Series against the Pac-10 this season with an 8-2 record. Oklahoma State plays at Stanford and Texas A&M plays at Washington to put a cap on it.

CU (lost 74-69 at Oregon State) and Iowa State (lost 82-63 at Cal) were the two Big 12 teams to lose in the Hardwood Series this season. The Buffs also lost to Arizona at the EA Sports Maui Invitational.

Moses not parting

Last season Marshall Moses ran out of patience with the new coaching staff and almost left the Oklahoma State program. Travis Ford had a meeting with the powerful 6-7, 240-pound forward and told him to either buy in or buy a bus ticket.

"He came to a point where he wanted to quit, and we would have made phone calls for him," Ford said. "From that meeting on he proved to us that he deserved to play and he can be one of the best players in the Big 12. There are still challenges because he's such an emotional player, but I think we've learned to trust one another."

Moses already has four double-doubles this season, including a career-high 23 points and 14 rebounds in OSU's last victory over Arkansas-Pine Bluff. He was 10-for-11 from the field in the game.

James Anderson leads the Big 12 in scoring (20.4 ppg) and Moses leads the conference in rebounding (10.6 rpg).

"Our record, that is not who we are right now," Ford insists. The Cowboys are 8-1. "We've got a lot of areas to improve to compete in the Big 12."

Notable

Texas will play defending national champion North Carolina at the new Dallas Cowboys stadium this Saturday before facing national runner-up Michigan State three days later.

"We're going to obviously be exposed to a different level of talent than we've played the last couple weeks," Longhorns head coach Rick Barnes said. "Where we've been able to overpower people talent-wise, that won't be the case in those

games." ...

The common denominator on both of Texas A&M's losses was that Derrick Roland fouled out in each game.

"Without him we're not very good defensively," Aggies coach Mark Turgeon said. "We've played an unbelievably tough schedule, and I think we've handed it pretty well. But we do need to play better defensively and develop some more depth." ...

Mike Anderson defended Missouri's non-conference home schedule, which has included UT-Martin, UT-Pan American, Chattanooga and Fairleigh Dickinson.

"We're playing who we're playing and we'll use that to our advantage," Anderson said. ...

OU coach Jeff Capel said his team's losses to VCU, San Diego and Houston have humbled the Sooners.

"Hopefully we learned we don't want to lose like that anymore. No respect to VCU, San Diego and Houston, but I don't think we were smart or tough in those games," Capel said. "Since then we've shown some signs that we are a better basketball team and can possibly become a good basketball team."

Quotable

"They're not going to give us a parade in December," K-State coach Frank Martin said of his team's impressive start. "There's still a lot of work to be done."

BIG 12 POWER RANKINGS

1. Kansas (9-0) -- Adding Xavier Henry to a roster that returns Sherron Collins and Cole Aldrich isn't fair. **Up next:** Saturday vs. Michigan.

2. Texas (8-0) -- Longhorns will be tested with back-to-back games against North Carolina and Michigan State this month. **Up next:** Tonight vs. Texas-Pan American.

3. Kansas State (9-1) -- Wildcats have defeated two ranked non-conference opponents in the same season for the first time in 51 years. **Up next:** Saturday vs. Alabama.

4. Texas Tech (9-0) -- We'll put Pat Knight's team up here since the program is off to its best start since 1929. **Up next:** Saturday at Wichita State.

5. Texas A&M (8-2) -- Aggies have played three ranked teams, not including a loss to unbeaten New Mexico, which is now ranked. **Up next:** Saturday vs. The Citadel.

6. Oklahoma State (8-1) -- James Anderson and the 'Pokes have made Stillwater a scary place to play again. **Up next:** Wednesday at Stanford.

7. Iowa State (7-3) -- Craig Brackins is surrounded by other good players now, and the Cyclones could make the NCAA Tournament. **Up next:** Sunday vs. Bradley.

8. Oklahoma (7-3) -- Jeff Capel has his team's attention after a humbling three-game losing streak early in the season. **Up next:** Saturday vs. Northern Colorado.

9. Baylor (7-1) -- Bears coming off an impressive win at Arizona State in the Big 12/Pac-10 Hardwood Series. **Up next:** Tonight vs. Jackson State.

10. Missouri (6-3) -- Tigers have played an easy schedule and are 0-2 on the road due to poor defensive rebounding. **Up next:** Saturday vs. Arkansas-Pine Bluff.

11. Nebraska (7-2) -- Doc Sadler's team represented the conference well with wins over USC and Oregon State. **Up next:** Saturday vs. Jackson State.

12. Colorado (6-4) -- Two of CU's wins are against Division II opponents, and Jeff Bzdelik's team can't win outside of Boulder. **Up next:** Dec. 22 vs. Cal State Northridge.

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Bzdelik wants more defense from Buffs

By Tom Kensler

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CU men's basketball team head coach Jeff Bzdelik stands on the sidelines against Colorado Christian at Coors Event Center on Monday. CU won 84-65. (Hyoung Chang, The Denver Post)

With still a week to go before the Colorado men's basketball team plays again, an emphasis is being placed in practice on improving at the

defensive end, CU coach Jeff Bzdelik said this morning during a Big 12 coaches teleconference.

"With still only one senior (guard Dwight Thorne), what we've done is, we're doing pretty well offensively," Bzdelik said. "(But) if you look at our four losses we need to improve defensively. That's been our focus."

Colorado (6-4) plays next on Dec. 22, a 5:30 p. m. home game against Cal State Northridge. The Buffaloes will have had 12 days off since losing at Colorado State.

The additional practices allow Bzdelik and his staff time to work with the squad on maintaining defensive intensity, regardless of whether a player is having a good shooting night at the other end.

"With a young team, in particular, a lot of times they do what most players do — they let their offense dictate their defense," Bzdelik said. "That can't be."

Colorado ranks seventh among Big 12 teams in scoring (78.3) but is last in scoring defense (70.2). Colorado also ranks 12th in field-goal percentage defense (.439) and in 3-point shooting defense (.367).

In a 76-72 loss to Gonzaga, CU allowed the Bulldogs to shoot 54 percent in the second half. Arizona hit 55 percent during the second half and 100 percent in overtime to beat the Buffs in 91-87 in OT. Oregon State connected on 59

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percent after halftime in a 74-69 win over Colorado.

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