

Conference conundrum: Big 12 boasts top basketball rating

Unless Pac-10 improves, CU men would face lesser competition if move occurs

By Ryan Thorburn Camera Sports Writer
Boulder Daily Camera

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Manhattan, Kan., or Manhattan Beach, Calif.?

Privately, administrators and coaches inside the Colorado men's basketball program will tell you that it's a no-brainer.

They would prefer to compete in the Pac-10 and recruit more talent and alumni support up and down the West Coast.

"I would be really happy about that," Keegan Hornbuckle, a 6-7 freshman forward from Westlake Village, Calif., a suburb of Los Angeles, said when asked what he thought about the possibility of CU leaving the Big 12 for the Pac-10. "All of my family lives in California and it would be fun to get to go to L.A. and travel to a lot nicer areas like California and Arizona where it's a lot warmer. ...

"I think we'd be a good fit. The Pac-10 has been down a little bit, but it would work geographically."

Better road trips will not determine whether or not CU would leave the Big 12 should the Pac-10 decide to expand and invite the Buffs to join.

Whether or not the move, which would cost CU's athletic department roughly \$9 million up front, would benefit the athletic department financially and the university's academic mission long-term will be the driving forces behind the decision. On the court, the Big 12 is clearly the superior conference this season with seven teams expected to be included in the 65-team NCAA Tournament field. There is a chance the Pac-10 could be a one-bid league.

CU's best player, who is from Danville, Calif., prefers Stillwater, Okla., to Seattle when it comes to hoops.

"Personally, I would be disappointed," Cory Higgins said after scoring 30 points to lead the Buffs to a 101-90 victory over Texas Tech on Saturday at the Coors Events Center. "I want to come back and see the team play the same teams that I've played. I don't want them going to the Pac-10."

They won't even argue in Silicon Valley that the Pac-10 is a better basketball conference than the Big 12 right now.

According to the Rating Percentage Index computers, the Big 12 is No. 1 in RPI followed by the Big East and ACC. The Pac-10 ranks eighth behind the Atlantic 10 and Mountain West.

The Big 12 had seven teams ranked in the RPI's top 32 on Sunday -- Kansas (1), Kansas State (5), Baylor (10), Texas A&M (12), Texas (25), Oklahoma State (27) and Missouri (32) -- according to realtimerpi.com.

The Pac-10 only had one team -- California (22) -- in the top 50. The Bears are the conference's only strong at-large candidate for the NCAA Tournament unless Washington (53) or Arizona State (54) make a deep run in the conference tournament.

Head-to-head the Big 12 is 13-4 against the Pac-10 this season. And two of the setbacks were suffered by the Buffs -- a 91-87 overtime loss to Arizona at the Maui Invitational and a 74-69 loss at Oregon State.

CU ranked 110th nationally in RPI on Sunday, ahead of only Iowa State (138) and Nebraska (158) in the Big 12. The Buffs' RPI is better than five Pac-10 teams, including UCLA (145).

"Honestly, it would probably be a better idea staying in the Big 12 when you look at the strength of the conference," said Shannon Sharpe, a freshman point guard from Corona, Calif., who is redshirting this season due to injury. "But either way, you're in a conference where you're normally going to get at least four or five teams in the tournament anyway."

The Buffs (15-15, 6-10) finished eighth in the rugged Big 12 this season and believe they will be in the NCAA Tournament discussion a year from now with only one senior on the current roster.

But could CU -- a program that has made two NCAA Tournament appearances in the last 40 years with one victory in the Big Dance -- experience March Madness on a more consistent basis in the Pac-10?

Kansas has won six consecutive Big 12 titles and it's difficult to image the Jayhawks ever finding themselves in rebuilding mode like the programs at Arizona (16-14), UCLA (13-17), Oregon (15-15) and Stanford (13-17) are going through.

Texas recruits nationally and has gone to the NCAA Tournament every year since Rick Barnes took over the program 12 years ago. Missouri basketball is back thanks to Mike Anderson's tenacious style of play.

Frank Martin has Kansas State back in the top 10. Texas A&M has turned into a basketball power in the last six years while the Aggies football program has struggled.

Baylor and Oklahoma State have facilities and support CU can only dream about. Even some of this year's most disappointing teams, Oklahoma and Iowa State, have NBA talent on campus.

"The only down side to it would be that the Big 12 is the best league in the nation right now," Hornbuckle said. "Other than that, I don't really see any down side of joining the Pac-10."

Historically, the Pac-10's bell cow -- UCLA -- has the most NCAA titles (11) and has made the most Final Four appearances (18) of any program in the country.

Arizona (1997), California (1959), Stanford (1942) and Oregon (1939) have also won national championships in men's basketball.

CU's academic standards preclude Jeff Bzdelik and his staff from going after many players who end up at other Big 12 institutions. The coaches believe there would be a more even playing field in terms of recruiting in the Pac-10.

One possible negative would be the Pac-10's Thursday-Saturday schedule during conference play, which would lead to more missed classes for the players. For example, CU would play at USC on a Thursday (leaving Wednesday) and at UCLA on a Saturday (returning in the wee hours after the game).

And many of the games wouldn't start until after 8 p.m. Mountain Standard Time.

"It would be different," said Sharpe, who would finish his career in the Pac-10 should all this speculation turn to reality this summer. "I don't know how the competition would be. You're still in a high major conference no matter what. The only thing different thing for me is I would be able to go home more."

The Buffs could still play Nebraska or another old rival once a year as part of the annual Big 12/Pac-10 Hardwood Series should they switch conferences.

But some alumni would miss the annual battles against teams the Buffs have been playing since the Big Seven (CU, Kansas, Kansas State, Missouri, Nebraska, Oklahoma and Oklahoma State) was formed prior to the 1947-48 season.

"I think the Big 12 has been a great conference historically," Higgins said. "I wouldn't want to mess that up. That's just me talking. I want to see CU in the Big 12."

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The record breakers

Higgins and Burks combine for 54 in third-straight win

By David Starcer on March 8, 2010

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Just when you thought the outstanding backcourt tandem for the CU men's basketball team couldn't get any better, they one-up themselves again.

Junior Cory Higgins had his third 30-point game this season (and fifth in his career) and freshman Alec Burks eclipsed Richard Roby as Colorado's all-time leading freshman scorer with his 24 points, leading the team to their third-straight win on Saturday afternoon.

With his 30 points, Higgins also moved into the top ten of CU's all-time scoring list, passing Stephane Pelle for ninth in program history.

The question many Buff fans may be asking themselves at this point is, will this (and another year with the group of players coming back in 2011) be enough to keep Higgins in gold and black and away from the NBA for another year?

"I guess it's some extra motivation, but regardless, I need to come back better than I was this year [next year]," Higgins said.

The good news is that even if Higgins declares for the 2010 NBA Draft, as long as he doesn't hire an agent and withdraws his name within ten days of the draft (June 24), he can still return to Boulder.

As for his partner in crime, Burks has also been speculated to leave CU early, slotted by many as a top five pick in the 2011 draft. But that would mean the guard from Grandview, Mo., would stay in Boulder for at least one more year.

Burks was very humbled to pass big names such as Chauncey Billups and Roby in the record books this season.



Junior guard Cory Higgins (#11) leaps for the basket during the second period of Saturday's game against Texas Tech. (CU Independent/Kelly Kaoudis)

"It means a lot," Burks said. "It means a great freshman performance, so it means a great deal to me to break that record."

While the dynamic duo has been consistent in their production throughout the year, the question of who CU's third option would be was a little more clouded.

Senior Dwight Thorne, who was the Buffs' second leading scorer a year ago, was relegated to bench duty and had inconsistent showings on offense throughout the season.

Junior Casey Crawford, who has shown glimpses of greatness with his scoring outbursts against Iowa State and Nebraska (30 points in two games), hasn't shown he can perform on a consistent basis either.

Instead it's been junior Marcus Relphorde, in his first season of this level of Division I play (he saw limited action as a freshman for St. Louis of the Atlantic 10) who has emerged as a viable third option, averaging 10.8 points a game and scoring 11 or more points in six straight games.

For Higgins, having that scoring support just helps to put his mind at ease.

"This year's team is so much more balanced," Higgins said after the win, a game in which "the Big Three" combined for 72 of Colorado's season-high 101 points. "Last year if I didn't have a big night, there probably wasn't going to be a good chance of us winning the game. It just makes us a better team as a whole."

As a result of having multiple options, the confidence level of the team has been rising since the first game of the season. Especially now that they are in the midst of a three-game conference winning streak, their first in seven years.

Higgins said the attitude of the team is different than in the past.

"This is probably the most confidence [the team's had] since I have been part of the Colorado program," Higgins said.

He also added, "I think this team has a little bit of cockiness and swagger, and I think that helped us a lot through this year."

Moving forward, the team now heads to Kansas City, Mo., for the Big 12 tournament come Wednesday, where the eighth-seeded Buffs will get a rematch with the ninth-seeded Red Raiders team they just defeated.

When asked if his team has considered the possibility of making the postseason, head coach Jeff Bzdelik stayed the course he's piloted his team on since day one.

"You never know," Bzdelik said. "All we can do is take care of what we can control and that is trying our very best to get a win on Wednesday, and keep going. That's what we can control."

As hard as it might be for those familiar with CU basketball to believe, the same team that won only nine games a year ago actually has something to play for in March. After the team's 18-point thrashing at the hands of Missouri following their heartbreaking overtime loss to Kansas, the team slipped under .500 for the first time this season and a disappointing 2-7 in Big 12 play.

Since then they've gone 4-3, ended their 36-game conference, road losing streak, and posted their first 100 point game in Big 12 play since their overtime victory on Feb. 19, 2000. What changed?

“We just had a choice to either cave in or push through,” Higgins said. “Obviously, I don’t think we’re a bunch of people that would cave in. We’ve been through the worst of the worst, so I think everybody just decided that we have to push.”

Contact CU Independent Staff Writer David Starcer at david.starcer@colorado.edu.

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Burks notches CU first with Big 12 freshman honor

Coach name Buff Freshman of Year

By Ryan Thorburn Camera Sports Writer
Boulder Daily Camera

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Chauncey Billups. David Harrison. Richard Roby.

All of the above had an immediate impact on Colorado basketball and are on the shortlist of the greatest players in program history.

But no CU player had ever been named the Big 12 Freshman of the Year until Alec Burks was so honored by the conference's coaches on Sunday.

"To me, he should be the Freshman of the Year in the Big 12," said Jeff Bzdelik, who was not allowed to vote for his own players for any of the conference's postseason honors, after Burks became CU's all-time leading freshman scorer on Saturday. "That just says it all."

Burks led all Big 12 freshmen in scoring (16.8 points per game) and was seventh among all of the conference's players in that key statistical department during the regular season. The 6-6 guard from Grandview, Mo., also led the Big 12 in field-goal percentage (.536).

Burks, who averaged 14.3 points on 14-for-26 shooting during the Maui Invitational, said the early-season trip to the prestigious tournament gave him the confidence to put together a historically good freshman campaign at CU.

"I felt like at the Maui tournament, the way I was playing, that I really helped the team and that I could be a big contributor on the team," Burks said.

After scoring 24 points during the Buffs' 101-90 victory over Texas Tech at the Coors Events Center, Burks has 488 points this season. He passed Billups (465 points, 2005-06) and Roby (480, 2004-05) on Saturday to reach the top spot on CU's all-time freshman scoring list.

"It means a lot because there were some great freshmen here before me," Burks said. "It means a great deal to me to break that record."

CU's leading scorer, Cory Higgins, was named third-team All-Big 12 for the second consecutive season. The junior guard is averaging 19.0 points per game, which ranks third overall in the conference, and is already ninth on the school's all-time scoring list with 1,373 career points.

Higgins was also named the Big 12's Player of the Week after averaging 24.5 points on 15-for-21 shooting in wins over Nebraska and Texas Tech. He is also tied with Missouri's Zaire Taylor for the conference lead in steals (1.9 per game).

Thanks in large part to the efforts of Burks and Higgins, the Buffs were able to bounce back from a demoralizing 92-63 loss at Missouri on Feb. 24 and string together three consecutive wins to put the team in position for postseason play entering the Big 12 Tournament.

"We just had a choice to either cave in or push through. Obviously, we're not people who are going to cave in," Higgins said. "We've been through the worst of the worst. I think everybody just decided it was time to make that push."

Burks, who was never given the conference's Rookie of the Week award (voted on by members of the media), was also named honorable mention All-Big 12.

Higgins could be a 2010-11 preseason first-team All-Big 12 selection considering most of this year's first- and second-year selections are either out of eligibility or likely to leave early for the NBA draft.

"Alec is a very talented player. Him coupled with Cory, I've heard people refer to them as one of the best wing tandems in the nation," Bzdelik said. "And they certainly are."

The Buffs (15-15, 6-10) will play Texas Tech in the opening game of the Big 12 Tournament in Kansas City at 10:30 a.m. on Wednesday. The winner will face Kansas in the quarterfinals on Thursday.

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colorado basketball

CU's Burks named top freshman in Big 12

By Tom Kensler
The Denver Post

Posted: 03/08/2010 01:00:00 AM MST



Alec Burks is the first Colorado athlete to be selected the Big 12 freshman of the year. He averages 16.8 points a game. (Hyoung Chang, The Denver Post)

BOULDER — Colorado's Alec Burks wasn't the most highly recruited or highly regarded freshman in the Big 12 Conference. But he turned out to be the best.

In a vote of the league's head coaches, Burks became the first CU athlete selected the Big 12 freshman of the year Sunday. The 6-foot-6 guard from Grandview, Mo., led the league's freshmen in scoring with 16.8 points per game. He also led all conference players in field-goal percentage (53.6 percent).

Not wanting to sound boastful, Burks said he realized with his play at the Maui Invitational in November that he could make an impact as a freshman. Burks averaged 15 points in games against Gonzaga and Arizona at the event.

"I saw the way I was playing in Maui and that it really helped the team out," Burks recalled Saturday after a 101-90 victory over Texas Tech. "I just felt like I could contribute on the team."

CU junior guard Cory Higgins was named to the all-conference third team for the second straight year. His 19.0 scoring average ranks third in the conference, behind Oklahoma State's James Anderson (22.9) and Baylor's LaceDarius Dunn (19.2). Burks was among those named to the all-conference honorable mention list. He ranks seventh among the league's scorers.

Coaches could not vote for their players.

Also, Higgins was named the final Big 12 player of the week, as voted by media who cover the conference. Higgins averaged 24.5 points and 4.5 rebounds in victories against Nebraska and Texas Tech. He combined to shoot 71.4 percent from the field in the two games.

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THE DENVER POST

Higgins became only the second CU player to earn a weekly conference award. Junior forward Marcus Relphorde, a junior college transfer, earned Big 12 rookie of the week honors Jan. 18. Burks never won a weekly newcomer award, although he ultimately was named the league's best freshman.

On Saturday, Burks became the all-time CU freshman scoring leader with 488 points, breaking the former mark of 480 set by Richard Roby during the 2004-05 season.

"Alec coupled with Cory, I've heard people call them one of the best wing tandems in the nation, and they certainly are," CU coach Jeff Bzdelik said.

After finishing in last place in the Big 12 standings the previous three years, Colorado showed significant progress this season. The Buffaloes (15-15, 6-10 Big 12) finished eighth and will face No. 9 seed Texas Tech (16-14, 4-12) Wednesday morning in the first round of the Big 12 Tournament in Kansas City.

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Burks' big honor

CU guard is Big 12 freshman of year; Higgins also honored

By Patrick Ridgell
© 2010 Longmont Times-Call

BOULDER — Colorado men's basketball coach Jeff Bzdelik has more tangible evidence of his program's progress.

CU's Alec Burks was named the Big 12's freshman of the year on Sunday. Conference coaches vote on the award, and they cannot vote for their own players.

CU's Cory Higgins was named third-team all-Big 12 for the second year in a row. Burks was honorable mention.

No Buff had been named Big 12 freshman of the year before Burks. Joining him on the league's all-rookie team are Kansas freshman Xavier Henry, Oklahoma freshman Tommy Mason-Griffin and Texas freshman Avery Bradley, all much more celebrated recruits than Burks.

Burks set CU's freshman scoring record Saturday against Texas Tech with 24 points, upping his season total to 488. After the win, which clinched eighth place in the Big 12 for CU, Bzdelik said Burks deserved the award.

"I think that just says it all," Bzdelik said. "He's a very talented player. He, coupled with Cory ... I've heard people call them one of the best wing tandems in the nation, and they certainly are."

Burks said Saturday that setting the program's freshman scoring record meant a lot to him. He said he realized in November, when CU played in the Maui Invitational, that he could have a big year.

"I saw the way I was playing, and it really helped everybody out," he said.

"I just felt like I could contribute to the team."

Burks is the Big 12's highest-scoring freshman at 16.8 points per game. He leads the league in shooting, 53.6 percent. He's fourth nationally among freshmen in shooting and scoring.

Higgins leads CU with 19 points and 1.9 steals per game.

Higgins was also named the Big 12's player of the week Sunday. He averaged 24.5 points and 4.5 rebounds in CU's two wins last week.



Colorado guard Alec Burks, right, blocks a shot by Iowa State guard Diante Garrett in the second half of Colorado's 75-72 victory Feb. 27 in Boulder. Burks, who set CU's freshman scoring record Saturday against Texas Tech — upping his season total to 488 — was named the Big 12's freshman of the year on Sunday. It was the first time a Buff has earned the honor. **David Zalubowski/AP**

BIG 12 AWARDS

(voted on by coaches)

Name

Pos.Ht.Wt.Cl.

PLAYER OF THE YEAR

James Anderson, Oklahoma State

GJr.6-6205

DEFENSIVE PLAYER OF THE YEAR

Cole Aldrich, Kansas

CU (15-15, 6-10) will play ninth-seed Texas Tech on Wednesday at 10:30 a.m. in Kansas City in the first round of the Big 12 Tournament. Altitude will air the game.

Read Patrick Ridgell's [CU sports blog](#). He can be reached at pridgell@times-call.com.

CJr.6-11245

NEWCOMER OF THE YEAR

Ekpe Udoh, Baylor

FJr.6-10240

FRESHMAN OF THE YEAR

Alec Burks, Colorado

GFr.6-6185

SIXTH MAN AWARD

Jamar Samuels, Kansas State

FSo.6-7215

COACH OF THE YEAR

Frank Martin, Kansas State (Career: 67-30, 3rd season; At KSU: 67-30, 3rd season)

ALL-BIG 12 FIRST TEAM

Cole Aldrich, Kansas

C 6-11 245 Jr.

Sherron Collins, Kansas

G 5-11 205 Sr.

Jacob Pullen, Kansas State

G 6-0 200 Jr.

James Anderson, Oklahoma State**

G 6-6 205 Jr.

Damion James, Texas**

G/F 6-7 225 Sr.

Donald Sloan, Texas A&M

G 6-3 205 Sr.

ALL-BIG 12 SECOND TEAM

LaceDarius Dunn, Baylor

G 6-4 205 Jr.

Ekpe Udoh, Baylor

F 6-10 240 Jr.

Craig Brackins, Iowa State

F 6-10 230 Jr.

Marcus Morris, Kansas

F 6-8 225 So.

Denis Clemente, Kansas State

G 6-1 175 Sr.

ALL-BIG 12 THIRD TEAM

Tweety Carter, Baylor

G 5-11 185 Sr.

Cory Higgins, Colorado

G 6-5 190 Jr.

Kim English, Missouri

G 6-6 200 So.

Tommy Mason-Griffin, Oklahoma

G 5-11 203 Fr.

Bryan Davis, Texas A&M

F 6-9 250 Sr.

**ALL-BIG 12 HONORABLE
MENTION**

Alec Burks (Colorado), Marquis Gilstrap (Iowa State), Xavier Henry (Kansas), Zaire Taylor (Missouri), Willie Warren (Oklahoma), Obi Muonelo (Oklahoma State), Avery Bradley (Texas), John Roberson (Texas Tech), Mike Singletary (Texas Tech)

ALL-BIG 12 DEFENSIVE TEAM

Ekpe Udoh, Baylor

F 6-10 240 Jr.

Cole Aldrich, Kansas

C 6-11 245 Jr.

Jacob Pullen, Kansas State

G 6-0 200 Jr.

J.T. Tiller, Missouri

G 6-3 200 Sr.

Dogus Balbay, Texas

G 6-1 175 Jr.

Bryan Davis, Texas A&M

F 6-9 250 Sr.

BIG 12 ALL-ROOKIE TEAM

Ekpe Udoh, Baylor

F 6-10 240 Jr.

Alec Burks, Colorado

G 6-6 185 Fr.

Xavier Henry, Kansas

G 6-6 220 Fr.

Tommy Mason-Griffin, Oklahoma

G 5-11 203 Fr.

Avery Bradley, Texas

G 6-2 180 Fr.

** Unanimous Selection

Note: Ties in the voting created additional spots for the All-Big 12 First Team and All-Defensive Team.