

Ex-CU Buff Billups in NBA All-Star game

It's fifth straight All-Star appearance for Nugget standout

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MANHATTAN, Kan. -- Valentine's Day is the perfect day for basketball junkies in Colorado to pay homage to Chauncey Billups.

The aptly nicknamed "Mr. Big Shot" -- who will play in the NBA All-Star Game tonight in Dallas -- is the heart of the Denver Nuggets, just as he was the heart of the Buffs back in the day.

George Karl will coach the Western Conference team, and Carmelo Anthony was fifth among all players in fan voting.

But when Billups is introduced in front of an expected record crowd of 80,000 at Cowboys Stadium the public address announcer will say, "From the University of Colorado ... "

The free international publicity Billups creates for CU still plays well at the Coors Events Center.

"If I could only play him I'd be in better shape," Buffs coach Jeff Bzdelik joked. "Seriously, it's wonderful for Chauncey."

When Kansas State played in Boulder on Jan. 16, Billups was among the crowd of 10,852 that showed up to see the Buffs try to pull off the upset.

Bzdelik -- a former Nuggets head coach who helped Anthony make the playoffs as a rookie without as many other pieces in place as Karl enjoys today -- invited CU's most famous basketball face to address his young team after the 87-81 loss to the nationally ranked Wildcats.

"That was huge to see the connection he still has with the university," sophomore forward Austin Dufault said. "He doesn't put himself above anybody. He had fond memories of the time he was here and he enjoys coming back to watch us play."

"He told us he hasn't seen this building like it was when he was here until that game. That's a positive and a sign we're heading in the right direction."

Cory Higgins, the son of former NBA player and current Charlotte Bobcats general manager Rod Higgins, grew up around great players, including Michael Jordan. CU's leading scorer takes pride in wearing the same college colors Billups did 13 years ago.

"When he spoke to us we probably listened a little harder because he's a guy ... everybody wants to be in his position," Higgins said. "When he says something all eyes are on him. We probably just took away from it that we can't take any plays off and have to capitalize on all our opportunities."

Billups has certainly done that. He led CU to its first NCAA Tournament victory in more than 30 years, was the third pick in the 1997 draft, and after a tough start to his professional career he was the NBA Finals most valuable player during the Detroit Pistons' championship in 2004.

"It's kind of humbling to be honest with you, it's surreal (after) how my career started," Billups told the Denver Post when asked about being named to another All-Star Game at the age of 33. "People wrote me off, thought I'd be out of the league, and I've come back and have been able to make five-straight All-Star Games. It's crazy. I don't even have words for it."

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