

Thorburn: Burks could lead CU to 2011 dance

By Ryan Thorburn Camera Sports Writer
Boulder Daily Camera

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In many ways, Chauncey Billups remains the face of Colorado basketball.

Despite enduring its share of hard times, including three consecutive 20-loss seasons, the program still receives some positive national exposure thanks to its most famous ex-player.

When Mr. Big Shot was knocking down 3-pointer after 3-pointer to lead the Denver Nuggets to an impressive victory over the Lakers in Los Angeles last week, ESPN commentator Mark Jackson pointed out that Billups proudly played at CU.

Billups is an NBA All-Star once again and has the Nuggets in position to make another run at the Lakers. Thanks to the leadership and drive of George Karl's point guard, this might be the franchise's best opportunity to make its first appearance in the NBA Finals.

Fourteen years after Billups arrived on the CU campus from Park Hill, the Buffs have found another super freshman who makes the game look easy.

Alec Burks wasn't highly recruited like Billups, but the 6-6 guard has brought some much-needed skill and attention to Jeff Bzdelik's program.

The coaching staff knew it had stolen a special player from Grandview, Mo., as soon as Burks stepped foot in Boulder.

"When we started individual workouts at the beginning of the school year, he made plays look easy," CU associate head coach Steve McClain said during Monday's Big 12 coaches teleconference. "He immediately grasped the system and knew how he could get his shots and help the team. Sometimes young guys can't do that."

After scoring a career-high 27 points against Missouri on Saturday, Burks is averaging 16.8 points per game this season, tops among Big 12 freshmen. Billups averaged 17.9 points as a true freshman during the 1995-96 season.

Rounding out the top five freshmen scorers in CU history are Richard Roby (15.8 ppg, 2004-05), Emmett Lewis (15.0 ppg, 1975-76) and Donnie Boyce (14.9 ppg, 1991-92).

"He is truly a wonderful young man. He's very quiet, he's very humble, he's very mature, he's very polite, he's very respectful," Bzdelik said recently. "He has the total package both on and off the court."

Burks -- despite missing 38 minutes of the Iowa State game and sitting out against No. 1 Kansas with a sprained left knee -- has scored 370 points this season.

To put that into perspective, David Harrison, the last Buff to be taken in the first round of the NBA draft, scored a total of 375 points as a freshman during the 2001-02 season.

Roby scored the most points (480) of any CU freshman. Burks will only have to average 13.8 in the final eight games to ascend to the top of the list (Billups is currently second, 465 points).

Even more amazing is the fact that Burks currently leads the Big 12 in field goal percentage (.526). Roby shot 44.5 percent from the floor as a freshman, and Billups shot 41.3 percent.

"He gets his points, but you never feel like it's because he takes shots he shouldn't," McClain said.

Burks is currently eighth in the conference in scoring. Cory Higgins (18.0 ppg) is quietly fifth in that department.

"As you build a program, guys like Cory Higgins understand that as we get other good players it's going to do nothing but help you," McClain said. "Our guys have done a good job of understanding that as we evolve and recruit it's going to change the dynamic of our team, but it's going to change it in a good way."

Bzdelik believes next season the Buffs, led by Burks and Higgins, will have a chance to return to the NCAA Tournament. The program hasn't won a game on that stage since Billups was the active face of CU basketball.

Dance cards

Coaches are already starting to lobby for six or perhaps seven Big 12 teams getting into the NCAA Tournament field this March. And it's a pretty easy sell considering the conference is No. 1 in RPI with seven teams in the top 40 and eight teams in the top 50.

"We're 28-12 against the other major conferences and there's only one other conference, the ACC, that's over .500," Baylor coach Scott Drew said after doing his homework. "It just shows how talented and how tough the league is. You could have seven or eight teams hovering around the .500 mark (in conference play), and it's not because they're bad teams, it's because of how strong the home-court advantage is."

The Bears (17-5) have an impressive non-conference resume with wins over Xavier, Arizona State and Arkansas. Drew's team also beat South Carolina 85-74 on the same court the Gamecocks upset then No. 1 Kentucky on.

Yet Baylor sits just 4-4 in the Big 12, tied for sixth with Oklahoma. Will 8-8 in this conference be good enough to get in?

"I definitely think 8-8 should get you in," Texas Tech coach Pat Knight said. "I wouldn't be surprised if guys keep beating each other up the way we are that a 7-9 team is on the bubble."

Since the NCAA Tournament expanded to 64 teams in 1985, only 33 teams have made the field with losing conference records.

Who's hot?

Texas A&M. The Aggies snapped Missouri's 32-game home winning streak last week and then beat No. 24 Baylor on Saturday.

Mark Turgeon's team is an amazing 8-3 since losing standout Derrick Roland to a season-ending knee injury and has won five of its last six games since an overtime loss at then No. 2 Texas.

"I just told the kids after we lost to Texas that we were a pretty good team and I thought we could go on a roll," Turgeon said. "You look at the five out of six and four of them could have gone the other way. We've done the little things to win close games and that has been the difference."

Who's not?

Nebraska. The Huskers continue to fight hard but are just 1-7 in the Big 12 after finishing their non-conference schedule 12-3.

"We're just playing better teams when you get right down to it. We seem to be defending like we always do," Nebraska coach Doc Sadler said. "Unfortunately, we're playing as well as we probably can right now and it's just not good enough. We have to find a way to win some games."

No catching KU

Before Texas hosted No. 1 Kansas on Monday night, Rick Barnes said even if the Longhorns pulled off the upset, the chances of chasing down the Jayhawks and getting a piece of the Big 12 regular season title were slim and none.

"It's pretty much impossible," Barnes said. "I don't see them dropping three games, so it's going to be very hard. They would have to give it back. ... It will be extremely tough for anybody to catch them."

KU is seeking its sixth consecutive Big 12 title and the 53rd conference championship in program history.

Road rage

Oklahoma is 11-0 at home this season, 1-4 on neutral courts and 1-5 in true road games (including 0-4 in conference play).

That's good news for Colorado, which hosts the Sooners on Feb. 17. The Buffs are 10-3 at the Coors Events Center but have lost 33 consecutive Big 12 road games.

"Most teams feel more comfortable at home," OU coach Jeff Capel said. "You feed off the energy of our crowd, and we've had very good crowds this year, especially the students."

Kansas is 5-0 in conference road games and Kansas State is 4-1. The other Big 12 teams are a combined 8-33.

"In this conference there is no such thing as an easy road game," K-State coach Frank Martin said. "Our guys somehow to this point in the season have figured it out a couple times and that has a lot to do with experience."

Notable

Baylor leads the Big 12 in rebounding margin (+7.9) and blocked shots per game (7.32). ... Kansas State's Denis Clemente was the Big 12 player of the week and Oklahoma's Tommy Mason-Griffin was the conference's rookie of the week.

Quotable

"It's going to save a lot of coaches' jobs, I know that. I think it could be something that's good," Missouri coach Mike Anderson on the possible future expansion of the NCAA Tournament field.

Big 12 rankings

Ranking team previous ranking/overall record/conference record

- 1. Kansas (1/23-1/ 9-0)** -- Jayhawks are making it look easy in the No. 1 RPI conference. **Up next:** Saturday vs. Iowa State.
- 2. Kansas State (2/19-4/6-3)** -- Denis Clemente had 53 points last week as 'Cats went 2-0. **Up next:** Saturday vs. Colorado.
- 3. Texas A&M (7/17-6/6-3)** -- Mark Turgeon's teams play their best basketball in February and March. **Up next:** Saturday at Texas Tech.
- 4. Texas (4/19-5/5-4)** -- Rick Barnes' team may have played its best basketball in December and early January. **Up next:** Saturday vs. Nebraska.
- 5. Missouri (5/17-6/5-3)** -- Tigers were all-business during Saturday's blowout of the Buffs. **Up next:** Wednesday vs. Iowa State.
- 6. Baylor (3/17-5/4-4)** -- Bears, after losing in Boulder, probably need to win in Lincoln to avoid bubble trouble. **Up next:** Wednesday at Nebraska.
- 7. Oklahoma State (6/16-7/4-5)** -- Pokes will try to get back on track in the Bedlam series. **Up next:** Saturday vs. Oklahoma.
- 8. Oklahoma (9/13-9/4-4)** -- Jeff Capel's team could very well go 8-0 at home and 0-8 on the road in conference play. **Up next:** Tonight vs. Texas Tech.

9. Texas Tech (8/15-7/3-5) -- John Roberson's Red Raider assist record might never be broken. **Up next:** Tonight at Oklahoma.

10. Iowa State (10/13-10/2-6) -- Greg McDermott has to regret leaving Northern Iowa for Ames at this point. **Up next:** Wednesday at Missouri.

11. Colorado (11/11-12/2-7) -- Buffs licking their wounds after another tough week in the Big 12. **Up next:** Saturday at Kansas State.

12. Nebraska (12/13-10/1-7) -- At least spring football isn't far away. **Up next:** Wednesday vs. Baylor.

-- Ryan Thorburn

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college basketball

Despite skid, Colorado hoops up for tough stretch

By Tom Kensler
The Denver Post

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Colorado's defense swarms Missouri's Steve Moore on Saturday before the Tigers' victory in Boulder. (The Daily Camera | Cliff Grassmick)

Although the Colorado men's basketball team has lost six of seven games since making headlines with a Jan. 12 victory over ranked Baylor, the morale and focus of the Buffaloes players remains good, CU assistant coach State McClain said Monday on the Big 12 coaches teleconference.

"I've been around teams where you lose a game and you're not sure (how players will react)," McClain said. "This group of guys, they really care. They hurt. They want to do better. I like

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their attitude. They're leaving it all out there."

McClain, head coach for nine seasons at Wyoming (1998-2007), subbed on the teleconference for CU coach Jeff Bzdelik, who is in Chicago to attend the funeral of his mother.

A disappointing 84-66 home loss

CU Basketball

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to Missouri on Saturday left Colorado (11-12, 2-7 Big 12) with an overall losing record for the first time this season. McClain said the message to the team after that game was that here is a lot of basketball left to be played.

"I like what (our players) are talking about and how they're reacting after games, and how they come back to practice," McClain said. "We just

have to keep that focus."

Colorado has a mid-week bye before playing Saturday at Kansas State. The Wildcats figure to rise in the national rankings when the new polls are released later on Monday.

The trip to Manhattan, Kan., continues an especially difficult stretch for the Buffs that began with last week's games against Kansas and Missouri. Upcoming are dates with Oklahoma (Feb. 17 in Boulder), Kansas (Feb. 20 in Lawrence) and Missouri (Feb. 24 at Columbia).

The mid-week bye came at a good time, McClain said.

"It will give a little time for guys to catch their breath," McClain said. "We just want to get better every day. We don't have to prepare for a game for a couple of days, so we can get back and focus on things that we've got to do better.

"It's a time for guys to catch their breath and realize that there's a lot of basketball left and we can do some things. But we have to do them (first) in practice."

That's Alec McClain said the CU coaching staff was not surprised that Buffs 6-foot-6 freshman guard Alec Burks showed no rust on Saturday.

Burks had only played less than three minutes in 10 days when he suited up against Missouri, having sprained his left knee early against Iowa S

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tate and then being held out of the overtime loss to Kansas. Wearing a light wrap on the knee, he scored a career-best 27 points against Missouri, his home-state school. Burks is a native of Kansas City, Mo.

"Alec had been really good in practice when he did practice," McClain said. "So it didn't surprise me that he came right back out and was able to get going again."

"Good players can take a couple of days off and it doesn't seem to affect them."

McClain said Burks' lack of conditioning the previous 10 days "did hit him a couple of times" against Missouri. The coaches decided to leave Burks on the court for 32 minutes of playing time on Saturday "so he could play through it," McClain said following the game.

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All Things Colorado Sports — Blogs — The Denver Post

FEBRUARY 8, 2010, 10:47 AM

Once again, CU to face Big 12 award winner

By **TOM KENSLE** |  No Comments

The Colorado men's basketball team hasn't always faced a reigning Big 12 Conference player of the week. It just seems that way.

For the fourth time this season, CU will face a current Big 12 top dog (either player of the week or rookie of the week) when the Buffaloes play Saturday at Kansas State.

Wildcats senior guard Denis Clemente was named conference player of the week on Monday. Clemente averaged 26.5 points and 4.0 assists last week in road victories over Nebraska and Iowa State.

“(Clemente) just puts so much pressure defensively,” CU associate coach Steve McClain said Monday on the Big 12 coaches teleconference. “When the ball is in his hands, his motor is always running. And he can get from end to end as quick as anybody in our league.”

McClain subbed on the teleconference for Colorado head coach Jeff Bzdelik, who is in Chicago for the funeral of his mother.

Colorado has a mid-week open date.

Oklahoma freshman guard Tommy Mason-Griffin was named Big 12 rookie of the week.

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Big 12 eyes 7 NCAA bids

By Patrick Ridgell
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Underlined on the most recent version of Big 12 men's basketball notes is this little nugget: The league owns the nation's highest RPI.

It has moved ahead of the Big East and remained ahead of the Atlantic Coast, two conferences whose spots atop the rankings are a given. Seven Big 12 teams own RPIs in the top 40, and eight are in the top 50. No other league can boast such figures. Good stuff, indeed.

As mid-February approaches and the selection committee starts eyeing its tournament field, two Big 12 spots are secure — Kansas (No. 1 RPI) and Kansas State (No. 7).

Then there's three whose spots are pretty secure, assuming they don't fall off some cliff between now and March 14. That includes Texas A&M (No. 20), Texas (No. 21) and Baylor (No. 28).

Next comes programs like Texas Tech (No. 32), Oklahoma State (No. 39) and Missouri (No. 47), all squarely on the bubble as the bubble forms.

In its 13 seasons, the Big 12 has sent six to the NCAA Tournament seven times, including each of the past two years. Never has it sent more than six. Only one Big 12 team has made the tournament with an 8-8 league mark — Texas A&M in 2008.

That 8-8 record might be a magic number this year, but at least one coach says 7-9 might do the trick.

"The ACC has gotten teams in in the past with losing conference records," Texas Tech's Pat Knight said. "I think (the Big 12) is so tough this year, a team at 7-9, under certain circumstances, might get in.

"I would not be surprised if guys keep beating each other up like we are, that someone at 7-8 could be on the bubble."

Tech could be the one. After starting 9-0, it's 15-7, 3-5 in league play, 0-4 on the road in the conference. It visits Oklahoma tonight, then Nebraska and Colorado in later weeks. Those are winnable games for any team that sees itself in the NCAAs.

Missouri saved its chances Saturday by winning at CU. The Tigers (17-6, 5-3) still have to play Texas and Kansas at home. It has Iowa State twice and a road trip to Kansas State.

Oklahoma State (16-7, 4-5) finds itself in its first three-game losing streak during coach Travis Ford's tenure. Losses in the non-conference to Tulsa and Rhode Island could hurt the Cowboys, but with four home games remaining, plus a road trip to Iowa State, 8-8 in the conference is very possible.

And if that happens ...

"I think we'd have a great shot," Ford said.

AROUND THE BIG 12

CU TAKES A BREAK: The Buffs don't play again until Saturday at Kansas State, giving CU more time to get over Saturday's disappointing 84-66 loss to Missouri.

"I've been around teams where you lose a game and you're not sure; this group of guys, they care, they hurt," associate head coach Steve McClain said Monday. "I think they're leaving it all out there."

CU has lost six of seven and will try to snap its 33-game Big 12 road losing streak Saturday in Manhattan. Trips to Kansas, Missouri and Nebraska remain for the Buffs.

MORE EXPANSION TALK: Coaches continue to field questions about the NCAA Tournament expanding beyond its current field of 65. Few seem to be against the idea.

"I think the more teams that get into the tournament, it's going to save a lot of coaches' jobs," Missouri's Mike Anderson said.

Said Kansas State's Frank Martin: "I think expanding it by three or four teams or 10 teams, that doesn't make any sense to me. If they're going to expand it, it should go to 128 teams."

The NCAA's 11-year, \$6 billion deal with CBS ends in 2013. The NCAA can opt out after this season.

According to multiple reports, ESPN and Fox might bid for the tournament's rights, assuming the NCAA opts out of its deal. CBS and Turner Sports are considering a joint bid.

TOUGH SCHEDULE: Kansas is in a stretch of three consecutive weeks in which it plays on Saturday, then Monday. The Jayhawks played at Texas on Monday.

Next Monday, they go to Texas A&M, and the Monday after that they host Oklahoma.

"That's a tough draw, but at the end of the day, hopefully it'll make us a little bit tougher," Kansas coach Bill Self said.

TIP-INS: Kansas freshman Xavier Henry averaged 15.7 points per game in non-conference. Entering Monday, in conference he's scoring 7.9 per. "A lot of freshmen out there are wishing they were averaging what he is, and for a pretty good team," Self said. ... The Big 12 is 28-12 against teams from the other BCS leagues. Only the ACC (24-21) also has a winning record against the other BCS leagues. ... Kansas State's Denis Clemente has shot 11-for-17 on 3s over his past two games, scoring 53 points in them to win the league's player of the week award. ... Kansas won at CU last week despite hitting only 18-of-38 free throws. Texas A&M won at Missouri when it went 19-for-36 from the line.

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.