

Bzdelik's Buffs headed for bigger stage

CU stepping in for KU in prestigious Maui Invitational

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Jeff Bzdelik isn't afraid of the spotlight.

One of the reasons the veteran coach decided to leave Air Force for Colorado was so that he would have an opportunity to compete against peers like Bill Self in the Big 12.

So it's no surprise that when Kansas decided not to compete in the 2009 EA Sports Maui Invitational that Bzdelik jumped at the opportunity to get the Buffs on that stage.

"Kansas was scheduled to go and they bowed out. They needed a team from the Big 12, and I raised my hand," Bzdelik said when asked how CU's invitation came about. "Let's go do it. It's not a safe business here."

The Jayhawks are ranked No. 1 in the national polls and would have been a heavy favorite to fly back from Maui with another trophy. The Buffs -- despite being picked in the preseason coaches poll to finish last in the conference -- are confident they can represent the Big 12 well next week after opening up the season 3-0.

"It's an honor just to be in the tournament first of all. I know all of the guys have been watching it growing up. Just knowing the nation is going to be watching you play is going to be exciting," Cory Higgins said. "We're not going there to just play some games. We're going up there to win. I think we have a lot to prove."

Higgins doesn't have a lot to prove individually. He has quietly developed into one of the best players in the Big 12 over the last two seasons while suffering through back-to-back 20-loss seasons and last-place finishes.

Through three games, the 6-5 junior guard is averaging 23.3 points per game while shooting an astonishing 70 percent (21-for-30) from the field -- including 6-for-9 (66.7 percent) from 3-point distance -- and 91.7 percent (22-for-24) from the foul line.

"Cory just plays at a great pace. He's taking good shots, he's mixing up his game with shooting the ball off the dribble, driving it, finishing it, passing it. He has been very efficient," Bzdelik said. "He's just beginning his junior year and all those minutes he played early on as a freshman and even in his second year have escalated his maturity."

"You're seeing the results of those first two years and the minutes Cory played right now."

Another encouraging development within the program is the play of Alec Burks, who is having a greater impact as a true freshman than Higgins had two years ago when he deferred to Richard Roby and Marcus Hall.

Burks and Higgins each scored 23 points during Wednesday's 88-77 victory over an athletic Texas Southern team.

"Alec is a big-time player," Higgins said. "He's not going to back down from anything. It's not a surprise to any of us, but it's very welcome."

Burks, a 6-6 guard who was the Gatorade Player of the Year in Missouri, was not heavily recruited. Kansas State was the only other program in the Big 12 that showed serious interest before he committed to CU.

"I had Iowa State and Missouri look at me for a minute. And Oklahoma. But they weren't really interested, so I came here," Burks said. "It's about Boulder. I love it here."

Burks is averaging 18.0 points per game while shooting 60.9 percent (14-for-23) from the field.

"He's a gifted player offensively," Bzdelik said. "He didn't have a turnover, he passes the ball, he's unselfish, he scores in a variety of ways and he's an intelligent player. He's going to make his freshman mistakes and he has to figure it out."

Add Dwight Thorne (11.0 ppg) and Nate Tomlinson (12 assists, four turnovers) into the mix and the Buffs suddenly have a pretty formidable backcourt situation. Eventually, Levi Knutson (hip) is going to get healthy and be able to knock down some 3-pointers off the bench.

What will likely be exposed in the spotlight of the Maui Invitational, however, is CU's lack of interior size and an inability to keep the opponent off the glass.

The Buffs gave up 16 offensive rebounds and were out-rebounded 32-25 by Texas Southern. Entering Thursday's action CU was ranked third in the Big 12 in scoring offense (86.0 ppg) but last in rebounding (29.0 rpg).

"I'm most encouraged by the team effort, the balanced scoring, the shot distribution and just how much deeper we are this year," Higgins said. "I'm always concerned with the rebounding part. We need all five guys and we just need to keep working on it."

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CU says Aloha

Men's basketball faces Gonzaga to kick off Maui Invitational

By David Starcer on November 20, 2009

As far as early-season tournaments go, it doesn't get much bigger than the 2009 EA SPORTS Maui Invitational.

And as far as games go, it may not get bigger for Colorado than a showdown with a perennial NCAA Tournament team on national TV.

The 3-0 Colorado Buffaloes men's basketball team will head to Hawaii where they will face the Gonzaga Bulldogs of the West Coast Conference in the opening game of the 2009 EA SPORTS Maui Invitational at 1 p.m. MST Monday on ESPN2.

This is the 26th year of the tournament, which was first held in 1984 in honor of perhaps the greatest upset in college basketball history.

Chaminade University, a tiny Hawaiian school, knocked off three-time National Player of the Year Ralph Sampson and the top-ranked Virginia Cavaliers 77-72 to shock the college basketball world. Two years later, the first Maui Classic was held.

As the hosts, the Chaminade Silverswords have been a regular participant of the tourney as well as a team from each of the six major conferences (Big 12, Big Ten, Pac-10, SEC, ACC, and Big East). This year, Colorado is the Big 12 Conference's representative, but would probably like to replace Chaminade in the role of Cinderella.

The Buffs will have their hands full right off the bat as they face a Gonzaga team that took second-ranked Michigan State to the wire before succumbing 75-71 in East Lansing, Mich. on Tuesday. The Zags led for most of the game, but fell victim to having their big men in foul trouble late in the contest.

It's those same big men, 7-foot Robert Sacre and 7-foot-5 Will Foster, who will give Colorado trouble on the glass.

"They're big, so we are going to have to rebound the ball," said junior guard Cory Higgins after the team's win over Texas Southern on Wednesday night. "That's what it's going to come down to. I think if we play our game, we'll be fine. We just have to rebound the ball."



Earlier this season, freshman guard Alec Burks struggles past the Golden Lions' defense. Burks kicked off his collegiate career with 13 points. No first-game fear stopped him from driving to the basket. The team is headed to Hawaii 3-0. (CU Independent file/Illana Finer)

Colorado wasn't originally scheduled to participate in Maui, but after Kansas bowed out, head coach Jeff Bzdelik was the first to volunteer.

"They needed a team from the Big 12, I raised my hand," Bzdelik said. "To me it's like, 'Let's go do it. Let's go play.'"

The rest of the tournament field is interesting, to say the least.

Gonzaga and Arizona made it to the Sweet 16 of the NCAA tournament last year while Maryland and Wisconsin were knocked out in the second round. Vanderbilt and Cincinnati joins Colorado as teams who didn't make a postseason appearance last year, including the NIT. Chaminade is a Division II school and is therefore in a league of its own.

The Wildcats (Jordan Hill and Chase Budinger), Commodores (Shan Foster) and Bulldogs (Josh Heytvelt and Jeremy Pargo) all lost main contributors from a year ago, and everyone else isn't expected to make a huge leap in the standings.

This means it's a pretty even playing field, which means the Buffaloes aren't just going into it looking to compete, the coach says.

"Everybody there is good," Bzdelik said. "That's why you play the game, and we're good, too."

For senior guard Dwight Thorne II, the trip to Hawaii isn't a vacation.

"We are not going there to go 2-1 or 1-2, we are going to try and win," Thorne said. "It's a business trip."

Although the Buffs will look to be all business on the court, it was clear the players were looking forward to enjoying their time off the court as well.

"I'm going to get a ukulele and sit out by the beach and play it a little bit," Higgins said. "I'm definitely going to enjoy it."

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