

CU Buff women look to build momentum

Bufs` first four Big 12 opponents not ranked

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It took the Colorado women`s basketball team just four games in Big 12 play last season to dig itself a hole that it couldn`t climb out.

The Buffs opened league play against four ranked teams and lost those games by an average of 23 points.

The result, the Buffs admit, was a devastating blow to their morale as they stumbled to a 3-13 Big 12 finish.

"We were coming off a tough preseason, and then to lose four straight and start 0-4 was pretty tough," senior guard Bianca Smith said this week.

The Big 12 is as loaded as ever this season, with eight teams ranked in at least one of the two major polls, including seven in the Associated Press top 25. CU`s opening slate in league play, though, is a little more friendly this time around.

Three of the Buffs` first four opponents are unranked, and the other game is a winnable one against Iowa State at home.

CU (10-3) begins league play today against Missouri (10-3) in a noon game at the Coors Events Center. The Tigers were picked by Big 12 coaches to finish last.

"You don`t take anybody for granted," CU coach Kathy McConnell-Miller said. "It wouldn`t matter if it was Missouri, Baylor, Kansas State. Whoever`s coming in here, we`re going to be prepared."

Still, the Buffs realize they have a great chance to gain some early momentum before heading into a meat-grinder stretch that features eight ranked teams in a row from Jan. 30 to Feb. 20.

Colorado travels to face Texas Tech on Tuesday, then hosts Iowa State and plays on the road against a struggling Kansas State squad.

"It`s a very winnable schedule," Smith said. "I think this schedule puts us in great position to make the NCAA tournament."

The coaches picked CU to finish 11th in the Big 12, and moving up won`t be easy with so many solid teams.

But the Buffs enter conference play riding high. They`re just one victory short of last season`s total, and they feel they`ve improved in multiple areas that will make them legit contenders this season.

Balance and depth, especially in the backcourt, are both better than they were a year ago thanks largely to the addition of true freshman Chucky Jeffery and the experience of players like Smith and sophomore Alyssa Fressle. Freshman Meagan Malcolm-Peck has also added another rebounding presence and significant scoring at times to help take pressure off of Smith and junior forward Brittany Spears.

"For the first time in five years we have more experience in the backcourt, and that is desperately needed in this conference," McConnell-Miller said. "That`s a big deal."

The most important shift, though, might have come between the Buffs` ears, Smith said.

Adversity drained the Buffs to the point last season that they skidded to an 0-6 finish. This season`s group, Smith said, has had a different persona on and off the court. Whether it`s basketball practice or playing board games at home, she said the Buffs have taken their competitive fire and mental toughness to another level.

"Any time we`re in practice we`re always getting better just because we`re pushing each other," Smith said.

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