

CU Buffs men face tall order

Hurricane, with NBA prospect at center, dominates on boards

By Ryan Thorburn Camera Sports Writer
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TULSA, Okla. -- The Buffs are treating today's road game as the unofficial start of the Big 12 season.

Jeff Bzdelik understands Colorado will have to play its best game of the season to beat Tulsa at the Donald W. Reynolds Center (1:05 p.m., no television).

The Golden Hurricane (9-3) is 9-0 on its home court while the Buffs (8-4) are packing a 20-game road losing streak against Division I opponents.

CU will travel to Stillwater on Jan. 20 to take on Oklahoma State. The Cowboys are 11-1 this season with an 86-65 loss here against Tulsa.

"It's like we're starting Big 12 play now. Tulsa beat Oklahoma State by 20," said Bzdelik, who brought the Buffs to Tulsa on Thursday so they could focus on this game instead of ringing in the new year with friends in Boulder. "They're one of the best rebounding teams in the nation and one of the best 3-point shooting teams in the nation."

Tulsa averages 42.1 rebounds per game and is plus-10.4 in rebounding margin. CU averages 30.4 rebounds per game and is minus-2.5 in rebounding margin. The under-sized Buffs might not have an answer for 7-foot center Jerome Jordan (14.1 ppg., 8.8 rpg.), who Bzdelik says has the potential to be taken in the first round of the 2010 NBA draft.

Typically, when teams double Jordan in the post, the senior finds Ben Ozoh (16.7 ppg.), Justin Hurtt (14.3 ppg.) or other perimeter players for open 3-point looks.

"If we don't rebound the way we should we can make shots, we can make free throws, we can get you in foul trouble," CU senior guard Dwight Thorne noted. "But we have to improve on rebounding because that continues to be our Achilles' heel."

The Buffs are coming off a 70-59 victory over Yale on Tuesday, but the Big 12 representative was out-rebounded 41-27 by the visitors from the Ivy League.

After the game, Bzdelik pointed out that CU has a lot of strengths -- a balanced offense that is averaging 78.8 points, good shooters (the team is 49.4 percent from the field and 78.2 percent from the line) and better depth -- that help overcome the program's glaring weakness on the glass.

"At times I think we can cover up (our rebounding) with the way we shoot the ball and the way we score and force turnovers," Austin Dufault said. "If we can get our rebounding to a higher level that will make us a better overall team."

The Buffs are 7-0 at the Coors Events Center and one victory away from last season's overall win total of nine. Bzdelik's team has always competed on the road, but if CU wants to get out of the conference cellar this season the players are going to have to find a way to actually fly home victorious a few times.

"It just has to be our mindset when we walk into the building," Dufault said. "We can't worry about anything else besides ourselves and the team we're playing. It's a game out on the court and nothing else matters. We have to go there and take care of business this time."

CU was out-played by Colorado State during a 77-62 loss at Moby Arena in the previous road game on Dec. 10. Since that humbling defeat, Bzdelik has made it clear that the starting spots and all minutes will be determined on a practice-by-practice basis.

"We've seen evidence over the past two years with all of the close games that we haven't won that one or two key plays in the game can make a big difference in a win or a loss," Bzdelik said. "When someone comes off the bench, even for four or five minutes, that's a key stretch. Every possession matters. They all need to play together and they all have jobs to do and roles to fill."

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Colorado men mixing things up on court

By Patrick Ridgell
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BOULDER — Mixing and matching lineups might not be the way for Colorado men's basketball to win on the road, win in the Big 12, reach the postseason and revive interest in a program that's been dormant for too long.

Then again, the Buffs might be on to something.

In recent practices, CU coach Jeff Bzdelik has changed lineups in search of stronger combinations and greater familiarity, qualities he hopes can make his team more competitive as conference play nears. CU (8-4) visits Tulsa (9-3) today (1 p.m., no TV).

Thus far, it has produced only one change to the starting lineup: Nate Tomlinson has replaced Dwight Thorne the past two games. But the players seem all for it.

"I think it's making more competitive practices, which I think is always good," Thorne said. "We have a lot of guys that can play this year, a lot of guys that can contribute. So I think in practice, if everybody is playing against each other and competing, it makes for better practices."

Said Tomlinson: "I don't know why the coaches hadn't done that before. It makes sense. We all play with each other, so we all need to know how to play with each other in practice as well as in games. I think it's helped us. Players are playing together more in games. You see we had like 30 assists or something the other night. So it's really showing."

Actually, CU had 27 assists Dec. 22 against Cal State Northridge, a season high in the Buffs' first game since their embarrassing loss Dec. 10 at Colorado State. Tomlinson's point still is relevant.

Mixing lineups in practice since that loss has enabled players like Alec Burks and Cory Higgins to go against one another rather than work exclusively on the same five. Ditto for forward Austin Dufault and guard/forward Marcus Relphorde. Everyone benefits, Bzdelik said, as cohesion builds.

"It makes practice interesting," the coach said. "When Alec is against Cory, for example, boy, they really get after one another, as opposed to them always being together."

"And Austin goes against Marcus. It's maybe why Marcus has all of a sudden really excelled the last couple of weeks. Now all of a sudden, him and Austin are really into each other and bringing out the best in each other."

Relphorde, a junior college transfer, had probably his best game as a Buffalo against Yale on Tuesday. He had a

Colorado men (8-4) at Tulsa (9-3)

When/Where: 1 p.m. today at the Donald W. Reynolds Center in Tulsa, Okla.

TV/Radio: No TV/KKZN 760

The series: CU leads 4-2. Tulsa has won two of the past three, including last year's game in Boulder, 81-68.

Leading scorers: CU — Cory Higgins (19.5 points per game); Tulsa — Ben Uzoh (16.7 points per game)

Notes: This is CU's third game in 23 days, but its second this week. ... CU lists Nate Tomlinson as a starter at guard. Dwight Thorne is expected to come off the bench for the third straight game. ... CU will have to deal with Tulsa's 7-foot center Jerome Jordan, who averages 14.1 points and 8.8 rebounds per game. Reserves Shane Harris-Tunks, 6-11, and Casey Crawford, 6-9, could draw extra minutes for the Buffs. ... Of CU's 20 straight road losses to Division I opponents, eight came by single digits. ... Tulsa is 9-0 at home. Among its wins is a 86-65 defeat of Oklahoma State on Dec. 2. Tulsa enters having not played since a defeat to Nevada, 99-68, on Dec. 23 in the Las Vegas Classic. Tulsa lost 74-70 to Nebraska on Dec. 22.

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season-best 15 points, including 10 of CU's first 13 to start the second half as the Buffs extended their lead from one to 10 points. He also matched his season best with six rebounds.

CU enters today trying to snap a 20-game road losing streak to Division I opponents. On Tuesday, in its final non-conference game, CU hosts 3-9 Miami (Ohio), which Bzdelik insists is better than its record. Miami lost by two at No. 3 Kentucky. It also has played No. 19 New Mexico, Dayton, Temple, Cincinnati and Xavier.

"It's like we're starting Big 12 (play) right now," Bzdelik said.

A little success before they open Big 12 play at No. 2 Texas next Saturday — the Buffs have lost a Big 12-record 29 straight road conference games — would bode well.

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