

Big year could pay off big for CU's Burks

Freshman sensation for Buffs considered 2011 NBA lottery pick

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David Stern strolls across the stage to the podium and begins reading the card that was just handed to him:

With the ninth pick in the 2011 NBA Draft, the New York Knicks select guard Alec Burks from Colorado ...

This hoops dream is still a year away from being realized. However, the Big 12's reigning freshman of the year believes it can be a reality next summer if all goes well at the Coors Events Center during the 2010-11 season.

"When you're a kid you want to play basketball for a living, so it has always been a dream of mine. But I didn't think it would be coming that soon, after this year," Burks said during an interview with the Camera on Tuesday. "The way I've played, I've put myself in a situation like that. I'm just grateful."

Burks, who has been projected as a 2011 lottery pick in the mock drafts at nbadraft.net dating back to the middle of last season, has not completely made up his mind that he will leave CU after his sophomore season as the great Chauncey Billups did in 1997.

"I don't know yet. If I have a year like I had last year, who knows?" Burks said. "If they feel like I'm ready and my mom feels like I'm ready, then I might have to go. If I'm not ready, then I'll just have to come back and play another year here."

Tad Boyle and his staff are currently recruiting players they hope will make the Buffs relevant in the Pac-10 down the road.

The talented group Jeff Bzdelik assembled and endured Big 12 purgatory with -- led by Burks, Cory Higgins and Marcus Relphorde -- are ready to win now before their NCAA Tournament window slams shut.

"I feel like with Cory being a senior, Marcus being a senior, and me coming into my sophomore year, it's a chance to do something big here," Burks said. "You can see the time slipping away because we've only got one year left. But I feel like we can do something with it."

As usual, an impressive list of Big 12 players have left the conference early to join the work force.

Those expecting to hear their names called during the first round of Thursday's NBA draft include Baylor's Ekpe Udoh, Kansas' Cole Aldrich, Texas' Avery Bradley, Oklahoma State's James Anderson and Iowa State's Craig Brackins.

Yes, the Jayhawks and Longhorns will reload. But this should finally be the season where there is room for the Buffs near the top of the standings, which is usually enough to be invited to the NCAA Tournament.

"I feel if we keep pushing we can be in the top half," Burks said.

Bzdelik, who left CU for Wake Forest in April after suffering through 58 losses and celebrating just 36 wins during his three-year stay in Boulder, told the Camera on several occasions that if he didn't take the Buffs to the NCAA Tournament in 2010-11 he should be fired.

Boyle's job will be secure in March whether CU is dancing or disappointing. However, after improving from nine wins to 15 wins and 12th place to eighth place, expectations remain high at the Coors Events Center.

The new head coach wisely made sure his first recruiting job was to keep Burks at CU during the transition in April.

"The outlook is: The sky is the limit," Burks said. "(Boyle) is still kind of new, so we're still adjusting. But I think we're getting over that hump. If we all have good offseasons, we'll have a great year."

Burks -- who said he has added 15 pounds of muscle to his 6-foot-6 frame since stepping on campus as an unheralded recruit from Grandview, Mo., a year ago -- set a CU freshman record last season by scoring 512 points (17.1 ppg). He also led the Big 12 in field goal percentage (53.8 percent) and was the Buffs' top rebounder (5.0 rpg).

"It's flattering from where I came from a couple years ago with nobody knowing me to being considered that," Burks said on being projected as a top-10 NBA pick next summer. "It is a very humbling feeling."

CU in Las Vegas

As reported in the Camera last season, the Buffs will compete in the 10th Annual Las Vegas Classic along with Indiana, New Mexico and Northern Iowa on Dec. 22-23 at the Orleans Arena.

Each team will play four games with the first two games at campus sites and the final two rounds played in Las Vegas. It was announced on Tuesday that the field also includes Longwood, South Carolina State, Southern Illinois Edwardsville and The Citadel.

"The Las Vegas Classic is set up well for us with two home games and two neutral games against quality competition," Boyle said. "That's what you look for when scheduling, it fits what we're looking for to a tee."

Former CU associate head coach Steve McClain, who was a finalist to replace Bzdelik, is now an assistant at Indiana. New Mexico, coached by former Indiana star Steve Alford, won the Mountain West last season and advanced to the second round of the NCAA Tournament. And Northern Iowa was among the great March madness stories after upsetting No. 1 Kansas.

The Buffs' schedule will also include home games against Colorado State and Oregon State. The team will play at Harvard and San Francisco -- return trips against teams that visited Boulder -- during non-conference play.

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