

Thorburn: Season not over for Big 12 bottom feeders

Ryan Thorburn
Boulder Daily Camera

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Jeff Bzdelik is a patient man.

I can attest to that as a reporter who has interviewed him after many frustrating losses (and probably asked the coach a stupid question or two). On the record, off the record, at press conferences, behind closed doors ... Bzdelik has never been anything but professional with me.

I've obviously written some tough game stories while using plenty of unflattering adjectives and sarcasm covering a long and painful rebuilding process for Colorado basketball.

A lot of coaches let emotions get in the way of working relationships with newspaper reporters (Mike Shanahan has called my home screaming about things I wrote in the Camera). But after coaching the Denver Nuggets and spending the bulk of his career in the NBA, Bzdelik understands criticism is a part of the job.

As CU's head coach, Bzdelik understands any media attention on his program is a good thing. And usually I'm the only one waiting to talk outside the visitor's locker room when the Buffs are on the road.

During Monday's Big 12 coaches teleconference with the media, however, Bzdelik finally heard a question he didn't like (or at least the way it was phrased). It began with: "Even though you guys don't have a lot to play for ... "

"I resent that statement that we don't have a lot of play for," Bzdelik said tersely. "We're very blessed to play college basketball and to do the things that we are allowed to do. ... We still have a winning season within our grasp."

This no-quit attitude is what really makes the Big 12 great this season.

No. 1 Kansas, No. 6 Kansas State, No. 21 Texas, No. 22 Texas A&M and No. 24 Baylor are all nationally ranked. Oklahoma State and Missouri are also strong NCAA Tournament candidates from a conference ranked No. 1 in RPI.

The fact that the teams at the bottom — CU, Iowa State and Nebraska — are still competing so hard speaks to the depth of the conference and the quality of coaches.

The Huskers are 1-10 in the Big 12, but some of their recent performances have included a four-point loss at Kansas State, a two-point loss to Baylor and a 75-64 loss at KU.

Not that moral victories are acceptable in Lincoln.

"I can be the first to tell you that coach (Tom) Osborne isn't happy. And I understand why he's not happy," Doc Sadler said. "Nebraska has paid me to win basketball games here and lead a program."

The Cyclones (2-10 in Big 12 play) have lost nine of their last 10 games thanks to injuries, suspensions and a costly defection. Iowa State's last two losses were 60-56 to Texas A&M and 69-64 to Oklahoma State; not many teams want to see Craig Brackins and Marquis Gilstrap in Kansas City at the conference tournament.

"Anytime you're not as successful as you'd like to be the burden falls on everyone's shoulders. We're all sharing in the pain," Iowa State coach Greg McDermott said. "When you invest a lot and don't get the results there's a level of frustration. To their credit our players haven't let the frustrations take them on a road where their confidence is shaken."

Iowa State hosts Nebraska on Wednesday. CU still plays Iowa State at home and travels to Nebraska.

A winning overall record, a better seed at the conference tournament, experience, pride ... there is still plenty to play for at the bottom of the Big 12.

Senior moments

The Jayhawks and Wildcats are a combined 11-1 on the road in the Big 12. This is a conference that went 106-1 on its home courts during non-conference play.

So why do these teams thrive when they're suddenly not in Kansas anymore?

Well, when the games are on the line the ball and the crowds are on their feet, the ball is in the hands of an unflappable senior guard — Sherron Collins for KU and Denis Clemente for K-State.

"The kid is a winner," Texas A&M coach Mark Turgeon said of Collins, who became the winningest player in KU's storied history on Monday night. "He makes big plays at the right time, he makes tough plays, he makes players around him better."

Whenever the Jayhawks have been in danger of losing a game in the Big 12 — including the 72-66 overtime win over CU in Boulder — Collins has made a key basket or play to turn the tide. He scored the game-winner to beat K-State in overtime at Manhattan.

"I see excellence, I see greatness ... Sherron Collins is a pit bull," Oklahoma coach Jeff Capel said.

Capel said he was walking to the halftime locker room on Saturday with the Sooners only trailing K-State by three points when he heard a player yelling in the tunnel. He turned around and noticed it was Clemente getting on his teammates for a lackluster effort.

Clemente backed up the tough talk with 27 points on 11-for-18 shooting to lead the Wildcats to a 83-68 blowout in Norman.

"It's refreshing to see a guy who has passion," said Capel, whose talented individuals on the OU roster have not paid the price to become a good team this season. "They certainly have a swagger and a toughness on the road."

No shame iNIT

Pat Knight continues to lobby for ... the NIT?

That's right, Texas Tech's coach would love nothing more than to make a march for Madison Square Garden in his second full season running the program his father made an NCAA regular.

"It would be great. I haven't even talked to these guys about the NCAA," Knight said. "When any coach takes over a program, you're kind of on a three-year plan. ... There are a lot of guys that would kill to go to the NIT in their second year of coaching."

The Red Raiders (16-10, 4-8) are in good position to be included in the NIT. Believe it or not, if the Buffs (12-14, 3-9) are able to rally down the stretch and finish with a winning record they are also a likely candidate to be included in the field.

CU's strength of schedule is in the top 20, and Bzdelik has a great relationship with the NIT brass after leading Air Force to the Final Four three years ago.

False alarm?

The Sooners had to evacuate their hotel in Lawrence at midnight, an extremely early wake-up call for Monday's game against Kansas at Allen Fieldhouse.

"Initially I thought maybe it was a KU fan or something like that," Capel said. "When I played in the ACC and you went on the road, you were never surprised if something like that happened. But I don't know if we're good enough to where they'd do that to us."

The Lawrence Journal-World reported oily kitchen rags began producing smoke in the hotel's laundry room, triggering the alarm.

Doing without Dogus

Texas, already in the midst of a puzzling slump since the team was ranked No. 1 nationally last month, will have to make a late surge without starting point guard Dogus Balbay. The junior tore an ACL in his left knee on Saturday during a win at Texas Tech.

"We're going to miss his toughness, his defense ... but when a guy goes down it's an opportunity for someone else," Texas coach Rick Barnes said.

Notable

Clemente and Oklahoma State's James Anderson were the co-Big 12 players of the week. Xavier Henry was named the conference's rookie of the week after dropping 24 points on the Buffs in a 94-74 victory. ... Baylor's LaceDarius Dunn became the program's all-time leader in 3-pointers made (269) and is currently seventh on the Big 12's all-time list. ... Iowa State's bench has scored just seven points in the last three games. ... Missouri's Mike Anderson has won at least 20 games in each of his eight seasons as a Division I head coach and his teams have all finished fourth or higher in conference play.

Quotable "It was no ancient Chinese secret or anything. We just made shots," Oklahoma State coach Travis Ford on his team's ability to solve Baylor's zone defense during an 82-75 win over the Bears.

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Big 12 power rankings: Jan. 23

Ryan Thorburn
Boulder Daily Camera

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(Previous week's ranking and team's record in parentheses):

1. Kansas (1/27-1/13-0) — Jayhawks might cut down the nets again at the Final Four. Up next: Saturday at Oklahoma State.

2. Kansas State (2/22-4/9-3) — Frank Martin's team has lost more conference games at home (2) than on the road (1). Up next: Tonight at Texas Tech.

3. Texas A&M (3/19-7/8-4) — Mark Turgeon might be the best coach in the conference. Remember when College Station was a football town? Up next: Wednesday at Baylor.

4. Missouri (6/20-7/8-4) — Five Big 12 teams are ranked. And the Tigers aren't on that list? Up next: Wednesday vs. Colorado.

5. Oklahoma State (7/19-7/7-5) — Pokes are the youngest team in the Big 12, but James Anderson is a man. Up next: Wednesday at Texas.

6. Baylor (5/20-6/7-5) — Bears-Aggies has turned into a great hoops rivalry since that five-overtime classic. Up next: Wednesday vs. Texas A&M.

7. Texas (4/21-6/7-5) — Still waiting for the Longhorns to turn on the switch. It will be difficult without point guard Dogus Balbay. Up next: Wednesday vs. Oklahoma State.

8. Texas Tech (8/16-10/4-8) — The Red Raiders are a year away from being in the upper half of the conference again. Up next: Tonight vs. Kansas State.

9. Oklahoma (9/13-14/4-9) — This team is going to give Jeff Capel gray hair in his 30s. Up next: Saturday vs. Baylor.

10. Iowa State (10/13-14/2-10) — Clones' only win in their last 10 games was the one-point victory over CU in Ames. Up next: Wednesday vs. Nebraska.

11. Colorado (11/12-14/3-9) — Buffs need to beat some teams they're not supposed to down the stretch. Up next: Wednesday at Missouri.

12. Nebraska (12/13-14/1-11) — Doc Sadler would be on the hot seat if this were football. Up next: Wednesday at Iowa State. — Ryan Thorburn

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college basketball

Bzdelik says Buffs have something to play for

By Tom Kensler
The Denver Post

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Colorado coach Jeff Bzdelik grew irritated today when a reporter suggested Buffs had nothing left to play for. (AP | Orlin Wagner)

Colorado's Jeff Bzdelik bristled during today's Big 12 coaches teleconference when a reporter

asked the Buffaloes' boss about how he might try to motivate his basketball team when it appears there "is not much left to play for."

The Buffs (12-14, 3-9 Big 12) have four regular-season games remaining before the conference tournament in Kansas City. This week, CU travels to Missouri for a Wednesday night game and then hosts Iowa State at 11:30 a.m. on Saturday.

"Out of all due respect to you, I resent that statement that we don't have a lot to play for," Bzdelik replied to the question. "We're very blessed to be able to play college basketball. We're very blessed to be able to do the things we are able to do — to go out

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people, to be on TV ...

"We still have a winning season within our grasp. We're a very young team. Our goal is to get better every time we step on the court. You can see why I'm not happy with the statement that we don't have a lot to play for."

When the caller tried to offer a follow-up, Bzdelik cut him off.

"That's the answer to (the) question. Thank you," the coach said.

Difficult matchup

During Bzdelik's three seasons in the building process, the Buffs have have two victories over Oklahoma, two over Baylor, and have taken Kansas and Texas into overtime. In all, Bzdelik's CU teams have lost 27 games by single-digit margins, indicating that they have generally been competitive.

However, Colorado seems to get run off the court by Missouri. The Tigers are 5-0 against Bzdelik-coached Buff teams and have won the past three meetings by an average of 25.3 points. Colorado was stomped 107-62 the last time it visited Missouri (Jan. 14, 2009). Earlier this year in Boulder, the Tigers romped 84-66.

Missouri coach Mike Anderson coaches his team to play all 40 minutes at a frenetic pace, forcing fastbreaks on offense and trapping on defense with a fullcourt press.

"The problems Missouri poses for us is, they make you make plays," Bzdelik said on the teleconference. "(In this year's earlier matchup) we certainly had opportunities at the rim to score. We had open shots, and we just need to make those shots.

"(The Tigers) seem to be one-step quicker than us in all positions thus far."

Longhorns lose point guard

Texas confirmed today that junior Dogus Balbay suffered a torn ACL in his left knee early in the first half against Texas Tech on Saturday and will miss the remainder of the season.

Balbay, from Istanbul, Turkey, averaged a team-best 3.8 assists in addition to 3.8 points and 3.2 rebounds.

"We're going to miss (Balbay's) toughness, his defense, what he brings," Texas coach Rick Barnes said on the teleconference. "But when a guy goes down, we said ... it's an opportunity for someone else."

Freshmen Avery Bradley and J'Covan Brown figure to absorb more minutes and share point-guard duties. Both are superior talents but have frustrated Barnes with their inconsistency.

"I just hope that a couple of people look at this as a challenge and are willing to accept it," Barnes said, referring to the newcomers.

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FEBRUARY 22, 2010, 4:33 PM

Was Bzdelik out of line?

By **TOM KENSLE** |  No Comments

I was surprised to hear Colorado men's basketball coach Jeff Bzdelik becoming short with a reporter during Monday's Big 12 Conference teleconference with media that cover the league.

At the same time, I understood.

The question concerned what Bzdelik could do to keep his team motivated now that, the reporter said, the Buffs (12-14, 3-9 Big 12) apparently have little to play for.

Bzdelik took issue with the question, which was his prerogative. That's what I expect of a coach. He said his team is trying to improve every day and all players should be appreciative of having the privilege to play college basketball.

Bzdelik added that his team can still finish with a winning record.

The caller tried to say something, and I'd guess the reporter would have explained that he didn't mean any negativity. But Bzdelik cut him off, saying, "That's my answer ... thank you."

In other words, Bzdelik signaled to the moderator to go to the next reporter.

I think Bzdelik should have given the caller an opportunity to elaborate or future explain his question. But there are always times when coaches believe a question has crossed the line, is off-base or perhaps even stupid. I'm sure Bzdelik thought he was being polite – and probably didn't want to chance getting into an argument on a teleconference. That's fine.

On the other hand, the reporter certainly could have worded his question more diplomatically. Perhaps he could have phrased it in the context of what Bzdelik will be looking for during the last two weeks of the season with an eye on the future.

Coaches almost never give up. Even if prospects look dim for what most people would construe as top-shelf success, a coach will gain satisfaction from day-to-day teaching and the incremental improvement that may bring.

Give Bzdelik credit, he didn't raise his voice. I've covered coaches that might have ripped into the reporter – or hung up, leaving the rest other reporters on the call out of luck.

As for Colorado's chances at finishing with a winning record, I'd say they are remote. But I do think the Buffs could get to .500. Winning at Missouri on Wednesday night would be a major upset, but CU's final three games of the season appear winable: home games against Iowa State and Texas Tech, and a road date at cellar-dweller Nebraska.

Winning three of four would pull the Buffs to even in their won-loss record. Trouble is, they would then

have to win at least their opening game in the Big 12 Tournament to remain at .500.

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All Things Colorado Sports — Blogs — The Denver Post

FEBRUARY 23, 2010, 8:00 AM

Here's why Big 12 hoops are a behemoth

By **TOM KENSLE** |  No Comments

Of course the Big East is going to have its support for being considered the nation's top men's basketball conference.

Yes, Syracuse (4), Villanova (7), West Virginia (8), Georgetown (11) and Pittsburgh (12) are ranked among the nation's top dozen in this week's Associated Press poll.

But I think the Big 12 can make a real case for itself. The Big 12 ranks first in RPI, but even more convincing is its record in matchups against the other "big six" conferences, compared to the others.

Here goes:

Big 12 — 28-12 vs. the other "big six" conferences (.700)

ACC — 24-21 (.533)

SEC — 25-26 (.490)

Big East — 19-21 (.475)

Big Ten — 18-20 (.474)

Pac-10 9-24 (.273)

No question that records between conferences can be a bit skewed because they can depend on the matchups — say if it's one of those years where the strongest teams of Conference A got to play the weaker teams of Conference B.

But the dominance of the Big 12 in inter-league games cannot be overlooked.

My take: The Big East may be a bit stronger at the top, but the Big 12 unquestionably has the most depth.

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Longmont, Colorado
Wednesday, April 21, 2010

Publish Date: 2/23/2010

Bzdelik bristles at question on season

By Patrick Ridgell
© 2010 Longmont Times-Call

As Colorado's men's basketball coach, Jeff Bzdelik deals with lots of questions he would probably rather ignore, and he usually answers them. Just don't tell him his team doesn't have much to play for.

During Monday's Big 12 coaches teleconference, Bzdelik received a question he didn't like, and he said so. The exchange went like this:

Questioner: "For a lot of teams that might be in your position, it would seem on the outside there isn't a ton to play for. But when you think about the improvement this team has shown this year, and the fact you only lose that one senior, how important are these last four games and the Big 12 Tournament for setting the tone for not only this year, but next year?"

Bzdelik: "First of all, out of all due respect to you, I resent the statement we don't have a lot to play for. We're very blessed to play college basketball, and we're very blessed to do the things we are able to do — to go out there in front of large crowds, 10,000-plus people, to play on TV.

"We still have a winning season within our grasp. We're a very young team. Our goal is to get better every time we step on the court. You can see why I'm not happy with a statement like we don't have a lot to play for. So that's the answer to (the) question. Thank you."

The Buffs play Wednesday at Missouri, an opponent to which they have lost seven straight times, including 84-66 in Boulder on Feb. 6. CU (12-14, 3-9 Big 12) then concludes its regular season with games at home against Iowa State and Texas Tech, plus a trip to Nebraska. CU has lost 35 straight Big 12 road games.

Picked last in the Big 12, CU can finish eighth with some success over the next two weeks. It entered Monday in 10th place, a game behind Oklahoma and Texas Tech, both 4-8 in the league.

Missouri coach Mike Anderson said its win in Boulder was Missouri's "most efficient" game of the season. He said he believes CU is turning things around.

"As (Bzdelik) continues to put his players in place, they'll continue to get improvement," Anderson said. "Jeff is a tremendous coach and a very good person. ... Their record does not indicate what kind of a season they've had."

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Longmont, Colorado
Wednesday, April 21, 2010

Publish Date: 2/23/2010

Inconsistency, lack of preparation vex Texas

By Patrick Ridgell
© 2010 Longmont Times-Call

Texas must replace starting point guard Dogus Balbay, who tore an ACL early in Saturday's win at Texas Tech. Coach Rick Barnes gave predictable responses Monday to how the Longhorns will do that, saying he hopes a couple of his players view it as a challenge they're willing to accept.

What Barnes said next was most interesting.

Texas has lost six of 10 since it was 17-0 and ranked No. 1 on Jan. 18. This week, it's No. 21. Injuries aside — Texas also lost starting guard Varez Ward for the year in November — its biggest problems appear to be ones the Longhorns can control. And that's bugging Barnes.

"As coaches, we're still trying to get our guys to play at the very highest level," Barnes said. "You realize how quickly it can go the other way if guys let down for one second. It's such a fine line. We're trying to get there."

"I said coming into the season we were going to have to rely on some young guys. We expected to go through some growing pains. But by this time of year, you hope by now they understand that part of it — preparation. You know they go through points where it's harder than they ever thought it'd be. They realize they can't do some things they could as high school kids."

"They should be beyond that by now. They should just understand the preparation that has to go into that everyday."

Barnes was quick to say problems with preparation plague his older players in addition to his freshmen. But one freshman who saw his minutes cut Saturday was J'Covan Brown, who played a season-low five.

Barnes said Brown needs to be more consistent to play more, and he must prepare everyday, "not just when it's convenient."

Again, Barnes said, that applies to Brown's teammates, too.

"I could go down the line with some of the older guys, as well," he said. "That's why we've been inconsistent. We need to have everybody understand everyday what goes into it and view this team in a way that we all see it the same, and everybody understands what their roles are and do those roles everyday."

AROUND THE BIG 12

ROLLING ALONG: Kansas moved to 13-0 in the Big 12 with Monday's defeat of Oklahoma.

Game Preview

Colorado women (12-13, 2-10) at Missouri (11-14, 1-11)

When/Where: 5:30 p.m. today at Mizzou Arena in Columbia, Mo.

TV/Radio: No TV/KKZN 760AM.

The series: CU leads 39-27. The Buffs beat Missouri 64-48 on Jan. 9 in Boulder.

Leading scorers: Missouri — Jessra Johnson (12.3 points per game); CU — Brittany Spears (17.6 points per game).

Notes: CU, in 11th place in the Big 12, has lost eight in a row and 10 of its past 11. ... CU has six conference road wins since 2005. Three have come at Missouri. ... Spears slumped midway through the conference season, but over her past three games is averaging 22 points per on 53 percent shooting. She has hit 10 of her past 15 3s. ... Missouri is in last place in the Big 12. IT has lost seven in a row. Its last win came over Baylor, which beat 76-42 on Feb. 6. Two of Missouri's past three losses have come by four points or less.

Patrick Ridgell

It's three wins from becoming the second team to go unbeaten through a Big 12 season. Kansas pulled the same trick in 2002.

But there's still some heavy lifting to do — the Jayhawks have road games at Oklahoma State and Missouri, plus a home game with Kansas State, remaining.

Guards Sherron Collins and Brady Morningstar became the program's all-time winningest players Monday when they were a part of their 124th career victories as Jayhawks.

Kansas clinched its sixth straight regular season title Monday.

NEBRASKA WOES: Nebraska's Doc Sadler has remained optimistic despite the Cornhuskers' struggles in Big 12 play. But after they fell to 1-11 Saturday against Missouri, Sadler told reporters, "I'm at a loss for words. I don't know what to say."

Sadler said Monday Nebraska's administration, including athletic director Tom Osborne, have been very supportive. He realizes that could change.

"I could be the first one to tell you I'm sure coach Osborne isn't happy either," Sadler said. "I understand why he shouldn't be."

ALARMING SOONERS: Oklahoma's Jeff Capel said a fire alarm sounded at the team's Kansas hotel around midnight Monday morning, forcing the team to wait in the lobby for an hour and a half while the issue was resolved.

"When I played in the ACC and we went on the road, I was never surprised when anything like that happened," Capel said. "I don't know if we're good enough to have to do something like that to."

TIP-INS: Kansas State has won five straight Big 12 road games. "Experience has a lot to do with it," coach Frank Martin said. ... Martin is the first Kansas State coach with 20 or more wins in his first three seasons. On Monday the Wildcats were ranked No. 6, their highest since 1962. ... Four Big 12 teams had top 15 RPIs on Monday. Five were in the top 25, six in the top 30 and seven in the top 40. The Big 12 remains the nation's top RPI conference. ... Missouri has 51 wins over this season and last. Only six other programs have more. The Tigers have won 20 games in consecutive years for the first time since 2002-03.

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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Big couple of weeks for Buffs

Written by [neill](#) in Monday, February 22nd 2010 under [Buffs](#), [college basketball](#)
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Here comes what might be one of the more important stretches in Jeff Bzdelik's tenure in Boulder.

With a 12-14 record (3-9 in the Big 12), the Buffs need to win three of their last four to head into the Big 12 Tournament with a .500 record and a decent shot at qualifying for postseason play.

It's also CU's last chance to end a dreadful losing streak on the road.

Not many folks are counting on a Buff win Wednesday at Missouri. The Buffs don't match up well with the physical Tigers, and it was MU that handed the Buffs by far their worst home loss of the season, an 84-66 thumping on Feb. 6.

But after Wednesday, the Buffs have three very winnable games — and if they're going to realize their goal of playing after the Big 12 Tournament, they need to win all three.

The stretch begins with a home game against Iowa State on Saturday. The Buffs dropped a heartbreaker in Ames earlier this season, letting a chance for a last-second win get away when they missed a shot in the waning moments. Then comes a March 2 game at Nebraska — a great place for the Buffs to get their first road win of the season and their first conference road win since 2006. CU beat Nebraska 72-60 in Boulder in late January.

And finally, the regular season ends up with a March 6 home game against Texas Tech, a team the Buffs actually have a chance of catching in the Big 12 standings (the Red Raiders are currently 4-8 in conference play).

As it stands now, the Buffs are in 10th place in the standings, meaning they'd meet the No. 7 team in the March 10 opening round of the Big 12 Tournament. There's currently a three-team logjam for the league's fifth, sixth and seventh spots (Texas, Baylor and Oklahoma State).

But if the Buffs could finish with three wins down the stretch, they could move up as high as eighth or ninth in the conference standings, giving them a possible opening round match against Texas Tech or Oklahoma.

Most importantly, the Buffs need to get some wins under their belt to increase confidence. With just one senior on the team, a strong finish would be a huge help to the team that will return almost intact for the 2010-2011 season.