Buffs` Houston misses out on key practice time

CU point guard questionable with minor concussion

By Joshua Lindenstein Camera Sports Writer Boulder Daily Camera

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Whitney Houston had just pulled off the late-game heroics necessary for the Colorado Buffaloes to squeak out a come-from-behind win in their season opener.

But with her point guard sitting just a few feet away in the post-game press conference, CU women's basketball coach Kathy McConnell-Miller didn't bother sugarcoating her assessment of Houston's play.

"We need more leadership," McConnell-Miller said. "We need more control with the ball. We need more control with the tempo. ... We need a more consistent Whitney Houston."

Unfortunately for the Buffs, Houston didn't get a chance to work on the consistency aspect this week. The 5-foot-5 sparkplug missed practice, and she's listed as questionable for today's 5 p.m. matchup against Illinois-Chicago -- the opening game of the University of Minnesota's Subway Basketball Classic.

Houston said she suffered a minor concussion in the win over UC-Irvine when she was fouled driving to the basket and hit her cheekbone on the floor. She left the game at the time but returned to score five points in the final two minutes.

Whether she plays tonight or not, Houston is probable for Sunday's game against Minnesota.

But the week of standing on the sidelines wasn't what the Buffs were hoping for for Houston, who is returning from a knee injury that kept her out all of last season.

The CU coaching staff has high hopes for Houston, who emerged as aplaymaker toward the end of her sophomore season. She had been impressive in fall workouts and preseason practice.

But Game 1 proved an eye opener, and McConnell-Miller tempered her Sunday post-game comments with a dose of perspective on Thursday. The coach said there's no doubt Houston has put in the work to return at full speed this season and be the player they believe she can be. It just might take a bit longer than expected.

"I think we might have underestimated what the year off did for her game time speed and game laps," McConnell-Miller said.

Houston scored 11 points on 5 of 10 shooting in the opener, but it was the three turnovers and no assists that concerned the coaching staff. Houston appeared tentative at times, not always taking charge of the offense.

Houston said she might have put too much pressure on herself in her first game back, which led to some "first-game jitters."

"I was disappointed with my own play," Houston said. "People were telling me, 'Good job. You came back and gave the team a spark.` I wasn't necessarily feeling good about it."

Houston said she did what she could to keep learning in the film room and while watching from the sidelines this week. But she knows the real cure to her rustiness is simply game reps, and the coaches have faith that the old Houston will still show up eventually.

"We need her on the floor, and she needs to be on the floor," McConnell-Miller said.

True freshman guard Chucky Jeffery will get her first college start if Houston can't go tonight. But it's sophomore Alyssa Fressle who will likely get most of the point guard duties.

Fressle, a shooting guard, saw some action at the point last season. She also led the Buffs in assists last year, so she knows how to distribute the ball.

"I just need to be ready to do whatever coach tells me to do," Fressle said. "If that means running point guard, I`m comfortable in doing that."

Road value

Buffalo guard Bianca Smith has some advice for the CU men's team, which is making a trip to Hawaii for the Maui Invitational: "Stay focused. Stay away from the beach until it's all over."

The CU women went to Honolulu and won the Paradise Classic with a pair of victories last season.

"I think we were able to stay focused, and if we can have that same mentality going into this trip (to Minnesota) we'll come out victorious," Smith said.

Smith, a senior, said early-season tournaments can be a good chance for teams to get away from campus and build some camaraderie for the long season to come: "I think when you really know your teammates it helps with team chemistry on the floor."

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