

Woelk: Kritza on road to rebuilding Buff volleyball

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Posted: 05/30/2010 11:26:08 PM MDT

Folks who saw the list of newcomers to Liz Kritza's Colorado volleyball team a few weeks ago couldn't have been blamed for doing a double take.

There were 15 names on the list.

That's virtually an entire roster. It would be akin to Dan Hawkins signing 70 players for CU's football team, or Tad Boyle signing a dozen new basketball players.

The message was clear: When Kritza talks about rebuilding, she means it.

This is no touch-up job, no cosmetic facelift. This is rebuilding from the bottom up, a complete makeover of a once-proud program that has hit rough times in recent years.

When Kritza took the reins at CU a little more than a year ago, the spring signing period had already passed. But instead of rushing to fill roster spots simply for the sake of filling spots, she began working on her 2010 class.

She knew the lumps would come in the 2009 season -- but she wasn't going to mortgage the long term for a slightly easier path in the beginning.

"The normal reaction would have been to shore up the roster, scramble for players and try to hit the ground running, but without a real plan in place," she said. "That's not what we wanted to do. It's a matter of risk and reward. We decided to go in a different direction.

"We knew it would be a tough year, but we also believed it would be prudent in the long run to be patient. So we started bringing in players for the 2010 class. This year's group is really a 1½-year recruiting class."

Kritza was right about the tough year. The Buffs finished 10th in the 11-team Big 12, finishing with a 2-18 conference record and 7-22 mark overall. Thanks to injuries and other issues, she played with about 10 healthy players, or what amounts to roughly half of a full roster.

But her new recruiting class -- virtually her new team -- should be a good start toward turning those numbers around.

So far, it includes nine freshmen and six transfers. There are seven players from Colorado, at least four players 6-foot or taller, and a solid core of players who have a year or two of college experience under their belts.

The latter group includes a solid setter, Alyssa Valentine, who was the Atlantic 10 Rookie of the Year two seasons ago.

Even better, the class is likely not finished. Kritza is in the process of adding one or two more players, including a 6-6 European player who would give the Buffs terrific presence at the net in a big hurry.

But the big emphasis has been protecting the border and ensuring that Colorado's best prep and club players stay home.

"The first year here was dedicated to really trying to understand what direction the program needed to go," Kritza said. "When I came here, one of the first things I had to do was figure out how we position ourselves to be successful.

"That meant cultivating some relationships in the state. One thing we know for certain: You can field a high-caliber program with Colorado kids. If you keep three or four of the top players from Colorado every year, you can have a championship program."

As a Colorado native and former prep standout at St. Mary's, Kritza is familiar with the level of talent the state produces. Every year, some of the nation's top players come from Colorado -- and recently, too many of those players have been going elsewhere.

Kritza, who went on to play college ball and coach at Tulane, knew that had to change.

Thus, the birth of "Project Colorado." It's an all-out effort to make sure every club and every high school in the state is aware and educated about CU's volleyball program.

"There are blue-chip players here every year," Kritza said. "We want to be at the table with them. I have the greatest respect for the coaches and players in Colorado, and I want CU to be a viable option for them."

It's not just recruiting. It's running camps and clinics from one end of the state to the other. It's being visible wherever and whenever possible.

And it's keeping your door open at all times.

"Any kid who wants to know what our program is about, they're welcome to come see us -- regardless of their ability," Kritza said. "Our door is open."

In turn, she wants the Buffs to become a volleyball power again instead of a Big 12 afterthought.

There was a time when CU was a regular among the nation's top 25. From 1991 through 2001, the Buffs went to the NCAA Tournament every year. In 1993, '94 and '97, they advanced to the Sweet 16.

But since 2002, they've made it past the NCAA first round only once -- and they haven't been to the tournament at all in the last three seasons.

Now, despite last year's rough road, Kritza believes the Buffs are headed in the right direction. Her latest -- in reality, her first -- recruiting class should make a major difference.

"I'm more encouraged than ever before," she said. "This was a program that was perennially in the top 25 and perennially in the NCAA Tournament. We want to get back there."

"There is an opportunity here to build a national powerhouse."

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