

Burks brings confidence to CU men's hoops squad

True freshman energizing Bzdelik's Buffs

By Ryan Thorburn Camera Sports Writer
Boulder Daily Camera

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The pass looked like it was designed to land in the upper concourse of the Coors Events Center.

Cory Higgins' lob was headed for the band playing in the cheap seats when a soaring Alec Burks grabbed the ball out of the air and soared in for a dunk that had the 5,838 witnesses buzzing during Colorado's 92-58 victory over Cal State Northridge on Tuesday night.

Burks would add another powerful dunk while getting fouled and a spectacular blocked shot to his highlight reel while finishing with 14 points, six rebounds, three assists and two steals in 28 minutes of work.

Xavier Henry is going to be the freshman of the year in the Big 12 if he stays healthy for No. 1 Kansas, but Burks is in rare company at CU.

Only some guy by the name of Chauncey Billups (217 points in 1995-96) has scored more than Burks' 175 points through 11 games as a true freshman in program history.

"He's entertaining," head coach Jeff Bzdelik said. "It's not only that, but I think when we play this way sharing the basketball and when we can rebound and get the ball up the floor, it gives you a chance to win. It's also fun to watch."

CU's offense looked like it's supposed to look against the Matadors. The home team had good ball movement, knocked down 10 3-pointers and outscored the opponent 34-18 in the paint.

Nate Tomlinson, a true point guard, was moved into the starting lineup and finished with eight points (on 3-for-3 shooting) and four assists in 30 minutes.

Dwight Thorne, who had been running the offense as a starter, was asked to come off the bench at his more natural shooting guard position. The senior responded with 19 points and five assists in 18 minutes while spelling Burks.

"Coach said he was going to make some changes, I was the change," Thorne said. "I'm a grown man, so I've got to respond to it. I came out and did what I had to do. ...

"I try and come in focused and bring energy, come out and just play hard."

Bzdelik will likely change the starting lineup again when Big 12 play begins at Texas on Jan. 9. Austin Dufault started at the center spot, but the coach would like for him to play forward against the bigger, faster and stronger conference opponents.

Shane Harris-Tunks was 2-for-2 shooting with three rebounds in 12 minutes. The 6-11 freshman has emerged as the most reliable big man on the roster.

"The starters' only job is to get us off to a good start," Bzdelik said. "It's not a right of passage or an entitlement to play extended minutes. Your effectiveness on the floor and your quality of play will determine how long you stay out there."

Higgins is still CU's best all-around player. The junior also had 14 points in 28 minutes with a career-high eight assists.

Burks is quickly becoming a fan favorite, however, and his self-confidence is refreshing in a program that hasn't had any swagger or success the previous three seasons.

"I felt like it was an up and down game and I could show off my athleticism for the fans," Burks said. "I didn't feel like I'd be

this big a part of it at this point, but I knew I had the talent."

The secret is out.

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Break suits Buffs fine

By Patrick Ridgell
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BOULDER — If you missed the Buffs' game Tuesday night, too bad.

The Colorado men's basketball team (7-4) is in a stretch where Tuesday's 92-58 defeat of Cal State Northridge was its only game from Dec. 11 to next Tuesday. That's when Yale visits the Coors Events Center.

Following Tuesday's win, coach Jeff Bzdelik said his team has used the abundance of available time since finals ended last week to practice hard, including 3 1/2-hour sessions each day, last Friday through Sunday. He has given his players Wednesday through Friday off. When they reconvene at 3:30 p.m. Saturday, they are expected to be ready to "rock and roll."

Is so much time between games good or bad?

"I like it in a sense, but then we have another long layoff here, and, you know, it's kind of — what's that expression? — six of this and half a dozen of the other," Bzdelik said.

"The good part about it is we're able to really step back and really work hard in the areas that we haven't been good at."

While the coach continues to harp on sustained effort and intensity, the specific area he cited Tuesday in need of attention is CU's defensive positioning. The Buffs entered this week averaging 21 fouls per game, more than any other Big 12 program except for Kansas State. They committed another 20 Tuesday night, sending Cal State Northridge to the free throw line 26 times.

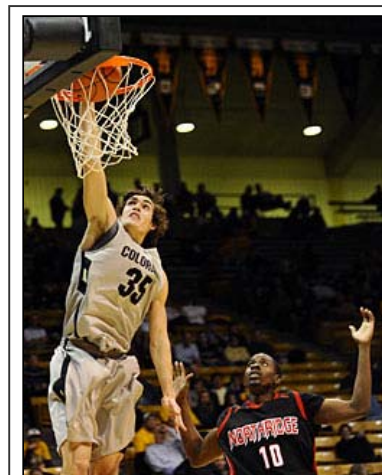
The fouls tells Bzdelik his players are frequently out of position.

"Ninety percent of fouls are defensive mistakes that result from poor defensive positioning," he said. "That's what we've utilized this time for — to improve our defensive positioning. We may be a step slow, but you can be a step quick in your mind and be in the proper spot."

"Being in the proper position puts you in position to be able to help effectively and take charges and (do) things we need to do to protect the rim."

Defensive positioning can also help CU's rebounding, a whole other issue that appears to be the program's most glaring weakness as Big 12 play nears. The Buffs own the league's fewest rebounds and worst rebounding margin, and they haven't even played league foes Baylor, Texas or Kansas yet.

Bzdelik would also like to see his defenders take more charges. They also block fewer shots than any other Big 12 team.



Colorado's Keegan Hornbuckle, left, dunks the ball as Cal State Northridge's Tony Osunsanmi watches during a game Tuesday at Coors Events Center in Boulder.

Morgan Varon/Times-Call

These long, intense practices appear to have plenty of purposes.

“Coach has done a good job,” senior Dwight Thorne said. “In practice, we’re switching it up, going pretty hard, banging against each other, having competitive practices.

“If we can continue to sustain that ... it’ll give us an edge to play better.”

Read Patrick Ridgell's CU sports blog at www.timescall.com/blogs/ridgell. He can be reached at pridgell@times-call.com.