

Colorado looks to regain balance on offense

Relphorde likely to return from knee tendinitis to boost Buffaloes

By **Ryan Thorburn** Camera Sports Writer
Boulder Daily Camera

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Where's the balance, Buffs?

Cory Higgins and Alec Burks combined for nine made free throws, 13 made shots and 38 points during Colorado's 68-51 loss at Kansas State on Saturday.

CU's other players combined for one made free throw, six made shots and 13 points as the team lost for the seventh time in its last eight games.

Marcus Relphorde, who says he's ready to return to the lineup after missing the game due to knee tendinitis, hopes to bring some balance back to the offense tonight when Oklahoma visits the Coors Events Center (7 p.m., ESPNU).

"I think sometimes we get selfish as a team," Relphorde said before Tuesday's practice. "Certain players try to do it all by themselves and that relates to the whole team not playing well."

To be fair, Higgins and Burks -- who would have gladly traded in their modest stats for an upset of a top-10 team and a rare Big 12 road victory -- didn't get much help in Manhattan.

Nate Tomlinson and Trey Eckloff, who both started, didn't take a shot or a free throw. Austin Dufault was 1-for-4 from the field and 1-for-4 at the line. Three bench players -- Dwight Thorne, Levi Knutson and Casey Crawford -- combined for 10 points on 5-for-14 shooting.

"Cory and Alec both played pretty well, they both had their usual numbers," Relphorde said. "I think they definitely needed one or two guys to step up and contribute to the scoring."

After the game, coach Jeff Bzdelik said Relphorde's scoring (10.4 ppg) and ball handling skills (CU committed a season-high 22 turnovers) were sorely missed.

It's pretty obvious that when the junior point-forward plays well the Buffs are a dangerous team. Relphorde had 18 points and 11 rebounds during the overtime loss to No. 1 Kansas and 17 points and seven rebounds in the win over Baylor.

"We've been on a pretty long losing streak. Any win we can get would be good," Relphorde said when asked about the opportunity a slumping OU team presents. "I think we're all really excited for the game, coming home and trying to get the fans riled up."

Shane Harris-Tunks did not play against K-State. The 6-11 freshman from Australia told the Camera he's not injured.

"I just have to get my head right, that's the main thing," Harris-Tunks said. "I need to have my head in every play and prepare myself more mentally."

Bzdelik's talented freshmen appear to have smashed into the wall. Shannon Sharpe was lost for the season after sustaining a knee injury in October, Keegan Hornbuckle has missed four of the last six games with a shoulder injury, and Harris-Tunks has fallen out of Bzdelik's rotation.

Burks -- the Big 12's leading freshman scorer (16.8 ppg) -- is the exception to the rule. The 6-6 guard looks like he could play an 82-game schedule, something he will likely get a chance to do in a couple years.

"It's something they've never experienced before in terms of the intensity coupled with the length of the season," Bzdelik said. "(Harris-Tunks) is no different than anybody else. He just needs to continue to work hard and strive to get better."

The Sooners (13-11, 4-6) are coming off a lopsided loss at Oklahoma State that dropped their record in true road games to 1-6 this season. Willie Warren (illness) and Tiny Gallon (suspended) did not play in the 97-76 beating in Stillwater.

CU knocked off Jeff Capel's team in Boulder two years ago and lost 77-72 in Norman last season when OU had Blake Griffin and was ranked No. 2 nationally.

"Those guys play with passion. They play the game the right way," Capel said of the Buffs during Monday's Big 12 coaches teleconference. "That doesn't mean they do everything right all the time, but those guys play with a passion and a spirit."

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CU men's preview: Feb. 17 vs. Oklahoma

Camera staff
Boulder Daily Camera

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TODAY: Colorado hosts Oklahoma at 7 p.m. at the Coors Events Center.

BROADCAST: **Television:** ESPNU with Carter Blackburn (play-by-play) and LaPhonso Ellis (analyst); **Radio:** KKZN (760 AM) with Mark Johnson (play-by-play) and Charles Johnson (color).

STORYLINES: The Buffs (11-13, 2-8) have lost seven of their last eight games, including Saturday's 68-51 loss at Kansas State. ... Cory Higgins leads the Big 12 in steals (2.5 spg) and has averaged 16.4 points and 5.0 rebounds over the last five games. ... CU is fifth nationally in free throw percentage (76.1 percent). ... The Sooners (13-11, 4-6) are coming off a 97-76 loss at Bedlam rival Oklahoma State. OU standouts Willie Warren (illness) and Tiny Gallon (suspension) did not play. ... OU is 1-6 in true road games this season.

KEY STAT: CU is 10-3 at home and averages 77.8 points at the Coors Events Center, but the Buffs are 1-8 on the road (including the win over Division II Chaminade) and averaging 67.1 points per game.

COACHES: Jeff Bzdelik is 32-55 in his third season at CU. Jeff Capel is 82-44 in his fourth season at OU.

PROBABLE STARTERS:

Colorado -- G Nate Tomlinson, 6-3, sophomore, 5.5 ppg, 2.4 rpg, G Alec Burks, 6-6, freshman, 16.8 ppg, 4.8 rpg, G Cory Higgins, 6-5, junior, 18.1 ppg, 3.8 rpg, G Marcus Relphorde, 6-7, junior, 10.4 ppg, 4.0 rpg, F Austin Dufault, 6-9, sophomore, 6.3 ppg, 3.5 rpg.

Oklahoma -- G Cade Davis, 6-5, junior, 10.0 ppg, 3.5 rpg, G Willie Warren, 6-4, sophomore, 16.2 ppg, 3.5 rpg, G Tommy Mason-Griffin, 5-11, freshman, 13.8 ppg, 3.0 rpg, G Tony Crocker, 6-6, senior, 12.0 ppg, 6.5 rpg, F Ryan Wright, 6-9, senior, 4.2 ppg, 4.6 rpg.

SERIES: Oklahoma leads 87-48 with a 12-4 advantage in Big 12 play. CU won the last meeting in Boulder, 72-58.

UP NEXT: The Buffs hit the road again and will face No. 1 Kansas on Saturday at Allen Fieldhouse (2 p.m., Altitude).

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CU returns home for the Sooners

Bufs hope OU game will turn things around for remainder of season

By David Starcer on February 17, 2010

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If the Colorado men's basketball team has any hopes of making postseason play for the first time since 2003, they better start sooner rather than later.

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So perhaps their upcoming matchup with Oklahoma is just what the doctor ordered.

The Sooners enter Wednesday's contest on a two-game losing streak, including a 21-point thrashing at the hands of in-state rival Oklahoma State.

Oklahoma has had its share of good moments on the campaign too. On top of convincing wins over Arizona (who CU lost to in overtime at the Maui Invitational) and Missouri (who beat the Buffs by 18 in Boulder), the Sooners beat arch-rival No. 15 Texas, another team Colorado could not conquer, 80-71 before their recent slump. And even if Warren is scratched, head coach Jeff Bzdelik says his team has plenty more to prepare for.

"Tommy Mason-Griffin is playing as well as any guard in this conference," Bzdelik said. "He's a real special player, and they've got a couple other big-time players, and we're just going to have to do our best to limit them."

The freshman guard from Houston has been on a tear recently; Mason-Griffin has scored over 20 points in five of his team's last seven games, and has eclipsed the 30-point mark twice, including a 38-point outburst against Iowa State. Add on the fact that Griffin is shooting 45 percent from beyond the arc, and you can see why he has Bzdelik worried.

On the flip side, Colorado is riding a four-game losing streak of their own, the most recent defeat coming on Saturday at No. 7 Kansas State 68-51 in Manhattan, Kan. After trailing by only two heading into the half, a combination of poor shooting and turnovers led the Buffs astray and kept them from that elusive road victory.

"We need to share the ball a little bit better, and take care of the ball as well," Bzdelik said. "Turnovers,



Junior guard Cory Higgins goes in for a lay-up during a game against Baylor on Jan. 12. Higgins scored 18 points during the game, leading the Buffs to their 78-71 victory. (CU Independent file/Sara Fossum)

offensive rebounds, and fast-break points killed us. We didn't shoot the ball well in the second half and that allowed them to run on us."

Junior guard Cory Higgins, who leads the team in scoring with 18.1 points a game, has continued his strong play of late and has extended his double-digit scoring streak to 18 games. But the veteran and team leader knows after two years of sitting at home in March that now is the time to step up if the team wants to take itself to the next level.

"We look at this game as a game that we need to win," Higgins said. "A couple of wins would put us higher in the Big 12 standings, which would give us a more favorable matchup in the tournament. And there's no reason we can't win at the tournament no matter who we play."

Junior guard Levi Knutson, another player who has been here since the beginning with coach Bzdelik, has had his share of the "moral victories" as well.

Following the team's overtime loss to No. 1 Kansas, a game in which Knutson scored a season-high 13 points with three treys, the junior sharpshooter sent a mass e-mail to CU students thanking them for their support and promising them the results they deserve. Even though he's not underestimating OU, Knutson is confident the team will finally turn the corner, especially with the Coors faithful behind them.

"We always have to expect everybody's best shot because we're giving everybody our best shot, so we expect a battle," Knutson said. "Our crowd's been great this year, give a lot of credit to our fans and the people that have been supporting us here at home, they give us a little extra energy, so I feel like with them behind us on Wednesday we have a good shot to come out and beat Oklahoma."

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