



A 'heart-to-heart' with her coach helped Brittany Spears turn things around.  
Photo Courtesy: CUBuffs.com



02/26/2010 B.G. Brooks, Contributing Editor

## Brooks: Spears, Smith Refocused At Right Time

**BOULDER** - There's no certified way to coax a basketball player out of a slump, but over the past three weeks Colorado women's coach Kathy McConnell-Miller did what she could - and whatever she did seems to be working.

Junior Brittany Spears, CU's leading scorer and unassuming team leader, slipped into an uncharacteristic three-game funk and took the Buffs with her.

During the same span, senior Bianca Smith, the team's three-point sharpshooter, encountered a drought where hitting the side of the Coors Events Center might have been difficult.

Talk about a February freeze out . . . In losses to then-Nos. 6 Nebraska, 15 Baylor and 14 Texas - a trio of defeats absorbed two games into an eight-game losing streak - Spears and Smith combined to shoot 23 percent from the field (14-of-61). Spears hit eight of 30 field goal attempts and Smith six of 31.

To bring Spears back to form, McConnell-Miller and her top player "had a nice little heart-to-heart." To help Smith rediscover her shooting touch, McConnell-Miller did, well, practically nothing.

After CU's 74-50 loss to Texas on Feb. 10, the "nice little heart-to-heart" with her coach included McConnell-Miller showing Spears the cumulative stat sheet, analyzing her performance and reiterating to Spears what her scoring means to the team.

McConnell-Miller also emphasized the need to dismiss a bad possession and move on - "not allowing one play to affect the next play . . . The fact that she's not a vocal leader, she leads through performance and we needed our leader to step up and be more efficient."

But, added McConnell-Miller, "Even during those bad (scoring) stretches, she was defending, she was rebounding and being productive."

Some players might have balked or sulked after a similar one-on-one with their coach. Spears, said McConnell-Miller, never "takes anything the wrong way. She wants to be that go-to player.

"She just needed some help figuring out what was keeping her from being that go-to player. She's a face-value type girl; you don't beat around the bush with her."

Spears' take on her soul-session with McConnell-Miller: "She just told me, 'I believe in you . . . every time you shoot the ball, I think it's going to go in. You have to have confidence that it's going in; I think I have more confidence in you than you do in yourself. Play your game - don't worry about the officiating or anything else. Even if you're having a bad game, just keep playing basketball, don't get angry or anything like that.'"

Spears claimed she wasn't in a confidence crisis. Rather, it was one involving all-out effort: "No, I just think I wasn't playing as hard as I could play. She was basically just telling me to go out and play basketball, and I felt I wasn't helping my teammates out because I wasn't scoring. I feel like I came out of it."

Indeed, she has. In her two most recent games, Spears has totaled 60 points and 17 rebounds - 26 points, 7 boards in an 89-73 loss at now-No. 3 Nebraska and 34 points, 10 boards in an 80-79 overtime win at Missouri.

Two more factors helped in Spears' emergence from her slump. She increased her personal "gym time" to about 21/2 hours of shooting and dribbling. And a tweak in the Buffs' offense has allowed her "a little more freedom and some more touches" while making the offense "a little less predictable," McConnell-Miller said.

Spears, averaging 18.2 points a game, said she has "felt a lot more comfortable" in recent games. "And I started feeling like my shot was going to start falling. Everybody goes through slumps."

That brings us to Smith, who has been reinserted into the starting lineup to offer the Buffs more early firepower and theoretically avoid disastrous starts.

At Baylor - a 76-42 CU loss - McConnell-Miller recalls Smith missing shot after shot, running by the Buffs bench and offering her coach a bewildered look, "Like, 'What am I doing?'"

Smith took and missed 13 shots in that game. But with pure shooters (and Smith easily qualifies) the most effective prescription to snap out of a slump calls for more shots.

"We let her shoot her way out of it . . . that's the way you've got to let shooters do it," McConnell-Miller said. "With shooters, the more you put in their head, the worse they get. And she's been able to shoot herself out of it."

At Nebraska, Smith produced 18 points, then hit 26 on the following trip to Missouri. Her six three-pointers against the Tigers moved her to within one of tying Shelley Sheetz's CU record (252) for career treys. Plus, Smith is four away from her seasonal-high and school-record (80 in 2007-08)) for three-pointers.

In a best-case scenario, both of those marks would fall Saturday when CU plays No. 12 Texas A&M (2 p.m.) at the Events Center. In an even better-case scenario, said Smith, the Buffs would win and improve their chances to make a postseason tournament: "The big thing for us now is to make it to the postseason. Breaking Shelley Sheetz's record would be great but you have to put it in perspective. I haven't been to the NCAA tournament and only once to the postseason."

Smith admitted it was difficult for her to completely blot out thoughts of setting a milestone mark in her final season at CU.

"From my family to reporters and everyone on campus to keep reminding me, it's hard to say it's not in the back of my mind," she said. "But I try not to let it get to me because I'm big into not jinxing myself . . . I try to keep it in the back of my mind as much as possible."

In shaking out of her shooting slump, Smith got advice from her stepfather, her coach and herself. "The big thing," she said, "was just to keep shooting. I was down for a while, but everybody told me to keep shooting. I think I focused on (that) and kept telling myself the next shot was going to fall."

Finally, the next one did.

**CU MEN vs. IOWA STATE:** The Buffs lost by a point (64-63) at Ames, Iowa on Jan. 30. Freshman Alec Burks played only 2 minutes after suffering a knee injury.

Burks, who averages 16.7 points a game and has been in double figures in every game he's finished, is eager to play Saturday against the Cyclones at the Events Center (11:30 a.m., Altitude).

"Yeah, I really needed to be with my teammates in that game," Burks said of watching the one-point loss in Ames. "I got hurt and feel like we let one slip away."

Asked he believed his absence might have been the difference in that outcome, Burks said, "It's neither here nor there . . . we'll never know, but I feel like I could have helped my teammates to a win."

The Buffs (12-15, 3-10) are coming off their worst loss of the season - 93-62 on Wednesday night at Missouri. Wanting to immediately move forward, coach Jeff Bzdelik didn't show his team the game tape, and Burks doesn't believe there will be any ill-effects: "A loss is hard to bounce back from no matter how (lopsided) it is. It's a loss. But I feel like we're going to bounce back strong because we always do."

In winning its most recent home game (77-67 against Oklahoma on Feb. 17), CU turned in one of its best overall efforts of the season. The Buffs are a different team in Boulder (11-3 this season) and

Bzdelik said he is "not going to overreact" about the last three road losses in a Big 12 Conference streak that has reached 36.

"Look at last three road games - at Kansas State, Kansas and Missouri," he said. "I don't take any team in the country - Duke, anybody - and ask them to play at Kansas State, Kansas and Missouri.

"You see where I'm going with that? We're not playing the Little Sisters of the Poor. I'm not going to overreact at all (after those three road losses). The most important thing is the next thing we do."

CU's remaining games are against Iowa State, at Nebraska (March 2) and Texas Tech (March 6). Winning two of the three would put the Buffs at 5-11 in the Big 12 and improve their seeding in the conference's postseason tournament (March 10-13, Kansas City).

The Buffs currently are tied with the Cyclones (3-10) while the Cornhuskers are in last place (1-12). A game ahead of CU and Iowa State are Oklahoma and Texas Tech (each at 4-9).

CU already has defeated OU and gets Texas Tech in the regular-season finale.

The Buffs have been the Big 12 tournament's No. 12 seed in each of Bzdelik's first two seasons.

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coach, we always evaluate at the end of the year to see where we are."

Bohn said expectations for both men's and women's basketball are certainly high given the increased resources being devoted to those programs in recent years -- not the least of which is a new practice facility that is expected to be completed some time next year and will also be used by the volleyball team.

"Investment is up in the program," Bohn said. "So I think we're looking for a return on investment in both of our (basketball teams), and to now include volleyball."

Still, both Bohn and McConnell-Miller noted the difficulty of making a major jump in a Big 12 Conference that is at its strongest ever in women's basketball. The league is ranked first in the country in the RPI, and as many as eight or nine teams are still alive for NCAA berths.

"You've got to take a look at programs like Nebraska, and you've got to take a look at programs like Kansas and Texas Tech," McConnell-Miller said. "Nebraska is (26-0). This isn't what they were in Connie (Yori's) third and fourth year and fifth year.

"I think it takes time. I think the foundation is strong in that we continue to get great players in the program."

McConnell-Miller has conceded that the team still needs an impact post player. But she also said good things are happening and can still happen this season and beyond.

"I think Alyssa Fressle is playing the best basketball she's played," McConnell-Miller said. "(Leading scorer Brittany Spears) is motivated. Bianca (Smith) is about to break a record by one of the best players (in CU history). So there's a lot of positives going on, and there's a lot of positive energy every day we step on the floor."

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## CU women's preview: vs. Texas A&M

Camera staff  
Boulder Daily Camera

Posted: 02/27/2010 12:16:35 AM MST

**TODAY:** The Buffs (13-13, 3-10 Big 12) host No. 12 Texas A&M (19-7, 7-6) in a 2 p.m. game at the Coors Events Center.

**BROADCAST:** **Television:** None. **Radio:** KKZN (760 AM) with Mike Rice (play-by-play) and Carol Callan (color).

**STORYLINES:** Colorado is coming off of an 80-79 overtime win over Missouri on Tuesday that snapped an eight-game losing streak. ... The Buffs have lost 20 straight to ranked foes. ... Texas A&M has won three of four. ... Despite starting only 10 games this season, junior forward Danielle Adams leads the Aggies in scoring (15.3 ppg) and rebounding (5.7 rpg).

**KEY STAT:** CU senior guard Bianca Smith needs just one 3-point basket to match Shelley Sheetz's CU career record of 252 from 1991-1995. Smith also needs just four to tie her own single-season record of 80, which she set as a sophomore.

**COACHES:** Kathy McConnell-Miller is 65-84 in her fifth year at CU and 156-172 overall. Gary Blair is 148-73 in his seventh year at Texas A&M and 556-236 overall.

### PROBABLE STARTERS:

**Colorado --** G Chucky Jeffery, 5-10, Fr., 9.7 ppg, 5.3 rpg, 3.4 apg; G Alyssa Fressle, 5-10, So., 6.9 ppg, 2.7 rpg, 2.6 apg; F Brittany Spears, 6-1, Jr., 18.2 ppg, 8.5 rpg, 2.2 spg; G Bianca Smith, 5-9, Sr., 13.3 ppg, 2.7 apg; C Courtney Dunn, 6-4, Sr., 6.4 ppg, 4.6 rpg.

**Texas A&M --** G Sydney Carter, 5-6, So., 8.2 ppg, 2.7 rpg, 3.3 apg; G Tyra White, 6-0, So., 10.5 ppg, 4.3 rpg; G/F Tanisha Smith, 6-0, Sr., 15.0 ppg, 5.3 rpg; F Adaora Elonu, 6-1, So., 7.7 ppg, 4.1 rpg; F Damitria Buchanan, 6-2, Sr., 2.9 ppg, 4.1 rpg.

**SERIES:** CU leads 10-7, including 6-2 in Boulder.

**UP NEXT:** The Buffs host Kansas State at 7 p.m. Wednesday to wrap up their regular-season home slate.

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**All Things Colorado Sports — Blogs — The Denver Post**

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FEBRUARY 26, 2010, 3:45 PM

## CU's Spears back on track

By **TOM KENSLE** |  No Comments

I always find it interesting when a coach in any sport can light a fire under a player or turn a slump into a surge, and all it seems to take sometimes is a 5-minute conversation.

That apparently is what happened with Colorado junior forward Brittany Spears, who had hit just eight of 30 shots in losses to Nebraska, Baylor and Texas. Yes, those teams are nationally ranked. But CU needed more from Spears, the team's top offensive threat.

After what CU coach Kathy McConnell-Miller called "a nice little heart-to-heart," Spears busted out with in a big way. In the past two games – another game against Nebraska and Tuesday night's overtime win at Missouri – Spears has combined for 60 points and 17 rebounds.

That included a season-best 34-point performance in Columbia.

"Coach (McConnell-Miller) told me that she had more confidence in me than I had in myself," Spears said. "She said that every time I shoot the ball she thinks it's going in."

McConnell-Miller said she brought out statistics to prove her point.

"We sat down after her not-so-stellar stretches on the offensive end ... and I showed Brittany her lack of offensive performances and differences in our team when she is not scoring," McConnell-Miller said.

"We talked a little about her not allowing one (bad) play to affect the next play. And the fact that her team needed her to score."

Colorado (13-13, 3-10 Big 12) hosts No. 12 Texas A&M on Saturday. CU has lost 20 straight games against ranked teams.

"Every game is an opportunity in this conference," McConnell-Miller said.

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Longmont, Colorado  
Wednesday, April 21, 2010

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## Today's Games

*By Patrick Ridgell*  
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**No. 12 Texas A&M (19-7, 7-6) at Colorado women (13-13, 3-10)**

**When/Where:** 2 p.m. today at Coors Events Center in Boulder

**TV/Radio:** No TV/KKZN 760 AM

**The series:** CU leads 10-7. Texas A&M has won the past six meetings.

**Leading scorers:** Texas A&M — Danielle Adams (15.3 points per game); CU — Brittany Spears (18.2 points per game)

**Notes:** CU snapped its eight-game losing streak Tuesday with an 80-79 overtime win at Missouri. ... CU's Bianca Smith needs one 3-pointer to match Shelly Sheetz's program record of 252. ... CU has lost 17 in a row to teams ranked in the AP and WBCA polls. With three regular-season games to go, CU is in 11th place in the Big 12. It's a game behind Kansas State for 10th, and two behind Kansas and Texas Tech. The Buffs will host Kansas State in their regular-season home finale on March 3. ... Adams leads Texas A&M in scoring despite coming off the bench. The Aggies lead the league with 15.8 assists per game.

**Iowa State (14-14, 3-10) at Colorado men (12-15, 3-10)**

**When/Where:** 11:45 a.m. today at the Coors Events Center in Boulder

**TV/Radio:** Altitude/KVCU 1190 AM

**The series:** Iowa State leads 76-67. CU leads 46-16 in Boulder. Iowa State beat CU 64-63 on Jan. 30 in Ames.

**Leading scorers:** Iowa State — Craig Brackins (16.7 points per game); CU — Cory Higgins (18 points per game)

**Notes:** CU played at Iowa State without Alec Burks for all but the first 2 minutes of the game. He hurt his knee and did not return. Burks, with 434 points, needs 47 to break CU's single-season freshman record (Richard Roby, 480). ... CU is 11-3 at home. ... Iowa State snapped a six-game losing streak Wednesday when it beat Nebraska 78-74 in Ames.

## A&M women want Big 12 bye

By ROBERT CESSNA

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Published Saturday, February 27, 2010 12:14 AM

The Texas A&M women's basketball team has work to do if it wants to earn a bye for the first round of the Big 12 Tournament.

The 12th-ranked Aggies (19-7, 7-6) are tied with Baylor (20-7, 7-6) and Oklahoma State (19-8, 7-6) for fifth place with three games left in the regular season.

A&M will face Colorado (13-13, 3-10) at 3 p.m. Saturday in Boulder.

"It's another must-win game for us," A&M coach Gary Blair said. "When you are on the road and playing a team who is 'supposedly' near the bottom of the league, you have to be ready to play."

A&M is coming off a 65-63 Monday night loss to Baylor that gave the Lady Bears a sweep of the season series and put the Aggies in a position where they probably need to win to have a chance at a bye for the tournament in Kansas City on March 11-14.

The Aggies' final home game will be Tuesday against Oklahoma (19-8, 9-4), then A&M finishes at Kansas (15-11, 5-8) on March 6.

Nebraska (26-0, 13-0) has locked up the league title and a bye, while Iowa State (21-5, 9-4) is almost assured of a bye. Texas (19-8, 8-5) is in fourth place, but the Longhorns have to play a pair of ranked teams in A&M and Baylor.

Colorado is 0-5 against the Big 12 South and hasn't beaten a ranked team this season.

"They are a good team and it will be another battle," A&M point guard Sydney Colson said. "It's tough to go up there and play, especially with the altitude. I remember during my freshman year, when I went out in the game, I was huffing and puffing in the first two minutes, because you're not really used to it."

### A&M WOMEN'S HOOPS

\* **Saturday's game:** No. 12 Texas A&M (19-7, 7-6) at Colorado (13-13, 3-10), 3 p.m.

\* **TV/radio:** None/KZNE, 1150 AM

### LINEUPS

#### TEXAS A&M (19-7, 7-6 BIG 12)

#### NAME POS. HT. CL. PPG RPG

Sydney Carter G 5-6 So. 8.2 3.3\*

Tanisha Smith F 6-0 Sr. 15.0 5.3

Tyra White G 6-0 So. 10.5 4.3

Adaora Elonu F 6-1 So. 7.7 4.1

Damitria Buchanan F 6-2 Sr. 2.9 4.1

**COLORADO (13-13, 3-10)**

**NAME POS. HT. CL. PPG RPG**

Chucky Jeffery G 5-10 Fr. 9.7 3.4\*

Bianca Smith G 5-9 Sr. 13.3 2.7

Alyssa Fressle G 5-10 So. 6.9 2.7

Brittany Spears G 6-1 Jr. 18.2 8.5

Courtney Dunn C 6-4 Sr. 6.4 4.6

\*assists per game

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Longmont, Colorado  
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## CU's Spears goes on tear

Offensive shift giving high-scoring forward freedom to fire away

*By Patrick Ridgell*  
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BOULDER — Few would ever accuse Brittany Spears of being predictable. Turns out, she was.

When Spears, the leading scorer on Colorado's women's basketball team, endured a slump this month in which she scored 24 points over three games, she had a "heart-to-heart" with coach Kathy McConnell-Miller. That meeting was meant to revive Spears' confidence — and it did, helping the junior start her current tear in which she has 105 points over CU's past four games.

But changes in the Buffs' offense are what's enabling Spears to find those shots that she's so confident she'll hit. Spears said the changes provide the kind of freedom she saw playing pick-up games growing up in Southern California.

"Now we're doing more cutting to the basket and back doors and stuff," Spears said. "Before, I'd just go out on a wing and catch the ball, and we'd run the offense. But now it's more open offense, like we can do what we want — dribble, drive, pass, post up, whatever. It's more what we want to do."

Spears said she guessed opponents watched CU on tape and could deduce what the Buffs, and she, were going to do whenever she had the ball.

"But now they don't see what (we) do because it's open offense — we can do what we want," Spears said.

Such a drastic change in offensive philosophy in mid-season is unusual for any team to make. Of course, the Buffs were going nowhere fast. They lost eight straight Big 12 games prior to Tuesday's win at Missouri. Today, they're hosting No. 12 Texas A&M (2 p.m., no TV) in search of their first winning streak in conference play.

"We've made some changes to the offense," McConnell-Miller said. "If you go back and look at how many points we scored early on, it ranged anywhere from 61 to 64. And I thought we got very predictable in our offense. We changed the offense a little bit up — got more drives, more open looks, more kickouts — and now you're seeing us in the 70s."

Such a change suits Spears well. McConnell-Miller said it allows her to read defenses more and expand her options, making the Buffs less predictable.

The change also has opened up the perimeter. CU has exceeded 70 points in its past three games after failing to score more than 64 in its first 10 Big 12 games. From 3-point range, CU shot 15-for-27 at Nebraska last weekend, and 14-for-29 at Missouri.

Spears scored 34 at Missouri, her season high and two points from her career best. It was the seventh-best single-game output in program history. Other than battles with leg cramps that she has fought over the past two weeks, she said she feels fine.



CU's Brittany Spears pushes to the hoop against Nebraska's Catheryn Redmon during a Jan. 30 game at the Coors Event Center in Boulder.

**Times-Call file**

That figures.

“(McConnell-Miller) was telling me she believes in me and ... said every shot I take, she believes it’s going in and I should believe it’s going in,” Spears said. “When she told me that, I just felt like every shot I take is going to go in.”

Read Patrick Ridgell’s CU sports blog at [www.timescall.com/blogs/ridgell](http://www.timescall.com/blogs/ridgell). He can be reached at [pridgell@times-call.com](mailto:pridgell@times-call.com).