

Bufs leave Maui more confident

Young Bufs competitive against top teams

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LAHAINA, Hawaii -- The Bufs were all business here in this vacation paradise.

Colorado's goal was to win the EA Sports Maui Invitational. Even though the team flew home with a 1-2 record there is no question the players returned to Boulder a more mature and confident bunch.

The feeling and level of play was night and day compared to last year's Rainbow Classic in Honolulu, where CU defeated Coppin State and lost to Buffalo and Vermont.

"Last year I was more of a tourist than a basketball player," sophomore forward Austin Dufault said. "I didn't want that to happen against this year."

Gonzaga won the Maui Invitational late Wednesday night. In the first game of the tournament, the Bufs led the Zags by 15 points before falling 76-72.

In the second game, CU overcame an eight-point deficit in the final 50 seconds of regulation to force overtime against Arizona, only to fall 91-87.

And on Wednesday the Bufs, after a predictably sluggish start, woke up in the second half and beat host Chaminade 73-58.

So what do the players take away from the experience?

"We can compete with anyone on the national level," point guard Nate Tomlinson said. "That's something we really wanted to do last year, but we weren't quite ready for it. We've proved to ourselves and everyone else here that we're ready for it. That's the one thing we take away from this tournament."

Suddenly, many of the Big 12 coaches who picked CU to finish last in the conference for a fourth consecutive season have to be a little bit nervous about facing Jeff Bzdelik's team this season.

Cory Higgins, despite a poor game against Chaminade, is clearly one of the best players west of the Mississippi. He went play for play with All-American candidates Matt Bouldin and Nic Wise with 47 points in CU's first two games.

And, more importantly, Higgins had help from Alec Burks, Casey Crawford, Marcus Relphorpe, Dufault, Tomlinson and others during the tournament.

"It's completely different," Higgins said. "This team has flipped 180 degrees. Last year I think we would have come out hoping we could compete, hoping we could stay in the game, and just see what happens after 40 minutes. This year we stepped on the court expecting to win."

Last season the Bufs lost eight games by five points or less. The next step for the program will be finding a way to win close games against quality opponents.

That was the difference between playing in the seventh-place game of the Maui Invitational and watching Gonzaga cut down the nets.

"We're not really into moral victories and things like that, but I think it's good for the young guys to see that we can compete against these teams. We should start beating them pretty soon," Dufault said. "I think I speak for all of us when I say that we have the confidence that we can beat anybody in the country. It doesn't matter who we play, we'll go up

against anybody. That's the mindset we have after this tournament."

CU athletic director Mike Bohn flew home with the team to begin the tough task of selling Dan Hawkins as the head coach of the disappointing football program for a fifth season.

Perhaps the men's basketball team is finally ready to give long suffering Buffs fans something to cheer about this winter.

"What I took away from this experience is having the opportunity to be around a lot of national college basketball experts and coaches and having the opportunity to talk about what we're doing to try and make our program great," Bohn said. "It was certainly gratifying to have people recognize that we have a great coaching staff that has taken no shortcuts and we have a team that plays with great intensity and commitment. ...

"We still have a very young team, but hopefully many of our fans will come out and watch our team continue to grow."

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