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So long to CU's Casey Crawford

By **TOM KENSLE** |  No Comments

Apparently that wasn't just a slipup I thought I heard eight days ago during the final home game for the Colorado men's basketball team when, during pregame player introductions, it sure sounded like 6-foot-9 forward Casey Crawford was announced as a senior. (Although he was not honored during Senior Day activities).

A fourth-year junior in eligibility but scheduled to graduate this spring, Crawford had maintained to the media that he would return in 2010-11 to use his final season of eligibility. Presumably he would take graduate courses as a fifth-year student-athlete, which is not an uncommon practice and has the blessing of the NCAA if a year of eligibility is available.

But perhaps it's like the businessman who is retired but doesn't know it yet. According to the Boulder Camera, Crawford decided to call it a college career after a Friday meeting with CU coach Jeff Bzdelik.

"I'm at the point in my life where I want to move on," Crawford told The Camera.

There had been high hopes that Crawford, a transfer from Wake Forest, would make Bzdelik's Princeton-like offense go. Crawford is a terrific outside shooter, and Bzdelik felt that his threat from the high post would lure the opposing center away from the basket and thus open up space in the paint for backdoor cuts – the signature ploy of Princeton patterns.

But only rarely did Crawford make an impact during his two seasons – other than with the team's grade-point average. (He is a member of the Big 12 all-academic team.) Crawford will never be known as a strong rebounder or tenacious baseline defender. Except for short-lived spurts, his playing time decreased.

Crawford averaged 5.5 points and 1.7 rebounds in 2008-09 and 4.6 points and 2.0 rebounds this season. Crawford did key CU's first Big 12 road victory in four seasons with a 20-point effort (six 3-pointers) at Nebraska on March 2. But his role usually was relegated to being a designated 3-point shooter from off the bench. He started four games in his first season at CU and three games this season, playing about 14 minutes per game both years.

Maybe Crawford did not work as hard in practice as he could have. Practices are closed, so I wouldn't know. But I'm not going to rip the young man. After watching him play, I always thought Casey is what he is.

He would be the first guy you'd choose for a game of H-O-R-S-E but doesn't accomplish enough at both ends of the court to be an impact player, at least not at the Big 12 level. I believe Bzdelik and his staff should have realized that before bringing him in. Remember, recruiting mistakes are usually made by coaches, not players.

And I always thought it was nice to have that 3-point threat ready to come off the bench. But that's not

what Bzdelik envisioned.

I wish Casey Crawford well. He was always fun to talk to. I wish it would have worked out because he could have been a great team spokesman. Having grown up a baseball fan, I'm also sorry that I never got to meet his father, Steve Crawford, a former Major League pitcher. I was planning to do that story during Crawford's senior season.

It did sound like Casey wanted to come back next year, but I understand Bzdelik's perspective. Casey had three years at CU under full scholarship (including 2007-08 when he sat out the season under NCAA transfer rules) and will get his degree. And Bzdelik also needed to move on – and find some big men that rebound and block shots.

The Buffs coach now has three scholarships to offer this spring.

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Talent-laden rosters lend hope in basketball for Buffs

Bohn, CU basketball teams looking ahead

By Ryan Thorburn Camera Sports Writer
Boulder Daily Camera

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KANSAS CITY, Mo. -- The block party in the "Power & Light" district adjacent to the beautiful Sprint Center is getting louder and more crowded by the night.

It's a colorful mix that includes plenty of green (Baylor), gold (Missouri) and orange (Oklahoma State), but the scene is dominated by those clad in blue (Kansas) and purple (Kansas State) attire.

Mike Bohn is wandering around at the Big 12 Tournament festivities cloaked in disappointment.

Colorado's athletic director watched every second of the Buffs' painful exits from the opening round -- starting with the men's head-scratching effort during an 82-67 loss to Texas Tech on Wednesday afternoon, followed by the women's brutal collapse down the stretch in a 72-65 loss to Baylor on Thursday night.

Jeff Bzdelik's team finished with a 15-16 record. After three last-place finishes in the Big 12, the Buffs were 6-10 in conference during the regular season -- a five-game improvement -- and entered the bracket as the No. 8 seed.

The program appears to be on the rise with the loss of only Dwight Thorne (senior) and Casey Crawford (leaving a year early with his degree) and the return Big 12 rising stars Cory Higgins and Alec Burks next year.

But after the Buffs, now 35-58 under Bzdelik, let an opportunity to put themselves in position for an NIT berth and another shot at No. 1 Kansas slip away, Bohn simply said: "We had a lot to play for."

The emotions of a maddening March will fade and Bohn plans to work on a contract extension for Bzdelik, who is about to wrap up the third year of a five-year contract.

CU will break ground on a new basketball/volleyball practice facility on March 25 that will eventually take care of the practice congestion on the Coors Events Center court and enhance recruiting upon its completion in 2011.

Bzdelik firmly believes that he can get the program back into the NCAA Tournament next March, a stage the Buffs have only been on twice in the last 40 years. He welcomes the pressure of living up to those lofty expectations.

"We're knocking on the door. We just need to bust through it," Bzdelik said. "The players feel awful. I do too, with the way we finished it. At the same time, we need to keep things in perspective and reflect back on the things that we were able to accomplish and move forward."

Bzdelik's career at CU will be defined by his fourth season when Higgins is a senior and Burks could be wrapping up his college days and headed to the NBA lottery.

"We can go way up the chain next season. I see us finishing at least in the top half of the Big 12 and not having this NIT discussion, just the NCAA discussion," Higgins said. "And that discussion should be that we should be in there regardless."

On the women's side, McConnell-Miller has already completed her fifth season at CU. She has a 65-88 record with a 20-61 mark in Big 12 play.

"It's my job to focus on what we've done well, what we need to improve on in the offseason and how they're going to get better," McConnell-Miller said. "We've all got to grow. I've got to grow, the staff has to grow, the team's got to grow. And we've got to get better as a result of this season."

The women's team is also young with just two seniors leaving and a talented returning nucleus led by Brittany Spears,

Chucky Jeffery, Meagan and Brenna Malcolm-Peck and Alyssa Fressle.

"I think we're close," Fressle said after scoring 16 points against the 16th-ranked Bears at historic Municipal Auditorium in one of the more impressive performances of her promising career. "I think we've got a lot of great young ones, especially with Chucky and Meagan and the experience they're going to have next year. I think we need a good 'big.' ...

"I think we have a lot of good things in store for the program."

The Buffs made a run to the Final Four of the WNIT two years ago but have had losing records in McConnell-Miller's other four seasons.

CU has not made the women's NCAA Tournament since 2004 when Ceal Barry guided the program into the brackets for the 12th time in her storied run in Boulder.

Bohn was asked if he had made a decision on McConnell-Miller's future after the Buffs' season ended with a 13-17 record, including 13 losses in the final 15 games. The former Tulsa head coach was his first major hire at CU.

"No," Bohn said. "I was proud of our kids."

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