

Burks optimistic he'll play vs. Kansas

Standout guard to see how sprained knee responds after practicing

By Ryan Thorburn Camera Sports Writer
Boulder Daily Camera

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Alec Burks feared the worst.

"I was in pain. I thought I broke my leg when I went down," the gifted freshman guard said after sustaining a knee injury during Colorado's 64-63 loss on Saturday at Iowa State. "But I got back up. Scary."

Jeff Bzdelik and the entire program exhaled on Monday as the team began preparing for Wednesday's game against No. 1 Kansas at the Coors Events Center.

An MRI taken Sunday revealed that Burks had only sustained a mild sprain of his left knee. He was a limited practice participant on Monday but should be able to return to the lineup soon, perhaps even against the Jayhawks.

"Alec is doing great," Bzdelik reported. "I think we're in good shape there. ... We'll just see how he moves in practice. It's a very mild sprain."

Burks, a dynamic player who leads all Big 12 freshmen in scoring (16.2 ppg), actually wanted to try and return to the game in Ames.

"He has a great desire to play," Bzdelik said. "But we have to err on the side of caution."

Officially, Burks is listed as day-to-day. That's about as good as anyone could have hoped after the 6-6 guard went down in agony on the court at Hilton Coliseum.

"It didn't look good when he got hit," Bzdelik said. "We're very fortunate he's fine."

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Thorburn: Texas Tech's Knight favors NCAA Tournament expansion

Camera staff
Boulder Daily Camera

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Let the madness begin.

On the first day of February eight Big 12 teams were ranked among the top 40 in the Rating Percentage Index, according to the NCAA.

Usually, a top-40 RPI is a good sign that a program has played a tough-enough schedule and is winning enough games to be invited to the NCAA Tournament.

But history suggests that the conference will only get five, or perhaps six, teams into the Big Dance.

Which begs the question: Should the NCAA Tournament field be expanded?

"This week I'm all for it," Texas Tech coach Pat Knight said. "I haven't thought much about it, but from a money standpoint and everything it would be good. It's not like people aren't going to watch the early-round games just because they expanded it. ...

"A conference like ours, you could take seven or eight teams and that eighth team would have a chance to do real well."

The Red Raiders are 38th nationally in RPI, but at 14-7 overall and 2-5 in conference, Knight's team will have to finish strong or likely settle for an appearance in the NIT.

Kansas (1), Kansas State (8) and Texas (19) are in the RPI top 20 and are playing for the highest seeds they can get in the NCAA Tournament. Baylor (26), Oklahoma State (28), Texas A&M (31) and Missouri (32) are likely fighting amongst themselves for two or three spots in the field of 65.

"No," Knight said when asked if he thought the Big 12 could get eight teams in. "I really wish there was. ... I'm all for it, but I think it would be really tough if you look at the history."

Oklahoma (83), Iowa State (114), Nebraska (129) and Colorado (142) will have to start the March madness with a stunning run through the Big 12 Tournament in order to advance to the NCAA Tournament.

Some proponents of expansion would like to see the field grow to 96 teams, which would give hope to the less traditional programs at the bottom of the power conferences and create more Cinderella stories from the mid-major ranks.

"I think there is reason to talk about expansion. There's never been this many teams as there are now, and parity has never been better at this level," Kansas coach Bill Self said. "Television will dictate so much of it. I think it's worth discussing, but I'm not sure I've seen anyone's formula that's the best formula. Football can't figure out and they have much fewer teams. ...

"I do believe it will be expanded in the next decade."

The Big 12 easily has the most teams in the RPI top 40. The ACC and Big East each have five teams while the Atlantic 10, Big Ten and SEC each have four.

The Mountain West has three teams in the top 40, the Missouri Valley has two, and the Pac-10 only has one (California).

Jayhawk invasion

The No. 1 Jayhawks -- KU reclaimed the top spot in Monday's Associated Press poll -- and their fans will try to make

themselves comfortable at the Coors Events Center again on Wednesday. KU has won 13 consecutive games against CU and six in a row in Boulder.

The Buffs, however, are 10-1 at home this season and would love nothing more than to silence the blue half of the crowd.

"Every time we take the floor it's an opportunity, regardless of who we play," Jeff Bzdelik said. "I think it has always been about us and how we play. But certainly with Kansas being ranked where they are, it's a special opportunity I would say."

The Jayhawks (20-1, 6-0) are in the midst of their 21st consecutive 20-win season, the longest active streak in the nation. CU has had four 20-win seasons in the program's history.

Bouncing back

The Buffs are coming off a 64-63 loss at Iowa State that dropped them to 2-5 in conference play. The key to surviving in the Big 12 is having the ability to bounce back from deflating defeats.

Which is exactly what Nebraska did after its humbling 72-60 loss at the Coors Events Center last week. Doc Sadler rallied the troops with a stirring speech prior to the Huskers' 63-46 win over Oklahoma on Saturday.

"I don't know that the speech is going to go down as one of the great speeches of all time," Sadler said. "I just said, 'Guys, no one's going to feel sorry for us.'"

"Teams put a circle around Kansas and Texas, and I said teams were putting a circle around us because they expect to get a win."

Baylor rebounded from difficult losses to Kansas and Kansas State to stun Texas in Austin on Saturday, 80-77 in overtime. The No. 6 Longhorns were the highest-ranked team the Bears had ever beaten on the road.

"Anytime you can make history that's good," Baylor coach Scott Drew said. "In conference you definitely don't want to lose too many close games in a row because they can add up quick."

Bzdelik knows all about that feeling -- 26 of his losses at CU have been single-digit defeats.

Texas-sized March?

Entering Monday's game at Oklahoma State, Rick Barnes wasn't concerned at all that Texas had dropped three of four games since ascending to No. 1 in the polls two weeks earlier.

In fact, the head Longhorn was looking forward to seeing how his talented team responds to the challenge.

"When things are going really well, problems get masked a little bit," Barnes said. "I don't think there's a problem every now and then in getting stung. Adversity is good."

Even though Texas was leading the Big 12 in scoring at 85.3 points per game, turnovers and poor shot selection have led to the recent losses.

"Our defense has been helping our offense. The problem has been our offense is killing our defense," Barnes said.

If the Longhorns can clean things up, don't be surprised if their minor midseason slump is a distant memory in March. This is still a roster that screams Final Four.

"What excites me is I know how good a team we can be," Barnes said. "And it might take us until the end of the year to get there, but we're going to get there."

The James gang

Oklahoma State's James Anderson (22.5 ppg) was leading the Big 12 in scoring entering Monday's game against Texas.

The junior guard is projected as a first-round NBA pick should he leave Stillwater early.

With defenses focusing on Stillwater's star attraction, coach Travis Ford is looking for more consistency from the rest of his team down the stretch.

"Everybody on our team understands James Anderson is one of the best players in the country and they all have a role to play," Ford said. "And when they don't fill their roles we become a very average team. We have had times where two or three guys haven't shown up."

Tough love in Lubbock

Texas Tech doesn't play until Saturday. What will Knight's approach be in practice after losing 95-83 at Texas and 85-70 at Texas A&M last week?

"We're going to hammer 'em," Knight said. "We've gotten back to not guarding anybody. I was really disappointed from a defensive standpoint. We are just giving way too many points up on the road."

The Red Raiders' final road game of the season will be March 6 at CU.

Notable

Iowa State center Justin Hamilton recorded his first career double-double (10 points, 12 rebounds) in the win over CU. In his previous three games he had a total of 11 rebounds. ... Missouri forced Oklahoma State into 24 turnovers during a win in Columbia on Saturday. The Tigers have forced every opponent they've played into double-digit miscues. ... Cole Aldrich (Kansas) and Tommy Mason-Griffin (Oklahoma) have been chosen as the Big 12 player and rookie of the week, respectively, in voting by a panel of media covering the conference.

Quotable

"Our feelings were hurt. We laid it on the line. When you lay it on the line, there should be pain when you don't find success." Kansas State coach Frank Martin on his team's overtime loss to Kansas on Saturday in Manhattan.

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CU Buffs freshman Burks plans to play vs. No. 1 Kansas

By Natalie Meisler
The Denver Post

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BOULDER — Less than 48 hours after crashing to the floor at Iowa State and fearing his freshman season with Colorado was finished, 6-foot-6 guard Alec Burks insisted Monday he would play against top-ranked Kansas this week.

CU coach Jeff Bzdelik said the Buffs' medical staff, as always, will dictate the decision. Burks participated in limited practice Monday.

"When I went down, I thought it was over," Burks said. "I thought I was going to be out. I'm glad, I'm happy, I'm relieved."

Burks' MRI showed a sprained knee, but no ligament tear. Bzdelik said Burks' availability for Wednesday's home game against Kansas would be a game-time decision.

"I had never been hurt in my life," said Burks, who averages 16.3 points.

Burks heard a popping sound and was told the popping could have been bones colliding, but he had no swelling in the knee.

The Jayhawks are back to being ranked No. 1 after Texas and Kentucky lost last week. "I just hope that curse stays alive," Burks said.

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Bufs' Burks plans to play

Injured guard feels OK to face Kansas

By Patrick Ridgell

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BOULDER — Alec Burks is convinced. Others? Not so much.

Colorado's rising star guard said Monday — two days after suffering what CU is calling a left knee sprain at Iowa State — that he “definitely” thinks he'll play Wednesday when the men's basketball program hosts No. 1 Kansas (7 p.m., ESPN2). CU coach Jeff Bzdelik said the Burks will be a “game-day” decision, however, and that the decision is not up to the coach or the player.

“You err on the side of caution and do what's right for the young man, regardless of who it is,” Bzdelik said. “A player's health will always come first, regardless of who the player is, regardless of the situation.

“We'll just take it day-by-day. The medical staff dictates to me what I do. It's out of my hands.”

Said Burks: “I feel good. I feel like I can play right now, practice, everything. But they're taking precautions. I can't help ... but just take it day by day.”

Burks suffered the injury in the opening moments of Saturday's loss and did not return to the game. An official told Bzdelik he heard a pop when Burks went down.

Sunday's MRI revealed no tear. Burks said the pop occurred when two of his bones “collided together.”

“I have a slight bone bruise,” Burks said. “It scared me. I've never heard anything like that. I'm fine now.”

Burks said there was no swelling in the knee, which he said surprised doctors. He said he would not do anything at practice Monday besides shoot and possibly ride a stationary bicycle.

He said he was relieved to have escaped without something worse.

“When I went down, I thought it was over. ... I've heard that pop, and I never (knew) what that meant,” he said. “I thought I was going to be out.

“I'm happy I'm not out, and I'm walking, and I'm going to play Wednesday.”

Teammates were relieved, too.

“It's a big sense of relief,” senior Dwight Thorne said. “He bring a lot to the table. He scores the ball, he's active, he's an exciting player to watch.”



Colorado's Alec Burks, center, is fouled by Nebraska's Sek Henry (5) under the hoop during their game Wednesday at Coors Events Center in Boulder. Burks was injured Saturday at Iowa State but expects to play this Wednesday as the Buffs host Kansas. **Joshua Buck/Times-Call**

Bzdelik said there's nothing wrong with Burks' knee, but that it needs to "calm down and strengthen." How it reacts will determine whether he practices today and plays Wednesday, Bzdelik said.

CU reported that 500 tickets remained unsold for Wednesday's game, and that many Jayhawks fans are expected, as usual when Kansas visits Boulder.

Burks is from Grandview, Mo., which isn't far from Lawrence, Kan. — the home of the Jayhawks. He said Kansas did not recruit him "at all," and that he does not know any members of Kansas' team.

"To me, it's a big game — it's the No. 1 team in the nation," Burks said. "You always want to perform against the No. 1 team in the nation. I heard their crowd comes up here and supports them real good. It's going to be a great environment. I can't wait to play them."

Read Patrick Ridgell's CU sports blog at www.timescall.com/blogs/ridgell. He can be reached at pridgell@times-call.com.

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Jayhawks return to top perch

By Patrick Ridgell
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Kansas returned to the top of both major polls Monday. The question is: What did the Jayhawks learn last time they were there?

Kansas fell from the No. 1 spot it held for the season's first eight weeks when it went to Tennessee on Jan. 10 and played poorly against a team that had only six scholarship players available. It lost 76-68.

So here we go once again with the Jayhawks, the team dubbed No. 1 in preseason polls and the one many observers believe is the one to beat in March. Kansas will visit Colorado on Wednesday (7 p.m., ESPN2).

Of course, the two No. 1s that succeeded Kansas didn't fare much better. Texas lost the same day it received its first top ranking. And Kentucky, last week's top dog, lost Tuesday at South Carolina.

But since that painful loss at Rocky Top, the Jayhawks have rolled, winning by more than 14 points per game and opening a game-and-a-half lead in the Big 12. They're 6-0 in a league coaches regularly gush over.

Something might have clicked for Kansas after Tennessee.

"It was a poor performance for us, but it did get our guys' attention," Kansas coach Bill Self said Monday. "We've played better since then.

"We learned from a loss and made it not such a bad loss, and have gotten better from it."

Self named three individuals whose play has noticeably improved Jan. 10: Brady Morningstar has been "terrific;" Marcus Morris has been "terrific;" and Sherron Collins continues to be Sherron Collins.

The senior point guard from Chicago added to his legend in Saturday's overtime win at Kansas State when he fought through back spasms for a key driving layup in the game's decisive moment. Self said Collins needs six more wins to leave as the program's winningest player.

"That's all you ever judge a point guard on," Self said.

"It only matters if you win."

That's probably what Self hears daily around Lawrence. Running the table in the Big 12 means Kansas must win Feb. 8 at Texas and March 6 at Missouri — tough tasks, indeed. Another loss would probably cost Kansas the top spot again. If that were to happen, Self sounds prepared.

"I don't think anybody's going to run the table in this day and time, and I think that sometimes people — coaches included, media, fans, whatever — can make a bigger deal out of one loss," Self said.

AROUND THE BIG 12:

LONGHORNS LABORING: Texas entered Monday's game at Oklahoma State as losers of three of its four since climbing to the No. 1 spot in both polls two weeks ago. What's the problem?

"Our offense is killing our defense," coach Rick Barnes said Monday morning.

In Saturday's 80-77 home overtime loss to Baylor, the Longhorns committed 18 turnovers and had only 13 assists. They shot 38.6 percent from the field and 61.3 percent on free throws.

In Monday's 72-60 win, however, the Longhorns committed just five turnovers and shot 50.8 percent from the floor.

HUSKERS EYE NEW HOME: Nebraska wants to build a new arena. According to reports, the school and the Lincoln City Council are planning a new 16,000-seat arena that'll be the basketball programs' home for 30 years. Its estimated cost is \$340 million, and the city would retain ownership. Nebraska would pay \$750,000 rent each year, plus a \$1 surcharge on tickets.

A BIGGER DANCE? Some Big 12 coaches were asked Monday about the prospect of the NCAA Tournament expanding from its current 65 teams to as many as 96. Don't be surprised to see it.

"I'm not sure I've ever seen any formula that's the best formula," Self said. "Just adding a few, there's a pro and a con to everything. I do believe it will happen in the next decade ... somebody will figure it out."

TIP-INS: As of Monday, eight Big 12 programs held top 40 RPIs. The Big 12 has never had more than six teams land NCAA berths, though, and Texas Tech coach Pat Knight didn't sound optimistic that it'll happen this year: "That's really tough if you look at the history," he said. ... The Jayhawks (20-1) have recorded their 21st 20-win season in a row, the nation's longest streak.

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.