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## Deeper squad could equal deeper season

Men's basketball team shoots for more depth

By David Starcer on November 9, 2009

*Editor's note: Welcome to the CU Independent's five-day season preview of Colorado Buffaloes basketball. Each day, we will delve into the world of CU basketball leading up to the men's season-opener against Arkansas-Pine Bluff. On Day 1, we will take a look at the men's basketball team.*

From the head coach on down, the Colorado Buffaloes men's basketball team sees one key to getting into postseason play. It's something that can't be measured in a stat sheet.

The overall depth of the team has improved drastically from a season ago, a year in which only two upperclassmen saw significant playing time for the Buffaloes. Now a year older and more experienced, players and coaches said they hope their increased maturity coupled with some new additions — both young and old — can equate to earning that elusive postseason berth.

"We have to sustain energy for 40 minutes," head basketball coach Jeff Bzdelik said. "We have to do that to have a chance to win. To play at the high level of effort needed to do that, we're going to have to play nine or 10 players."

The depth chart remains a mystery at this point, though senior guard Dwight Thorne II, junior guard Cory Higgins, sophomore point guard Nate Tomlinson and sophomore forward Austin Dufault would be good bets to retain their starting jobs this season. The difference from last year is the number of quality options behind the big contributors and what they offer.

The backcourt took a big hit before the season started with the loss of freshman point guard Shannon Sharpe to season-ending knee surgery, thus putting a slight dent into Bzdelik's backcourt rotation. The high-flying Sharpe, known for his dunking ability (which can be witnessed [here](#)), was expected to share playing time with Tomlinson.

"It's devastating what happened to Shannon," Tomlinson said. "He was going to help us a lot and help me get better every day. I had to play a whole lot last year because we didn't have a real backup, so I'm kind of used to it. But having a year under my belt I feel like I'm a whole lot better, so I'm ready for the challenge."



The good news is the Buffs have multiple players who can bring the ball up but aren't listed as true point guards. Aside from Thorne and Higgins, who have proven they can run Bzdelik's difficult Princeton offense, the 6-foot-6 inch, 185-pound freshman guard Alec Burks should see time on the court and will be counted on to pick up the slack left by Sharpe's absence.

There is also junior college transfer Marcus Relphorde, a 6-foot-7 inch forward who can play four positions and may also be counted on to play some point forward, similar to what LeBron James does for the NBA's Cleveland Cavaliers.

"With my versatility I feel like I can bring a lot of different things [to the team]," Relphorde said. "I can be unselfish and pass the ball, I can rebound, score in different ways and just try to make things happen for my teammates."

The frontcourt has depth as well, with Dufault and Casey Crawford returning from last season and newcomers Relphorde, Shane Harris-Tunks and Keegan Hornbuckle joining the mix. Dufault showed flashes of potential last season, averaging 8.2 points and 3.7 rebounds, but admits there are phases of his game that still need improvement.

"I was weak around the rim when I finished, expecting to get fouls called," Dufault said. "But if you double-clutch in the Big 12 [Conference], you won't get those calls. I worked on going to the rim strong this summer, so I think in that area I've improved."

Rebounding, especially on defense, was an Achilles heel for the Buffs last season. That deficiency cost the team some close games last year.

Dufault said hitting the glass has become priority No. 1 for the more experienced frontcourt.

"Last year a lot of us were thinking, 'Oh, the guy next to me will get it,'" Dufault said. "We had guys leaking out [to the perimeter]. This year, I don't think that will be the case. I think we'll have five guys on the boards because we realize how important it is to winning basketball games."

The one other area the team has been working on is keeping their intensity, focus and energy up for 40 minutes and not letting up for portions of the game. The squad's recent practices as well as a scrimmage against Utah revealed they are still searching for the consistency needed to be a big time competitor.

"We've had some real good quarters, had some good stints against Utah when we played really well," Relphorde said. "We just need to be more consistent with our intensity, especially on the defensive end. But everything is starting to come along and I think we'll be all right."

With less than a week to go before basketball season officially starts in Boulder, CU fans should at least be curious to see what this team is capable of. While everyone knows what to expect out of Higgins and Thorne, it may be the play of the team's newfound depth that may be the pleasant surprise fans have been waiting for.

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