

Bufs turn attention to Bouldin

By Ryan Thorburn Camera Sports writer
Boulder Daily Camera

Posted: 11/23/2009 12:17:44 AM MST

LAHIANA, MAUI -- Jeff Bzdelik was one of the first college coaches in the country to discover Matt Bouldin.

"I knew of him when I was at Air Force because he lives right by my house," Bzdelik said Sunday before leaving the tournament later that day to see to his ill mother in Chicago.

But after being named Colorado's high school player of the year as a junior and senior at ThunderRidge, Bouldin decided to leave the state and play for Gonzaga.

"He knew he'd have to get a haircut if he came to Air Force, so he wasn't going to come there. I say that laughingly," Bzdelik said. "I think he's a terrific player and I just wish him well. He's a cagey, smart player who just finds a way to win."

The Bufs -- who do not have a player from the Centennial State among their starting five -- will face Bouldin's Bulldogs in the first round of the EA Sports Maui Invitational today at the Lahiana Civic Center (1 p.m., ESPN2).

Bouldin, a strong 2010 John R. Wooden Award candidate, is averaging 17.3 points, 4.7 rebounds, 3.7 assists and 2.3 steals per game. The 6-foot-5 senior, who was not seriously recruited to CU when Ricardo Patton was still the coach, will likely play in four NCAA Tournaments during his college career.

"He has meant everything. You get cornerstone guys and Matt's one of those cornerstone guys," Gonzaga head coach Mark Few said. "He's just a guy who people know is one of the all-time great Zags. Matt will be remembered."

Gonzaga's roster includes three players from Canada, two from Texas, one from Germany and a legendary last name from Spokane (John Stockton's son David).

But the kid from Highlands Ranch has been the face of Zags hoops for the past few seasons and is featured on the program's 2009-10 media guide.

"We're kind of able to recruit somewhat nationally now and when we saw Matt we thought he'd be a great fit for us," Few said. "We liked everything about him."

Bzdelik, of course, would love to have Bouldin in Boulder. That's kind of how Few feels about Cory Higgins, who was not highly recruited out of Danville, Calif.

Gonzaga, which plays in the West Coast Conference, was among the many teams that failed to uncover CU's hidden gem.

"He could start and play for anybody in the country. He's probably someone looking to play at the next level," Few said of Higgins, who is averaging 23.3 points and shooting 70 percent from the field through three games. "They did a great job evaluating him and recruiting him. He was a late sign. They've done a nice job developing him and he has done a nice job himself."

Every CU player who takes the court must play well in order to beat Gonzaga. Higgins will almost certainly have to steal the spotlight from Bouldin today to keep the Bufs out of the loser's bracket on Tuesday.

"I love Matt Bouldin," Bzdelik said. "If you watch all the players from all the teams, Matt might be the most unassuming looking player. But in my mind he's one of the top three or four players in this whole tournament."

Bufs staying focused

After a long day of traveling to get here, the first thing Bzdelik did when the Buffs landed was bus the team to a local high school for a 90-minute practice. During a coaches press conference on Sunday, Bzdelik made quick work of his media obligations so CU could hit the practice court again.

"This is a real test mentally as well as physically to keep your focus and competitive spirit for at least 120 minutes of intense basketball in a three-day period," Bzdelik said.

Bzdelik would like to win some games this week but said the most important mission for the Buffs is to show signs of improvement in each game.

"I want us to continue to get better and couple that by playing with a competitive spirit," he said.

CU-Gonzaga history

The only other meeting between these two programs was in Honolulu a decade ago. CU defeated Gonzaga 81-77 in the Rainbow Classic on Dec. 30, 1999. ...

Ironically, Richard Fox helped lead the Buffs to the victory over the Bulldogs and then transferred to Gonzaga. He is the color man on the Zags radio broadcast team ...

CU associate head coach Steve McClain pulled a major upset in the NCAA Tournament against Gonzaga in 2002 when his Wyoming Cowboys advanced with a 73-66 victory in the first round to end the Zags' season at 29-4. McClain's team lost to Arizona, another program competing in Maui, in the second round. ...

Shane Harris-Tunks was going to play in the Maui Invitational no matter what. The freshman center from Australia also visited Gonzaga and Vanderbilt before deciding to play for CU.

Notable

Higgins' 70 points through three games is the highest by any CU player through the first three games since the formation of the Big 12. David Harrison had the previous high (67 points in 2002-03). ...

Alec Burks has 54 points in his first three college games. That's the most by a true freshman at CU since Chauncey Billups scored 64 points in his first three games of the 1995-96 season. ...

The Buffs are looking for their first 4-0 start since the 1998-99 season. ...

Bzdelik's next win will be No. 100 as a college coach.

Quotable

"They are going to be a handful for us because of the schemes and the systems they run. Both offensively and defensively, they run things that you don't normally see," Few said of CU. "We've shown we can compete at the highest

level, now we have to show that we can react and play with some sort of intelligence."

[Close Window](#)[Send To Printer](#)