

Thorburn: Leaving Big 12 no step up in basketball

By Ryan Thorburn Camera Sports Writer
Boulder Daily Camera

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Money and football rule college sports together.

Potential television contracts, BCS pay-outs and game-day revenue from fall Saturdays will dictate whether targeted athletic departments decide to leave their current conference for greener pastures and new challenges elsewhere.

When it comes to basketball, it's hard to argue that leaving the Big 12 is a step up. Unless you're just looking for an easier way to move up the standings (see Buffs, Colorado).

The Big 12 is currently No. 1 in Rating Percentage Index in both men's and women's hoops.

On the men's side, Kansas (1), Kansas State (7), Texas A&M (13), Baylor (17) and Texas (28) were all in the top 30 at realtimeerpi.com entering Monday's games.

Texas Tech (37), Oklahoma State (39) and Missouri (46) are all in position to play themselves into the NCAA Tournament. ESPN "bracketologist" Joe Lunardi had seven Big 12 teams "in" the Big Dance in his Monday projections.

Five teams -- No. 1 KU, No. 7 K-State, No. 15 Texas, No. 22 Baylor and No. 24 Texas A&M -- are ranked in this week's Associated Press poll.

On the women's side the conference might even be stronger from top to bottom. Seven teams are ranked in the polls. Nebraska (4), Oklahoma (7), Texas A&M (8) and Texas (10) all had top-10 RPIs as of Monday.

Kansas coach Bill Self didn't sound too worried about losing any rivals to the Big Ten or Pac-10.

"I'm sure there's a very good replacement sitting out there if somebody chooses to leave," Self said during Monday's teleconference with members of the media. "I do think there is a lot of flirting going on and you understand why people listen. But I think our league is rock solid."

Self said there is more to the decision than money and that programs need to consider that it would take "40 or 50 years" to build new rivalries. KU would obviously miss Missouri and the "Border War" if the Tigers high-tailed it for the Big Ten.

That said, the only thing most conference members would miss about CU hoops would be circling a couple wins on the schedule.

In Big 12 play, the men's program has finished last the previous three seasons and is currently 11th with a 2-8 record. Jeff Bzdelik's conference record at CU is 6-36 (0-21 on the road). The Buffs' RPI was 143rd on Monday.

Kathy McConnell-Miller is 19-55 in Big 12 play. Her Buffs are 12-11 overall and 2-8 (also 11th) in conference with an RPI of 122 in her fifth season of rebuilding.

Obviously, a change of scenery would be welcomed with open arms at the Coors Events Center.

Although conference strength in basketball is cyclical, the fact is there is a good chance the Pac-10 will only have one men's team in the NCAA Tournament this season.

Northern (Colorado)

exposure?

There is one college team in the state that has a realistic chance of experiencing March Madness this year -- Northern Colorado.

The Bears are 20-6 overall with wins over Air Force, Colorado State and Denver (they also got the best of the Buffs during a preseason scrimmage in Boulder).

UNC head coach Tad Boyle played at Kansas with Mark Turgeon and worked as an assistant under the current Texas A&M head coach at Wichita State.

"I've got Bear fever," Turgeon said. "I follow them on the ticker and I follow them on my phone every time they're playing. I get a kick out of hearing that Oklahoma got a great win over Northern Colorado."

The Bears, who lost by one point in Norman, will have to win the Big Sky Tournament to get into the Big Dance. Boyle's team is currently second in the conference behind Weber State.

"Tad can get guys to believe in him and play hard for him and he's an excellent coach," Turgeon said. "Beyond that, he has done a great job of evaluating talent. ... I don't think this is the pinnacle for them. He's going to continue to recruit well and they're going to have some good teams in the future."

Respect for K-State

After getting swept by Kansas State on Saturday, Bzdelik gave Frank Martin and the Wildcats credit for taking it to the Buffs.

CU lost to No. 1 Kansas in overtime, played Gonzaga (now No. 13) to the wire at the Maui Invitational, competed well in losses at Texas (now No. 15) and Texas A&M (now No. 24), and beat Baylor (now No. 22).

The Wildcats are as impressive as any of the above.

"I think Kansas State is a heck of a basketball team and a well coached basketball team on top of that. I expect them to go deep into the NCAA Tournament," Bzdelik said. "There's no way you can prepare in practice for their physicality and their quickness. ...

"They're kind of living in the shadow of another great team in their state. From a national standpoint they're under the radar, but once that ball is thrown up in the NCAA Tournament they won't be under the radar."

No bye, no problem

The top four teams during the regular season will earn a bye at the Big 12 Tournament in Kansas City next month, which obviously gives them a much better chance of cutting down the nets on Saturday night.

But the way Texas Tech coach Pat Knight sees it, having to play a first-round game against an opponent with a similar record isn't a bad thing.

"It gives you a chance to play another game and win another game to add to your resume and get to the postseason," Knight said. "The top four teams might want the day of rest, but some of the rest of us are fighting to get into the NIT."

Or even the CBI for those teams at the bottom of the conference clinging for something to believe in.

If the Buffs can win their three remaining home games and end their Big 12 road losing streak (perhaps at Nebraska), they will have a 15-15 record entering the conference tournament.

Pull off a first-round win and one upset and the goal of a winning record is achieved.

Notable

Baylor's LaceDarius Dunn and Ekpe Udoh were the conference's player of the week and rookie of the week, respectively, after leading the team to last-second wins over Nebraska and Missouri. ... Freshman guard Tommy Mason-Griffin has led

Oklahoma in scoring five times in the last seven games, including a 30-point performance in a loss at Oklahoma State on Saturday. ... The Big 12 has six teams with 18 wins already, the most of any conference.

Big 12 Power Rankings

(Ranking team previous ranking/overall record/conference record)

Kansas (1/25-1/11-0) -- Jayhawks have the nation's longest active home-court winning streak (56 and counting). **Up next:** Saturday vs. Colorado.

2. Kansas State (2/20-4/7-3) -- Frank Martin is the first head coach in the program's rich history to win 20 games in his first three seasons. **Up next:** Wednesday vs. Nebraska.

3. Texas A&M (3/18-7/7-4) -- Aggies are the anti-Buffs with seven single-digit wins this season, including a four-point victory over CU. **Up next:** Saturday at Iowa State.

4. Texas (4/20-5/6-4) -- Longhorns took their frustrations out on Nebraska in a 40-point beating. **Up next:** Wednesday at Missouri.

5. Baylor (6/19-5/6-4) -- Ekpe Udoh scores two game-winning baskets in one week as the Bears edge Nebraska and Mizzou. **Up next:** Tonight vs. Texas Tech.

6. Missouri (5/18-7/6-4) -- Mike Anderson and the boys let an important one slip away in Waco. **Up next:** Wednesday vs. Texas.

7. Oklahoma State (7/17-7/5-5) -- Talented Pokes can still play their way into the Big Dance down the stretch. **Up next:** Wednesday at Iowa State.

8. Texas Tech (9/16-8/4-6) -- Pat Knight can sell the NIT to Red Raider Nation as a positive step forward in his second full season as head coach. **Up next:** Tonight at Baylor.

9. Oklahoma (8/13-11/4-6) -- Sooners are an absolute mess. Buffs better take advantage and get this one. **Up next:** Wednesday at Colorado.

10. Iowa State (10/13-12/2-8) -- The scary thing for Cyclones fans is Craig Brackins and Marquis Gilstrap won't be back next season. **Up next:** Wednesday vs. Oklahoma State.

11. Colorado (11/11-13/2-8) -- Waiting for the Pac-10 to call. Please. **Up next:** Wednesday vs. Oklahoma.

12. Nebraska (12/13-12/1-9) -- Maybe Dr. Tom wants to follow CU out West? The Huskers were 2-0 against the Pac-10 during the non-conference season. **Up next:** Wednesday at Kansas State.

-- Ryan Thorburn

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college basketball

CU hoping for Relphorde's quick return

By Tom Kensler
The Denver Post

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Colorado's Marcus Relphorde. (AP)

must have both fingers crossed that the sore left knee of junior swingman Marcus Relphorde will feel good enough to allow him to play Wednesday in a home game against Oklahoma.

The Buffaloes struggle mightily to find a third scoring option without him.

Relphorde's availability is "day to day," Bzdelik said Monday on the Big 12 coaches teleconference. The junior-college transfer suffers from tendinitis in the knee, and the condition was aggravated, Bzdelik said, when he bumped into sophomore forward Austin Dufault during practice on Thursday.

A 6-foot-7 perimeter player who usually draws an opponent's forward at the defensive end, Relphorde sat out Saturday's 68-51 loss at then-No. 9 Kansas State.

Colorado men's basketball coach Jeff Bzdelik

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- CU sports .

"The fact that he was able to rest that knee (will help)," Bzdelik said. "It just needs to calm down."

Colorado (11-13, 2-8 Big 12) has two of the Big 12's top scorers in junior guard Cory Higgins (18.1 points per game) and freshman guard Alec Burks (16.8). Relphorde (10.4) is the only other CU scorer averaging double figures.

Colorado trailed Kansas State by just 28-26 at halftime. But the Buffs shot 33 percent from the field in the second half. Higgins (21 points) and Burks (17) did their part, but three other starters — forward Austin Dufault, center Trey Eckloff and point guard Nate Tomlinson — combined for a total of three points. Eckoff, making his first career start, and Tomlinson both failed to score.

Other than Higgins and Burks, no CU player scored more than four points against the Wildcats.

"The offense is fine," Bzdelik said on the teleconference when asked about finding more scoring options to help Higgins and Burks. "(But) guys have to make shots ... we're leaving some points out there from guys having open looks."

Bzdelik added that the absence of Relphorde on Saturday also robbed the Buffs of one of their primary ballhandlers. Colorado, which lost its 34th consecutive Big 12 road game, may not have committed 22 turnovers if Relphorde had been in the lineup, the coach said.

Sooners struggling After reaching the NCAA Tournament's "Sweet 16" last March with national player of the year and overall No. 1 NBA pick Blake Griffin, Oklahoma (13-11, 4-6 Big 12) likely will have to settle this year for the National Invitation Tournament - at best.

The Sooners were blitzed 97-76 at Oklahoma State on Saturday. Oklahoma was short-handed, playing without star guard Willie Warren (sick) and starting center Tiny Gallon (suspended). OU coach Jeff Capel said Monday on the teleconference that he did not have an update on the status of either player.

Oklahoma has lost five of its past seven games.

"It's an experience for us all," Capel said of the

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season. "There's a quote from (NBA coach) Pat Riley that says, 'Adversity introduces a man to himself.' That's something I have had to share with our guys constantly this season.

"Some of the things we have gone through have been self-inflicted, because of stupid decisions our guys have made. Others are things you can't control. But that's life. We certainly are learning a lot of life lessons. It's painful when you go through it. But somewhere down the road this will make all of us better."

Capel on Colorado "I've always had a lot of respect for coach Bzdelik and the way they play," Capel said on the teleconference. ... "They kicked our butt two years ago up at their place (72-58) and it was a close game (77-72 Sooners win in Norman) last year.

"I've seen them really grow as a basketball team. Their guys are more familiar with their system. Burks is as good as any freshman in our league. Certainly, Higgins is as good as any guard in our league. And, most importantly, their guys are very, very well-coached."

Quote of the day Nebraska coach Doc Sadler on his team in the context of the powerful Big 12:

"People aren't going to believe me when I say this, but I like my team. I don't know that there are many coaches out there that are 1-9 (in conference play) that would tell you they like their basketball team.

"I don't know who that makes crazy, me or the people that don't believe it."

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OU weathers tough times

By Patrick Ridgell
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Remember when Oklahoma was ranked No. 17 and considered contenders? Seems like decades ago.

That was November, when the Sooners garnered such respect, in the preseason polls and the polls issued after the season's first week. It proved unwarranted.

Oklahoma (13-11) enters Wednesday at Colorado (7 p.m., ESPNU) as loser of five of its past seven. It has had to replace No. 1 NBA Draft pick Blake Griffin, an arduous challenge itself. It has had to play freshmen, a perilous task for sure. But what happened last week must have made coach Jeff Capel wonder.

Leading scorer Willie Warren was diagnosed with mono. He's out indefinitely, and Capel had no update Monday when asked for one.

Capel also indefinitely suspended center Tiny Gallon for reasons the program hasn't revealed. According to OUhoops.com, Gallon had improper contact with an agent prior to the season.

Capel suspended freshmen Andrew Fitzgerald and Steven Pledger for shoplifting for a game each. They played in Saturday's 97-76 loss at Oklahoma State. Cowboys fans mocked them by carrying shopping bags from Dillard's, where the alleged incident occurred.

"There's a quote from (former NBA coach) Pat Riley: 'Adversity introduces a man to himself'," Capel said. "I've said that too many times this season."

Capel didn't update Gallon's status for Wednesday either. A freshman who shattered a backboard dunking this season, Gallon is the conference's seventh-leading rebounder with eight per game. Apparently the Sooners need him. Capel called his team "soft" in light of its rebounding at Oklahoma State.

As Bob Knight says, most voters early in the year have no clue who's good and who isn't. So don't be surprised the Sooners (13-11) were so overrated. But they really missed on the Sooners, and barring a miraculous run to the Big 12 Tournament title, the Sooners won't reach the NCAA Tournament. How much worse will things get?

"Some things have been self inflicted this year because of stupid decisions our guys have made," Capel said. "Some things you can't control. But that's life."

"I always thought our main job was to help these guys grow. We certainly are learning a lot of life lessons. ... Somewhere down the road this will make many of us better."

AROUND THE BIG 12 ...

CU WOMEN PREVIEW

Kansas (14-9, 4-6) at Colorado women (12-11, 2-8)

When/Where: 7 p.m. tonight at the Coors Events Center in Boulder

TV/Radio: FSN/KKZN 760AM.

The series: CU leads 33-31. Kansas beat the Buffs 75-64 on Jan. 27 in Lawrence.

Leading scorers: Kansas — Aishah Sutherland (10.5 points per game); CU — Brittany Spears (17.2 points per game).

Notes: Kansas will be without leading scorer Danielle McCray, who suffered a season-ending knee injury in practice earlier this month. McCray was averaging 19.8 points and 7.2 rebounds a game. She had 29 and 16 against the Buffs in last month's meeting. ... CU has lost six in a row and eight of its past nine. Five of those losses have come against teams ranked in the top 15, including the past four. ... CU's Brittany Spears snapped out of her scoring slump in Saturday's loss at Oklahoma with 28 points. She had 24 in the previous three games combined.

Patrick Ridgell

BUFF STUFF: CU's Jeff Bzdelik said guard Marcus Relphorde "should" be able to play Wednesday.

"He's day to day," Bzdelik said. "It's just tendinitis, and it just needs to calm down."

Bzdelik said Relphorde aggravated the injury in Thursday's practice when he bumped knees with Austin Dufault. Relphorde left that practice and also missed Friday's. He missed Saturday's 68-51 loss at Kansas State, and also rested Sunday. He has been receiving treatment every day.

"He should be ready to go Wednesday, we hope," Bzdelik said.

Bzdelik said besides the offense Relphorde gives CU — he's its third-leading scorer — his ball handling was also missed. The coach said Kansas State scored 26 points Saturday off CU's 22 turnovers.

Bzdelik said CU's offense is "fine," but the Buffs have to make shots.

"We're leaving some points out there from open looks," Bzdelik said.

MORE CAPEL: Last time Oklahoma visited CU, in 2009, it lost 72-58 and Capel infamously muttered, "This is the most embarrassing thing I've ever been a part of."

Since, Capel has, publicly at least, been more respectful.

"I've always had a lot of respect for coach Bzdelik and his staff," Capel said. "They played us very close since I've been here. They kicked our butt two years ago at their place, and it was a close game last year (in Oklahoma). I've seen them really grow as a basketball team. And they're more athletic."

Capel said CU's Alec Burks is "as good as any freshman in our league." Capel said CU's Cory Higgins is "as good as any guard in our league."

"It just seems they play with a passion and a spirit that shows they love to compete," Capel said.

TEXAS TURMOIL? Since starting 17-0 and reaching the top spot in both polls last month, Texas hasn't been Texas. The Longhorns had lost five of seven before Saturday's 40-point defeat of Nebraska.

Is Texas struggling? No way, says one rival coach.

"I'm tired of hearing people say Texas has issues," Kansas State's Frank Martin said. "Texas doesn't have issues. It's that our league is good."

DEFECTION TALK: Texas, according to reports, is talking to the Big Ten. Missouri might bolt for the Big Ten. The Pac-10 might court CU.

As the Big 12 braces for such change, Kansas faces the thought that soon, it might not co-exist in the Big 12 with Missouri, and one of the nation's best rivalries will have to play across conference lines.

"There are some things inbred with fans and teams over time that make (the Big 12) so special to play certain games," Kansas' Bill Self said. "To eliminate those games would be in poor taste for many."

EXTRA POINTS: As of Monday, four Big 12 teams have top-20 RPIs, seven are in the top 40 and eight in the top 45. The Big 12 remains No. 1 among conference RPIs. ... With talk about a 7-9 Big 12 team making the NCAA Tournament, the Big 12 looked it up: Since 1985, 33 teams with losing conference records have reached the Tournament. None have been from the Big 12.

Patrick Ridgell's Big 12 notes column runs Tuesdays during the conference season. Read his CU sports blog at www.timescall.com/blogs/ridgell. He can be reached at pridgell@times-call.com.

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Burks' beats

Freshman star reveals what gets him pumped before games

By Zack Shapiro on February 16, 2010

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If there's one consistency in pre-game rituals among athletes, it's the music pumping through their veins. Eyes fixed on pieces of the world at a time, they're visualizing, focusing, listening.

Maybe it's the music that has helped breathe life back into the men's basketball program at the University of Colorado. Though the Buffs are currently ranked second-to-last in Big 12 conference play, that doesn't mean things aren't turning around.

This year, transforming the Buffs into the next Big 12 basketball force required 15 inspired individuals, all playing inspired basketball.

One of those players is freshman guard Alec Burks.

Burks, from Grandview, Mo., stands 6-foot-6, with a red Monster audio cord stretching from his white headphones (Beats by Dr. Dre) to his iPod. There's music pulsing through that cord and into Alec's ears, but that's a secret between Burks and his iPod.

Until now.

So what does the star true freshman listen to before he takes the court?

The 'No Ceiling' mixtape – Lil Wayne

"A.M. To P.M." – Cassidy

"All The Way Turnt Up" – Roscoe Dash featuring Soulja Boy

"Can I Live" – J Cole

"Violence" – Juelz Santana featuring Bezel



In a file photo, freshman guard Alec Burks attempts a shot at the basket during CU's game against Kansas State on Jan. 16 at the Coors Events Center. (CU Independent file/Charlie Sievers)

"Congratulations" – Drake

"Murda Murda" – Juelz Santana featuring Cam'Ron

"Murda Murda" is the last song Burks listens to before he takes the court.

"It puts you in a good mood to just go out and kill everybody on the court," Burks said.

And kill them he does. Burks is ranked first on the team in rebounds and second points averaging 16.8 points per game. Only junior guard Cory Higgins has more.

Half of February is over and March Madness is approaching fast, but there's a lot of basketball between now and the opening round of the tournament on March 16th.

It's still about the little things, the baby steps. The big dance can wait for now for the Buffs.

Oklahoma is next for the men's basketball team on Wednesday, and that is all that's on Alec's mind. That, and Juelz Santana.

Contact CU Independent social media editor Zack Shapiro at Zashapiro@colorado.edu

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