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Soccer team reflects on tough season

Players and coaches analyze disappointing campaign

By Esteban L. Hernandez on November 14, 2009

Bill Hempen, the Colorado Buffaloes women's soccer head coach, sits in a black chair next to a pile of documents covering his desk.

Hempen began speaking about the differences that damaged his ninth season, a season where at one point saw the Buffaloes ranked 15th in the nation.

"It just took a long time for the team to come together," Hempen said. "People talk a lot about chemistry and that feel for each other, and I think because all the things that were constants a year ago were no longer constant."

The pile in front of Hempen is full of letters, e-mails and other documents from potential recruits, a process Hempen promptly began to focus on after the end of the season.

"Trying to find that group that's comfortable with each other took a little bit longer to get to that point," Hempen said. "Also, I really don't know that we got there totally because you never saw us on a win streak or even a losing streak. It was just kind of win one, lose one, so it was a challenge."

Colorado finished with a record of 9-10, the first time since 2001 that they didn't amass 10 wins or more in a season. It was also the second time in the past five years that they didn't advance to the Big 12 Championship Game. The year 2001 marked the year Hempen took the reins at Colorado. The Buffs have advanced to the Big 12 Championship Game in 2005, 2006 and 2008.

Senior Nikki Marshall played in the 2006 and 2008 Big 12 Championship Game, both of which ended in losses.

"We struggled," Marshall said of her final season as a Buff. "I don't think it was the personnel, we sort of lacked leadership. Our chemistry wasn't as good, [it was] kind of an off season."

An early exit from the Big 12 tournament in San Antonio closed the door to further postseason play, including the NCAA tournament, which Colorado had participated in annually since 2003.



Earlier this season, senior forward Nikki Marshall strides past Oklahoma's defense. The Buffs had a 5-1 victory over the visiting Sooners on Oct. 2. Though ranked No. 15 at one point, the Buffs had a disappointing end to the season, finishing 9-10. (CU Independent file/Illana Finer)

For Marshall and her fellow seniors, the situation this season was twofold: A vision of a season closing quickly, followed by the realization that their collegiate athletic careers were approaching an end.

"Everyone expected us to do much better in the Big 12 tournament and we didn't, so it was disappointing all around," Marshall said. "I wanted to win that game more than anyone. I knew my season was coming to an end. And I think all the seniors went out and played our hearts out."

It didn't help that the 1-0 double overtime loss to the Texas Longhorns in the first round of the Big 12 tournament came two weeks after the Longhorns beat the Buffs with the same result in Austin, Texas.

The regular season loss may have foreshadowed future struggles in the Lone Star State, which freshman midfielder Amy Barczuk said was the moment she felt the season would not go well.

"I think the moment for me was when we lost to Texas, not in the Big 12, but in the season," Barczuk said. "[The team] definitely really needed to win that game and that was another game that was on the road that we lost."

Winning only one match on the road was damaging to the Buffs', but Hempen said nearly every team in the Big 12 had a difficult time with road games.

"I think everybody struggled on the road in the conference," Hempen said. "I think the conference is very good, and playing away from home has always been a difficult proposition, and this year was no different."

Barczuk was an All-Big 12 Second-Team and an All-Big 12 Newcomer Team selection this season. She called her first year as a Buffalo a learning experience.

"Everybody brings their experience back next year to succeed in our goals and get into the [NCAA] tournament," Barczuk said. "Going into the Big 12 tournament, I honestly thought we could win it. It was very disappointing"

Although they didn't make it to the Big 12 Championship Game, Barczuk said she has no regrets.

"I think everything happens for a reason and what happened this season will definitely make us stronger this next season," Barczuk said. "I would have loved to go in and win a Big 12 championship. There is nothing we can do about it now, so we have to make the best of it."

Hempen said the abrupt end to a not so abrupt season was difficult for him and his players.

"Knowing it wasn't over for that day — it was over for the rest of the year — was probably the hardest thing we had to deal with," Hempen said.

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