

CU Buffs' Shannon Sharpe destined to fly again

Knee injury minor bump in road for resilient Buff

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What goes up must come down.

And that includes the high-flying Shannon Sharpe.

The most beautiful, exciting and painful moment of Colorado's basketball season took place moments after head coach Jeff Bzdelik whistled the start of the team's first practice in October.

Sharpe, described by the coaching staff as the most explosive and athletic player to sign with the Buffs in years -- and if you've had a chance to watch Alec Burks play at all, you know that's saying something -- didn't waste any time showing off the leaping ability that made him a legendary YouTube figure.

The 6-0 freshman guard dunked the ball with authority but landed awkwardly on one foot after returning to our planet.

The player many fans wanted to see more than any of the other highly touted newcomers had sustained a season-ending knee injury in the first five minutes of the first practice of the season.

"It's nothing too big to me," Sharpe said during a recent interview with the Camera. "Life always hits you with minor setbacks."

In Sharpe's life, which is only in its 19th year, overcoming surgery and a season of physical rehabilitation qualifies as a small bump on the road to realizing his hoops dreams.

This is a kid who lost both of his parents to heart failure during high school. Sharpe's mother died in January 2007, less than two years after his father passed away -- both at the age of 46.

His grandmother, Doris Moore, moved from Cleveland to Corona, Calif., to raise Sharpe and his younger sister, Shari.

After CU's victory over Cal State Northridge on Tuesday night -- one of the many smaller schools closer to home that recruited Sharpe -- he returned home to spend Christmas with his remaining family.

So how did Sharpe deal with the death of both parents during his formative years at Corona Centennial High School?

"Basketball, family and friends," he said.

'Chip on his shoulder'

CU associate head coach Steve McClain, a man who loves to spend his spare time scouring small gymnasiums around the country for hidden talent, knew Sharpe was a special prospect.

So much so that he told Bzdelik it would be a good idea for the head coach to travel to California to give the lightning-quick guard the full-court press to make him a part of the CU program.

"I went to see him maybe three times and I remember at 6 o'clock in the morning he would be in the gym because that's when they worked out," Bzdelik said. "I loved him. He's a really talented player and has a great attitude and the

athleticism. He combines all of those things, and I think he's really going to have an impact for us."

Before Sharpe's injury, Bzdelik said he planned on splitting the minutes at point guard between the promising freshman and sophomore Nate Tomlinson, who started every game he played in last season but wore down after logging heavy minutes as a long 2008-09 campaign wound down.

CU assistant coach Derrick Clark, who also had a hand in recruiting Sharpe, said having such a talented player on the end of the bench in street clothes is a tough pill for the staff to swallow, especially as the Big 12 schedule looms closer.

"We miss him a lot because he would be out on that floor in games for us, but the biggest thing is from a competition standpoint in practice," Clark said. "Nate would have been going against someone who is a Big 12-caliber defender and athlete. Now Nate suffers because Shannon is injured and he doesn't go against him every day."

"Shannon was pushing Nate every day this summer. Nate had to work and be at his best at every practice. From that standpoint, we miss him a lot."

Last season the Buffs were on the verge of a historic upset at Allen Fieldhouse until Kansas point guard Sherron Collins put a move on Tomlinson that sent him tumbling to the floor and then pulled up for the key basket in crunch time.

Sharpe still has some work to do on his jump shot, but guarding players like Collins is something the coaches say he is capable of doing at this level.

"What Shannon showed us during the preseason before he got hurt was that he can defend physically against very quick guards," McClain said. "He can guard the point or the two or anybody he wants to. He can also push the ball and deliver it under great duress."

Cory Higgins, who also played high school basketball in California, didn't know anything about Sharpe until he signed with the Buffs last year. CU's best player was impressed with the new guard's play on the court and awed by his Internet dunking clips.

"He can really defend and compete. And he plays with a chip on his shoulder," Higgins said. "He's super athletic. The first time I saw that video I said, 'Wow.'"

"Shannon's pretty amazing."

'Had to grow up quickly'

Sharpe doesn't really feel comfortable talking about the death of his parents or the pressure he felt helping to raise his sister, who is 15 now and a sophomore track star at Corona Centennial, where he was a big brother and father figure.

"Every now and then I miss some things back home, but it hasn't been too tough," Sharpe said of life in Boulder. "I talk to my sister every other day and my grandma every Sunday. ..."

"Last year prep school was tough because I didn't like the place. It hasn't been as tough here. I'm in college, I'm going to school, I like the place."

Sharpe's high school and AAU coaches, teammates and friends helped get him through his darkest days.

"What he's been through is touching to all of us," Jose Perez, one of Sharpe's teammates at Corona Centennial, said during a 2007 story in the Corona Press-Enterprise. "That makes me a better player and person. What he's gone through tells me to be appreciative of what I have and play my hardest every day like it's my last day."

Sharpe said even though his parents weren't around he stayed out of trouble and maintained a 3.4 grade-point average in high school because he didn't want to disappoint them.

"He was raised correctly," Corona Centennial principal Sam Buenrostro said. "He's a special kid."

Sharpe still wears a Compton Magic sweatshirt, which was the powerful AAU team he played on that had McClain and many other coaches in hot pursuit of his commitment. He also remains close with his high school coach, Josh Giles.

"Unfortunately, he had to grow up quickly," McClain said.

'Everybody here loves him'

Now that Sharpe is a part of the CU family, Bzdelik and his staff want to make sure he leaves Boulder with a degree and a future as bright as his smile.

After feeling a tweak in his knee after that first dunk of the season, Sharpe assumed he would be asked to play through the pain.

"I didn't expect to be out longer than two weeks. I expected it to be a little injury, get a little cortisone shot and get back in a couple days," Sharpe said. "When coach told me there would be surgery and I would be out for the whole season, it was very devastating and disappointing."

There are some coaches in college basketball that would have played Sharpe this season. Bzdelik, despite needing all hands on deck to turn things around in his critical third season at CU, didn't hesitate in making the right decision.

"He probably could have played this year, but it would have been the wrong thing to do morally," Bzdelik said. "I would never do that. We will always err on the side of caution when it comes to a young man's health."

"The significance of the injury now that he has had the surgery is less severe than if we had played him all year. It really could have been a traumatic surgery if he had played. He should come back better than ever."

Sharpe's surgery was a success, his rehab is on schedule, and he expects to be off crutches in the next few weeks and playing basketball again by April.

"He knows that everybody here loves him and is here for him," Bzdelik said when asked if he felt a responsibility to be a father figure to Sharpe. "He knows in a time of need, as all my players do, they have a place to turn. That's us."

Bzdelik clearly isn't the only person at CU looking out for this young man.

"I think we all tag-team it," Clark said. "Coach (Jody) Bailey gives him rides to class, and not just because he's on crutches, but because we've got to stay on top of that kid. He has to feel like he's loved. I feel like it's a team effort on our staff."

"I'll pull him to the side before practice and give him a couple things, but we all have to continue to do that with this kid because of his background and the injury. I think we all share in that."

Sharpe says he feels the love from his new basketball family and plans to start and finish the promising career that came to a crashing halt on the first day of practice.

"I love Boulder actually. It's a nice environment, nice people," Sharpe said. "And it seems like everyone around here likes each other."

Other than being away from his sister and grandma, the most difficult part of 2009 for Sharpe was watching the Buffs lose close games, knowing he could have been the difference.

"Especially in the crucial moments," he said. "That's my favorite part of basketball."

A backcourt of Sharpe, Burks and Higgins could be dangerous in 2010-11 -- the season Bzdelik believes the program can finally return to the NCAA Tournament -- with Marcus Relphorde, Austin Dufault, Keegan Hornbuckle and Shane Harris-Tunks having more experience inside.

"Shannon will bring a lot more toughness and physicality," Higgins said.

He's still a teenager, but you can't hold a good man down. Shannon Sharpe will rise again.

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Big 12 remains Buffs' biggest obstacle

By Patrick Ridgell
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BOULDER — Some Christmas morning opinions and leftovers to unwrap ...

Colorado's men's basketball team is improved from last season, but its biggest problem remains the same: the Big 12.

As usual, it's loaded. Five Big 12 teams are ranked, and No. 1 Kansas hasn't really hit its stride yet. Over the past week, No. 2 Texas defeated No. 10 North Carolina and No. 9 Michigan State — both participants in last year's national title game — going away. No. 12 Kansas State owned the nation's No. 1 RPI on Sunday. Its RPI was No. 2 on Thursday — and conference play has yet to begin.

Big 12 teams are 7-2 against top 25 opponents, and 24-9 against the other six BCS conferences.

No one's surprised the league is this good — even with Oklahoma's struggles. But the emergence of programs like Kansas State and Texas Tech makes it more formidable. I thought six Big 12 wins would be a good achievement for CU in 2009-10, when it has only one senior and is counting on newcomers like Marcus Relphorde and freshman guard Alec Burks to play key roles. I still think that's a good number to reach.

For those who wonder, Kansas visits Texas on Feb. 8.

The toughest team to figure is Oklahoma. Ranked No. 17 in the preseason, the Sooners have lost to the likes of San Diego, Houston and UTEP, and squeaked past Northern Colorado by one point.

That's Northern Colorado, the best college basketball team in the state.

Speaking of UTEP, former Buff Jeremy Williams is averaging 12.2 points and 4.6 rebounds for the 7-2 Miners. Talk about one that got away.

Oklahoma is allowing a league-worst 71.8 points per game, and its opponents are shooting 44 percent from the field, the highest rate against any Big 12 team. Losing Blake Griffin obviously hurts, but don't forget about the May dismissal of Juan Pattillo, who had lots of potential.

Put Burks among the league's top freshmen, an impressive list that features Kansas' Xavier Henry and Texas' J'Covan Brown.

Burks is 11th in the Big 12 with 15.9 points per game. He's third in field goal percentage at .558, which is ahead of Henry's .532, and 13th in free throw percentage at .771.

The alley-oop Burks threw down Tuesday against Cal State Northridge was a sight to see. He hung in the air and grabbed a pass that clearly looked headed for the seats. Equally impressive was late in the first half when he blocked Vinnie McGhee's layup. Gasps came from the stands.

“Yeah, he's entertaining,” CU coach Jeff Bzdelik said.

Said a confident Burks: "I didn't know I was going to be this big at this point, but I felt like I had the talent to. So I'm not surprised at all."

Burks has scored in double figures in all 11 of his college games.

With 175 points, he's tied with Emmett Lewis for second-most points through a Buff's first 11 games. Only Chauncey Billups (217) scored more through his first 11.

For more comparison, Richard Roby, CU's all-time leading scorer, averaged 15.8 points as a freshman. Donnie Boyce scored 14.9 a game as a freshman, and Billups 17.9.

Texas A&M lost starting guard Derrick Roland for the season to a compound fracture of his leg Tuesday at Washington. The injury was the gruesome type that you don't forget. His leg stuck out at nearly a 90-degree angle, and reports from the game said trainers treating him grew queasy at the sight.

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