

Kritza believes move will raise bar

Bufs coach optimistic joining Pac-10 will help lure recruits of higher caliber

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What's the first thing that pops into your head when you hear the word ... volleyball?

For women who grew up in the 80s, it might be the beach scene from Top Gun. For college volleyball fans, it's more likely Southern California and the Pac-10.

Since the NCAA began sanctioning women's volleyball as a championship sport in 1981, the Pac-10 has captured 12 national titles. The Big 12 and Big Ten are second among BCS conference with four championships each.

Colorado volleyball has a proud history with 16 NCAA berths and three Sweet 16 appearances, but second-year head coach Liz Kritza believes moving from the Big 12 to the Pac-10 will give the program a chance to recruit a higher caliber athlete to the Coors Events Center.

"We're trying to build a program and we want to build it on the grandest scale. This move to the Pac-10 will allow us to do that," Kritza said during a recent interview with the Camera. "Obviously, it's going to be very difficult. We're going to have to climb our way up just as we would have to in the Big 12. But in the Pac-10 you have kind of a different following, a different fan base that has followed volleyball for generations. It's a really neat thing to be a part of."

USC won the first NCAA championship in 1981 and also

captured banners in 2002 and 2003. Stanford has five national titles, UCLA has three, and Washington has one.

"The Pac-10 has long been, as they call it, 'The Conference of Champions.' There has been some longstanding tradition and history with the conference and some amazing tradition for volleyball," Kritza said. "With the addition of Colorado and Utah, I think we have a tremendous opportunity. We have a chance to get into a league where some of the best volleyball has been played since the beginning of women's volleyball in the NCAA."

The timing of the move couldn't be better for CU. About a year from now Kritza and her staff will move their offices into a new volleyball operations center that will be a part of the basketball/volleyball practice facility on the north side of the Coors Events Center.

The fact that major construction on the project is well underway has already helped Kritza on the recruiting trail. The Buffs will welcome 15 new players -- nine high school recruits and six transfers -- to the program this fall.

"We're going into the Pac-10, one of the most storied volleyball conferences in the country, and we have a brand new, amazing facility being built. It really makes us stand out and really catches the eye of a top level player in the country," Kritza said. "Being able to play in the Pac-10 and have the facility we're going to have this next year dramatically increases the visibility of our program and allows us to raise the level. We can make something really great out of this."

Former CU All-American Kelly Campbell, arguably the greatest player in the program's history, is from Corona Del Mar, Calif. Three of Kritza's recent recruits are also exports of the Golden State.

"CU has a longstanding tradition of being able to connect in California. As soon as the announcement was made, I connected with some of our more prominent alumni that came out of Southern California and they feel this is the perfect marriage," Kritza said. "It could be a really advantageous thing for us to really be able to recruit on the West Coast. We're just close enough for them to spread their wings and they love everything about the university. ...

"In the past we talked a lot about recruiting Colorado and we will continue to, that's more of our sustainability and important for our long-term program. But we will expand and intensify our efforts on the West Coast as well."

The final AVCA top 25 poll from last season included six Pac-10 teams and five Big 12 teams. Nebraska, which has won three national titles, will be moving to the Big Ten after the upcoming season and will have an instant rival in Penn State, the three-time defending national champions.

CU's annual home match with the Huskers easily draws the largest crowd each season at the Coors Events Center, and the Buffs have a history of upsetting Nebraska in Boulder.

"We'll miss seeing them across the nets, but I have no doubt they will fare well no matter where they land. It will be interesting for them to go head-to-head every year with Penn State," Kritza said. "We'll be taking on equally challenging opponents, but now two at a time when we're on the road playing these Pac-10 opponents. We won't be lacking for competition, if anything we'll be increasing it."

CU is 6-19 all-time against Pac-10 opponents. Despite the program's recent struggles, the Buffs are 220-148 in Big 12 play.

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