

## CU must be better in second go-round against Texas Tech

**After beating Red Raider on Saturday, Buffs expect tougher game in Big 12 tourney**

**By Ryan Thorburn** Camera Sports Writer  
Boulder Daily Camera

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KANSAS CITY, Mo. -- The Buffs are on the bubble.

The NIT bubble.

Being the No. 8 seed at the Big 12 Tournament and arriving here with a 15-15 record didn't draw much attention as Colorado went through a crisp practice session on Tuesday at the Sprint Center that was open to the public.

A few hoops junkies in Kansas and Missouri attire showed up to scout possible future opponents, but there isn't too much buzz surrounding Jeff Bzdelik's young squad just yet.

Still, for a program coming off three consecutive 20-loss seasons and last-place finishes in the conference, the 2009-10 campaign has demonstrated that CU men's basketball is headed in the right direction.

Especially considering the seven teams looking down at the Buffs in the Big 12 standings are expected to be included in the 65-team NCAA Tournament field to be officially selected on Sunday.

"It's tangible evidence that we're taking steps forward," said Bzdelik, who is in his third season at CU. "Next year we need to finish higher than that. And if we do, then there's a good chance we'll be going to the dance. We just need to keep showing improvement."

The Buffs need a victory today in the opening round against No. 9 Texas Tech at the Sprint Center (10:30 a.m., Altitude) in order to be considered for the 32-team NIT field, which will be assembled late Sunday after the NCAA picks the cream of the college basketball crop.

Welcome to March mildness.

"You never know?" Bzdelik said when asked if beating the reeling Red Raiders for the second time in four days would be enough to get the Buffs into postseason play. "I will say this, we play in the No. 1 RPI conference, in which seven teams are going to the NCAA Tournament. And we're eighth.

"All we can do is take care of what we can control and that is trying our very best to get ourselves a win (today). That's what we can control. In football and the BCS, those football coaches ... you finish .500 and you're going to a bowl."

CU finished the regular season with three consecutive wins, including a 101-90 victory over Texas Tech on Saturday at the Coors Events Center.

According to the Big 12, this will be the fifth time that teams who met in the regular-season finale meet again in an opening-round game. The previous four times, the loser of the previous game prevailed at the conference tournament.

"They're going to play a lot harder. It's not going to be like last game. They have something to prove," Cory Higgins said. "At the same time, we have something to prove, too. Because we didn't play that well. ... I think you're going to see a lot more intensity from both teams."

CU outscored the Red Raiders 53-35 in the first half before giving up 55 points in the final 20 minutes.

"I saw a slogan on a shirt the other day that said, 'My better is better than your better,'" Bzdelik said. "I'm sure coach (Pat) Knight feels that they can play better and there are some things that we could have done better, too.

"We played pretty well and won the first half, and they played pretty well and won the second half. We just had a little bit bigger cushion."

Alec Burks scored 24 points to become the top freshman scorer in CU history and was named the Big 12's Freshman of the Year after averaging 16.8 points and a team-high 4.8 rebounds during the regular season.

Higgins dropped 30 points on the Red Raiders. The junior guard is the reigning Big 12 player of the week and a third-team, All Big-12 selection.

CU's dynamic wing tandem always shows up ready to play.

The Buffs -- who are 9-0 when four players score in double figures -- need Marcus Relphorde and the role players to show up big in order to make any noise at the Big 12 Tournament.

"It's going to be tough, they're going to be playing with confidence," Knight said. "They've won three in a row and we've lost seven in a row. I think from a confidence factor they have the edge."

The Red Raiders (16-14, 4-10) have some veteran stars who have hurt CU in the past.

John Roberson (14.4 ppg) is the program's all-time assists leader, Mike Singletary (14.9 ppg) scored 43 points in an upset of Texas A&M at the Big 12 Tournament last year, and Nick Okorie (10.8 ppg) scored 34 points at the Coors Events Center on Saturday.

"You kind of wipe the slate clean and get your guys motivated that anything can happen," Knight said. "With the NIT, I don't know what our chances are since we've had a bad three weeks. But we're in a great conference, and I think we deserve it."

Which sets this up as perhaps an unofficial NIT play-in game. A loss and the bubble will burst for the Buffs.

"We know that we can play with anybody," Bzdelik said. "We just need to keep getting better."

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## CU men`s preview: Today vs. Texas Tech

Camera staff  
Boulder Daily Camera

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**TODAY** -- Colorado will open the Big 12 Tournament against Texas Tech at 10:30 a.m. at the Sprint Center.

**BROADCAST** -- **Television:** Altitude with Mitch Holthus (play-by-play) and Reid Gettys (color); **Radio:** KKZN (760 AM) with Mark Johnson (play-by-play) and Charles Johnson (color).

**STORYLINES** -- The No. 8 seed Buffs (15-15, 6-10) finished the regular season with three consecutive wins, including a 101-90 victory over Texas Tech on Saturday at the Coors Events Center. ... Alec Burks became CU's all-time leading freshman scorer and was named the Big 12's Freshman of the Year. ... Cory Higgins is ninth on CU's all-time scoring list and was named third-team, All-Big 12 for the second straight year. .... The No. 9 seed Red Raiders (16-14, 4-12), ranked as high as 16th in the Associated Press poll early in the season, have lost seven consecutive games entering the conference tournament. .... Nick Okorie, who averages 10.8 points per game, scored 34 points on 11-for-16 shooting against the Buffs on Saturday.

**KEY STAT** -- CU has the third-best RPI (103) of any team with a non-winning record behind South Carolina (82) and Georgia (99) thanks to a strength of schedule ranked No. 28.

**COACHES** -- Jeff Bzdelik is 35-57 in his third season at CU. Pat Knight is 30-33 in his second full season at Texas Tech.

**PROBABLE STARTERS** -- **Colorado:** G Nate Tomlinson, 6-3, sophomore, 5.3 ppg, 2.4 rpg, G Alec Burks, 6-6, freshman, 16.8 ppg, 4.8 rpg, G Cory Higgins, 6-5, junior, 19.0 ppg, 3.9 rpg, G Marcus Relphorde, 6-7, junior, 11.1 ppg, 4.1 rpg, F Austin Dufault, 6-9, sophomore, 5.7 ppg, 3.1 rpg.

**Texas Tech:** G Nick Okorie, 6-1, senior, 10.8 ppg, 2.6 rpg, G John Roberson, 5-11, junior, 14.4 ppg, 2.1 rpg, F Mike Singletary, 6-6, junior, 14.9 ppg, 6.8 rpg, F Darko Cohadarevic, 6-9, senior, 6.8 ppg, 5.0 rpg, F D`waly Roberts, 6-7, junior, 6.5 ppg, 5.4 rpg.

**SERIES** -- Colorado leads 17-12.

**UP NEXT** -- If the Buffs win today they will play No. 1 Kansas in the quarterfinals on Thursday at the Sprint Center (10:30 a.m., ESPN2).

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cu basketball

## Bzdelik's Buffs on the rebound

**Coach positions CU to become Big 12 contender**

**By Tom Kensler**  
*The Denver Post*

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Updated: 03/10/2010 07:38:22 AM MST



Jeff Bzdelik's intensity and dedication have earned praise from CU athletic director Mike Bohn. (Kathryn Scott Osler, The Denver Post)

KANSAS CITY, Mo. — Jeff Bzdelik wasn't about to let his Colorado basketball team get too full of itself after romping 101-90 over Texas Tech on

Saturday in Boulder. The second number was just as significant to Bzdelik as the first. Ninety points.

"We got lazy on defense," Bzdelik told his players in preparation for this morning's rematch with the Red Raiders in the first round of the Big 12 Tournament. "We didn't guard the ball. We got out of our stance. We started going under screens. We allowed their 3-point shooters to get airspace. . . ."

But other than that, guys, it was a good win.

That's how Bzdelik, 57, functions in this world, always looking ahead — except while reviewing game tapes to determine what needs to improve in the future.

In Bzdelik's third season, CU (15-15, 6-10 Big 12) won five more regular-season conference games than a year ago and escaped the conference basement for the first time in four years.

"To go out and compete like he and his team have, and to create a sense of confidence in people that follow the program, is really a testament to what Jeff has done in three short years," CU athletic director Mike Bohn said. "(And that's) especially considering where the starting point really was with the program and what he inherited."

Bzdelik would like to believe the best is yet to come.

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"(Rising to eighth place) is tangible evidence that we're taking steps forward," the coach said. "Next year we need to finish higher than that. If we do, then there is a good chance we'll be going to the dance (NCAA Tournament)."

## Rough beginnings

Colorado combined for four regular-season Big 12 wins in Bzdelik's first two seasons, and the Buffs won just one of their first five conference games this season. More than once, Bzdelik told reporters on the record that if his team did not begin to show more improvement, perhaps the athletic director should look for

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another coach.

Players saw that frustration every day in practice.

"All the work the coaches and players were putting in was not showing up in wins," junior forward Casey Crawford recalled. "That's hard for any coach or player to stomach. It's very, very trying."

Every chance he got, Bzdelik said he knew what he was getting into in the Big 12 — or the "Big Nasty," as he has called the conference. But that realization did not reduce his sleepless nights.

He takes losses hard.

"I was very honest when I took this job," Bzdelik said. "I said I couldn't come in here and wave a magic wand and have success happen overnight. We're playing a lot of young players. I know everybody wants everything now. It doesn't always happen that way."

More than once, Bohn has sought Bzdelik after a defeat and helped cool him down.

"Jeff really cares, and he wears his emotions on his sleeves," Bohn said. "One of the neat things about Jeff is his lack of satisfaction. He's excited about where we're going. We've made progress, and we're close in a lot of ways. But by no means is he satisfied. His expectations are very high."

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Bzdelik probably could get a top NBA assistant coaching job by making a phone call. But after suffering through seasons of 12-20 and 9-22 at Colorado, he must have really enjoyed the past few weeks and seeing his program become one of the Big 12's hot teams entering the

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conference tournament.

"I am deeply committed to the University of

Colorado," Bzdelik said last weekend after the victory over Texas Tech. "The vision we all share, and that includes the (school) administration and myself, it's starting to be realized. But we're not there yet."

Bohn said he plans to talk to Bzdelik about a contract extension once CU is done playing. That could be awhile. A victory today over Texas Tech would guarantee Colorado at least a .500 record (the winner faces top-seeded Kansas on Thursday). By breaking even, the Buffs would be a candidate for the National Invitation Tournament.

Bzdelik is completing the third year of a five-year contract he signed in April 2007. It includes a guaranteed annual income of \$650,000, although performance clauses and bonuses could drive that past \$1 million. Among Big 12 coaches, Bzdelik's compensation is thought to be near the bottom.

"Jeff's roots are strong with the program, with the institution, with the community, with the state," Bohn said. "The industriousness of the way he runs the program, that starts with him from the way he recruits — to being on the road on a Friday night to be in a high school gym, to flying to coach his team on Saturday, to being on the road again on Sunday.

"For a head coach at this level to be that committed, we're most appreciative of that."

**Looking ahead**

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Only senior guard Dwight Thorne will depart after this season, and Bzdelik reiterated Tuesday at the Big 12 Tournament that redshirt freshman point guard Shannon Sharpe "is every bit as talented as anybody on our team."

*Tom Kensler: 303-954-1280 or  
tkensler@denverpost.com*

A sturdy, 6-foot-1, 200- pounder from the Los Angeles area, Sharpe (no relation to the former Broncos tight end) had been mentioned last fall in the same breath as the Buffs' Big 12 freshman of the year Alec Burks before Sharpe underwent season- ending microfracture knee before the first game.

The next order of business is to sign a "big" who is a natural rebounder. Bzdelik would like to sign two: an older, more experienced junior college player and an incoming freshman to build around.

CU's home attendance (averaging 8,201 for Big 12 games) was up. Ground will be broken March 25 for the long-awaited practice facility adjacent to the Coors Events Center. And next season's schedule could include teams from power conferences.

That's all great, but Bzdelik needs a rebounder.

"If we can add a couple of major pieces in recruiting, some big bodies," Bzdelik said, "we've got a chance to be special."

When was the last time anybody said that about Colorado basketball?

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