

CU women's basketball team ready to run

K-Mac hopes pieces in place for up-tempo style

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Alyssa Fressle has to admit: She was frustrated with the Colorado women's basketball team's offense at times last season as a freshman.

The athletic guard had been a part of three state titles at Highlands Ranch High School, where the Falcons smothered teams on defense and ran the floor every chance they could.

When she was recruited by CU coach Kathy McConnell-Miller, Fressle was recruited to play much the same style. The story line is similar for point guard Whitney Houston. And star forward Brittany Spears figured on a fast pace when she became a Buff.

The Buffs as a program, however, never quite had all of the pieces to implement such an up-tempo style -- until now, that is.

"You're not going to be able to push the ball every single time," Fressle said this week. "But to (slow it down more often than not), just felt so drab and not fun. I love running the lanes and getting easy fast-break points. It's just a much more fun game to watch, way more fun to play, and that's what we want to do this year."

Thanks to the return of Houston from injury and a talented freshman class, the Buffs believe they've finally got the personnel in place to be the uptempo team that McConnell-Miller envisioned when she took over the program four seasons ago.

The Buffs enter the 2009-2010 season opener against UC-Irvine at 3 p.m. today sporting a roster loaded with athletic guards and small forwards who are adept at applying pressure defense and scoring.

It took some time to get to this point.

When McConnell-Miller came to Boulder from Tulsa, where she'd run a similar style, the Buffs' depth and experience lied in the frontcourt. Players like centers Jackie McFarland, Kara Richards and forward Jasmina Ilic were the cornerstones of the program, and so naturally their talents were leaned upon in McConnell-Miller's early years at CU.

This season's Buffs are the first edition comprised entirely of players recruited by McConnell-Miller to play her style.

"When we had a frontcourt that was more experienced, we needed to run more set plays, and now we're getting a lot through our defense," McConnell-Miller said. "So it's starting to come together."

"We've still got great offensive sets. We've got a lot of options. But you're going to see a lot of our offense created from our defense."

Sometimes those transition opportunities will come from the full-court press. Other times, it will come simply from the Buffs using their athleticism to get up the floor after a defensive stop.

McConnell-Miller said her team is also more balanced now.

Spears, who led the team in scoring last season, still leads the way. But unlike when CU relied heavily on McFarland to produce offensively, McConnell-Miller feels she's got many scoring options now.

Senior guard Bianca Smith can shoot the 3. Fressle can slash to the hoop and pull up for jumpers. Houston creates for other players off the dribble. Freshman guard Chucky Jeffery "can score in bunches." And on and on.

Eight guards/small forwards figure to see playing time.

The flip-side, of course, is that the Buffs -- picked to finish 11th in the Big 12 by the coaches -- are thinner up front, with 6-foot-3 forward Julie Seabrook and 6-foot-4 center Courtney Dunn the only two true frontcourt players returning.

The Buffs hope to compensate for the lack of depth inside with the defensive pressure they'll be applying to disrupt other teams' backcourts before they can get into their own offensive sets.

"There's no doubt if we can put four guards on the floor and get away with it we will," McConnell-Miller said.

Offensively, the Buffs should be more free-form, with players using their athletic talents to create plays.

"It's good for me and I think a lot of the guards," Spears said.

And it's a style most of the current Buffs have itching to implement since they arrived on campus.

"The time has come to show this," Houston said. "I think it's going to be exciting to watch."

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