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Bzdelik says all CU hoop newcomers to contribute

By **TOM KENSLE** |  No Comments

Newcomers attracted much of the interest Friday at Colorado's men's basketball media day. And for good reason. Buffaloes coach Jeff Bzdelik said he expects all five to be a factor this season.

"Each in his own way will contribute," Bzdelik said.

Bzdelik was asked to give a thumbnail analysis of his five newbies.

Marcus Relphorde, 6-foot-6 junior forward, transfer from Indian Hills Community College (Iowa) — "He's the one that I expect the most out of. Marcus is from a great basketball area outside the city of Chicago. So he grew up understanding passion and competitiveness and the game. ... He's a tough (player to) guard because he's versatile. He can play four positions. He's very skilled. He can make a 3. He can drive it off the dribble, both ways. He can finish. He can post up. He can take a defensive board and go coast-to-coast. He's an intelligent, unselfish player."

Shannon Sharpe, 6-1 freshman guard, Centennial HS, Corona, Calif. — "He's one year removed out of high school. He's 190, 195 pounds. He's extremely athletic, a tenacious defender. He's a 94-foot defender. He can take a hit when he's driving to the hole and finish. Like Marcus, he's from an area of the country where basketball is extremely important."

Alec Burks, 6-6 freshman guard, Grandview (Mo.) HS — "Alec grew a couple of inches since we signed him. He's very long, very athletic. He's talented. Extremely talented. He can go make a play in a variety of ways. As soon as he understands the physicalness and intensity level at which this game is played at this level, I'll go out on the limb to say this ... he has a chance to be really special."

Shane Harris-Tunks, 6-11 freshman center-forward, Australian Institute of Sport — "He has a lot of experience internationally. He's strong. He's going to help us inside as a wide body."

Keegan Hornbuckle, 6-7 forward, Campbell Hall HS, Westlake Village, Calif. — "Probably the guy that's not spoken about a lot is Hornbuckle. He's an athletic, intelligent basketball player. He's got a great upside, great upside."

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things like that."

Rick is two years older than Cory, but little brother started to outgrow him in junior high. And, even worse, started beating him on the court.

"He was mad for the first couple of months, but he got used to it," Cory said. "He knew it wasn't going to change."

To his credit, Rick -- who is listed at 6-foot-1 and averaged 1.2 points at Cal-Poly -- has never been bitter about Cory's 6-4 frame and naturally smooth game.

"I didn't get any of the height and I think he can even jump higher. It's not fair," Rick said with a smile. "We were the same height my whole life, everybody thought we were twins. I had maybe a half-inch on him all the way until eighth grade. In eighth grade he shot right past me and never looked back."

Rick, 22, said he vaguely remembers the end of his dad's playing career, which included stints with the Bulls, Kings, Warriors and Cavs from 1982-95. Cory, 20, said Rod was able to balance professional basketball and spending time with his sons on and off the court.

"He did an excellent job there. He couldn't have done it any better," Cory said. "He made us love the game and made us have that fire that he has."

This has to be the year

Jeff Bzdelik's first recruit at CU was a good one -- Cory Higgins.

The former NBA head coach knew the unheralded prospect from Danville, Calif., was still undecided on a college and wisely called Rod Higgins to see if his son would be interested in helping to rebuild the Buffs.

As a true freshman, Cory started all 32 games and averaged 8.3 points, 4.3 rebounds, 2.3 assists and 1.1 steals while voluntarily taking a backseat to Big 12-tested seniors Richard Roby and Marcus Hall.

Last season Cory earned third-team All-Big 12 honors, averaging 17.4 points and 5.4 rebounds on a 9-22 team.

After spending the summer working out with NBA players -- Cory even coached youngsters at Paul Pierce's camp -- the focus of Bzdelik's best player is now on doing whatever it takes to win.

"Cory is definitely very important to this program. I feel like this year he's much more vocal. That's one area that I feel he's grown in," sophomore forward Austin Dufault said. "He has always been a great leader, but he was more of a quiet leader last year and led by example. This year he has spoken to the younger guys a lot and everything he says we can learn from."

Rick watched CU games on television or tracked them on the Internet the past two seasons. He wasn't surprised to see his brother emerge into the on-court face of the program last winter.

"That first year he played really well, but it was more of a feeling out process. He's always been like that. He likes to get used to his surroundings and then show what he's really capable of," Rick said.

Bzdelik said the next step in the evolution of Cory's game is to become a more consistent player on the defensive end and to finish more consistently at the rim.

The coach also said that No. 11 won't have to play 38 minutes a game with the addition of five promising newcomers (not including Rick).

"I feel like this has to be the year. The last couple years there have been a few excuses and this year we have no excuses, so this year has to be it," Cory said on the subject of winning at CU. "The vibe is way more competitive than last year, it's not as easy to take over your position, you have to challenge for your position. Like coach said, we are so deep this year, so if people aren't playing right he's going to put other players in."

Just meant to be

Since the days when Rick and Cory played together at Monte Vista High School, their mother, Concetta Higgins, had always hoped that they would be able to play together again in college.

After averaging just 4.8 minutes and 0.6 points for Cal-Poly during the 2007-08 season, Rick decided to take a break from basketball. Cory asked him if he would ever consider relocating to Boulder, and the CU coaching staff was receptive to the idea of welcoming another Higgins to the family.

"It means a lot. It makes me feel more at home," Cory said. "Having him here brings back a lot of memories. It's going to be a lot of fun."

"I couldn't tell you how it happened that we ended up here," Rick said. "I think this was just meant to be. ... This was just a perfect situation with me and Cory being so close. We talked every day as it was and I watched all of their games. This is just a dream come



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Woelk: Newcomers could help CU immediately

By Neill Woelk Camera Sports Writer
Boulder Daily Camera

Posted: 10/16/2009 11:57:52 PM MDT

Right off the top, some good news from Friday's Colorado men's basketball media day:

Jeff Bzdelik did not vow to win 20 games this season.

Jeff Bzdelik's son will not be playing point guard for the Buffs.

So far, so good. Unnecessary melodrama has been avoided.

But it does get better. Seriously. What had all the appearances of a productive offseason for the Buffaloes means that Bzdelik's team will be improved this season. Not to go out on a limb or anything, but one should be able to safely assume the Buffs will be better because:

a) They have almost everyone returning from last year; and

b) It would be difficult -- impossible? -- to be any worse. The Buffs finished dead last in the Big 12 a year ago with a 1-15 record in conference play and a 9-22 mark overall. Those are numbers rarely seen even in Colorado's record book; the odds against seeing them posted in back-to-back years have to be in the Buffs' favor.

Even Bzdelik, who has never let optimism cloud his realism, sincerely believes the Buffs will be a better club.

"We have more depth, we're more mature, we're stronger and we're more athletic," Bzdelik said.

Again. Not exactly a monumental achievement in itself because ... well, all that last-place stuff.

But enough negativity. We won't go there anymore. Promise.

New year, new start -- and some new players.

Emphasis on the new players. Five of them, to be exact, and it won't be a surprise if most of them make some kind of significant contribution to this year's squad.

Best bet to make some noise early? That would be juco transfer Marcus Relphorde, a 6-foot-7, 220-pounder who can play big forward, small forward, shooting guard and even point guard if necessary. He'll almost assuredly be in the starting lineup from Day One.

"He's the one I expect the most out of," Bzdelik said.

Relphorde also seems to be the player his teammates expect the most out of. Ask them who's been most impressive in preseason drills, and the answer is nearly unanimous.

But Relphorde isn't the only new face expected to make himself familiar to Buff fans in a hurry.

Asked about the point guard position, Bzdelik said he could see "Shannon and Nate going 50-50."

That would be sophomore Nate Tomlinson, who started 28 games for the Buffs last year, and incoming freshman Shannon Sharpe, whose pure athletic ability made him a minor YouTube sensation among Buff fans when he signed with Colorado.

Tomlinson had his troubles at times last year against more athletic Big 12 guards. While Sharpe's inexperience will be a factor, he'll fit right in when it comes to physical skills. The 6-1, 195-pounder is a tenacious defender and he's stout enough that he allegedly received some interest from the Southern Cal football program a couple of years ago.

Then there's 6-6 shooting guard Alex Burks, who happens to play the same position as the Buffs' best player, Cory Higgins. That doesn't, though, mean Burks will be spending lots of time on the bench. Rather, it's quite likely coaches will find a way to get the player who has been one of the leading scorers and rebounders in preseason drills on the floor as much as possible.

"He's very long, very athletic," Bzdelik said. "He has the chance to be really special."

One freshman Buff fans are anxious to see is 6-11 Shane Harris-Tunks. The Aussie drew attention from such schools as Gonzaga, but it's doubtful that he's physically mature enough yet to do battle night in and night out with Big 12 centers. Instead, he'll likely be part of a "big man by committee" as Colorado attempts to up the pace this year and perhaps put a little full-court pressure on opponents.

And, it won't be a surprise to see 6-7 freshman forward Keegan Hornbuckle log some consequential playing time. Hornbuckle was good enough in high school to get a scholarship offer from Arizona; Bzdelik calls him a player with "great upside."

But all the newcomers won't add enough if the Buffs' veterans haven't gotten better.

For a player such as Higgins, that's no easy order. A third-team all-conference player a year ago who led the Buffs in points, rebounds, steals and minute played, he won't be expected to carry such a load this year. But he'll still be expected to be the floor leader, and will almost certainly be the first player opposing coaches try to stop.

And, the Buffs will need significant improvement and contributions from big men Austin Dufault and Casey Crawford. Dufault, a sophomore, had his moments a year ago, but wore down in Big 12 play. Crawford, a physically gifted junior, must overcome mental blocks that limited his playing time and production.

But it all adds up to what should be an improved team, and what could be a competitive team.

"We have to play with a collective chip on our shoulders," Bzdelik said. "We need an air about us; a collective swagger. ... We have some question marks. But I feel good about this team."

That's a step up.

But then, that's about the only direction the Buffs can go from



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Bzdelik Cautiously Optimistic About Buffs Season

BOULDER, Colo. (AP) — Jeff Bzdelik is a realist. Never one to candy coat matters during two-plus seasons coaching the NBA's Denver Nuggets and two years at the University of Colorado, he remains one as he begins his third year with the Buffaloes.

"I understand how we can do all of these wonderful things, but the bottom line is to win," Bzdelik said Friday. "We have to start turning the corner, I understand that. I've been around a long time and I understand what's expected of me."

Colorado has been a collective 21-42 in two seasons under Bzdelik. And 4-28 in the Big 12 Conference games.

Yet, Bzdelik willingly offered a glimpse of optimism as the Buffaloes prepare for the 2009-10 campaign.

"As we approach this year, I feel like we are poking our head up above the horizon, out of this deep hole that we dug ourselves into," Bzdelik said. "I think we are going to be deeper, we are going to be stronger, we are going to be more mature and we are going to be a better basketball team."

The team will be deeper, thanks in part to a recruiting class that Bzdelik feels will fill a number of holes. The class includes versatile Marcus Relphorde, guard Alec Burks, forward Keegan Hornbuckle and center Shane Harris-Tunks.

"He (Relphorde) is the one I expect the most out of," Bzdelik said. "I expect more out of him because of his experience and maturity."

He sees the infusion of these four as allowing him to rest top returning scorers Cory Higgins (17.4) and Dwight Thorne (12.0) when required.

"Last year, Dwight and Cory played 36, 37, 38 minutes a game. They wore down. They took possessions off," Bzdelik said. "That won't happen again this year."

The scoring load could also be more balanced than last year when Higgins led the team in scoring 18 times and Thorne did eight times. They shared scoring honors once.

"I think it's a good thing," Thorne said. "I think our efficiency might go up with reduced minutes because we'll play harder longer."

Another issue that Bzdelik has vowed to correct is the team's glaring rebounding deficiency of a year ago. Colorado was outrebounded 24 times, tied twice and won the rebounding battle in only five games.

"Rebounding is a will and a want to and players understand if you don't rebound the basketball, you won't win," Bzdelik said. "We work on it in practice."

Early workouts have also indicated this will be a good shooting team.

Still, challenges remain for the Buffaloes, who remain a young team with only one senior.

"We face a difficult non-conference schedule coupled with what many consider to be the Big 12 at its very, very best in its history," Bzdelik said. "We have to grow up fast."

Higgins takes it a step farther.

"This has to be the year. There have been a lot of excuses for us the past two years," Higgins said. "This year we have to get it done."

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The Bz word is rebounding

Bzdelik and team preach rebounding at men's media day

By David Starcer on October 17, 2009

Hoops fans, basketball season is rapidly approaching and the motto of the 2009 Colorado Buffaloes men's team is simple: Rebound the basketball.

After a 9-22 campaign in 2008 in which the team went 1-15 in Big 12 Conference play, it became more apparent with each passing game that the inability of the undersized Buffs to outrebound their opponent hurt them in close games.

"We lost 11 games by an average of four-and-a-half points per game," said CU head coach Jeff Bzdelik, who's entering his third season with the program. "In those 11 games when the game was in the balance, one more rebound or one more basket or one more defensive stop makes the difference."

Bzdelik hammered home the fact Colorado was a young team last year, fielding only one senior and three juniors. He said their record was a poor indicator on the team's performance.

"If we win six of those 11 games, then we have 15 wins last year with a team of basically all freshmen and sophomores," Bzdelik said.

Anyone who paid attention to CU's struggles a year ago knows Bzdelik is speaking the truth about his team's rebounding, or lack thereof. Many of those close losses could've gone the other way for the Buffaloes. In the end, though, the size and strength of big bruisers such as Blake Griffin (Oklahoma), Cole Aldrich (Kansas), and Dexter Pittman (Texas) were too much to overcome.

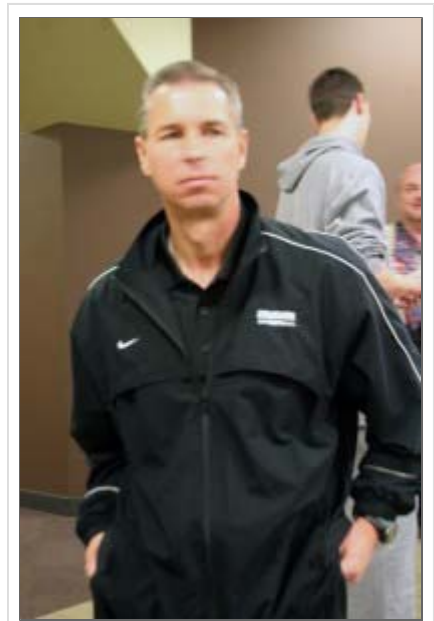
To try and counter their Big 12 rivals, the Buffs have some new and old faces in the low post to try and win the rebounding battle. Sophomore Austin Dufault (6-foot-9, 230 pounds) and junior Casey Crawford (6-9, 245), who said he added 20 pounds of muscle in the offseason, are two returning players who will be counted on to play a big role down low.

"We've been working a lot in the offseason on strength," Crawford said. "With me, I'm able to move people a lot easier to go and get that rebound whereas last year, I was in a jumping competition."

Also in the mix is freshman Shane Harris-Tunks, a 6-11, 225-pound freshman from Australia. Harris-Tunks should see some action at center. Needless to say, the tallest man on the team knows what his top priority is.

"Coach talks about [rebounding] every day at practice," Harris-Tunks said.

But hitting the boards isn't the only thing the Aussie can do.



Head coach Jeff Bzdelik speaks about the upcoming season at media day Friday. (CU Independent/Ilana Finer)

"We run a lot of back door cuts, so my passing ability really suits the offense," he said. "And defensively, I can help this team a lot. I'm used to playing against some really big bodies."

Another new and possibly key addition to the team is junior college transfer Marcus Relphorde, a 6-7, 220-pound forward who can also play at guard. Relphorde's expected contributions to the team are more on the scoreboard than the glass.

"He's the one that I expect the most out of and he knows that," Bzdelik said.

Relphorde played his freshman season at Saint Louis University under head coach Rick Majerus. He spent last year at Indian Hills Community College in Iowa, where he helped them to a 30-3 record and averaged 14 points per game in 12 of the team's last 13 games. Putting up those kinds of numbers in the Big 12 will be a more difficult task, but the coaches and players brag that Relphorde has the skills to do it.

"He can make a three or he can drive it off the dribble and finish both ways," Bzdelik said.

Senior guard Dwight Thorne II and junior guard Cory Higgins, the two leading scorers from last year, has been impressed by Relphorde as well.

"He's a matchup problem," Thorne said. "He causes havoc. If you put someone small on him, he can body them. If you put someone big on him, he can go around them."

Higgins added, "He's strong and physical, but I guarantee that their forwards won't be able to guard him because he plays like another guard out there."

Relphorde will need to put up big numbers to help out Thorne and Higgins, who at times were CU's only offense. Bzdelik said it forced him to play the duo 36-to-38 minutes a game, something the coach doesn't want to happen this year.

Another interesting position battle will be at point guard. Incumbent starter Nate Tomlinson will be splitting time with freshman Shannon Sharpe, who will be wearing No. 2 in black and gold and not No. 84 in blue and orange.

Tomlinson, a sophomore who averaged seven points and three assists last season, and Sharpe will be counted on to be more efficient with the basketball. Colorado was 7-6 last year when Tomlinson had more assists than turnovers, which again goes to show how good the team can be if they play well consistently.

Despite all the talk about rebounding, a third scorer, better interior defense and more efficiency, it still remains talk. Talk doesn't equate to wins, which is something the players on the team and the fans in the stands have been waiting for.

"I feel like this has to be the year," said Higgins, who was named All-Big 12 Conference third team last season. "The last couple of years there have been a few excuses and this year, we have no excuses."

Thorne, in his final year at Boulder, is done waiting for success to come.

"I was telling coach the other day that my time here has been fun," Thorne said. "But it hasn't been very fulfilling. I want to get into postseason play."

As for the coach's take on putting together a winning season, something he has yet to do in his tenure in Boulder, he shined a somewhat harsh light on himself.

"The bottom-line is to win and we've got to start turning the corner," Bzdelik said. "I've been around a long time and I understand what is expected of me."

Contact CU Independent Staff Writer David Starcer at David.Starcer@colorado.edu.

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college basketball: cu men

Buffaloes primed for turnaround

By Chris Dempsey
The Denver Post

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BOULDER — The numbers are ugly, yet encouraging, says Colorado coach Jeff Bzdelik and his players. This season, they insist, will be different from the last.

It can only go up.

"We have to play with a collective chip on our shoulder and air and swagger," Bzdelik said Friday during CU basketball media day. "We need to get that here."

Getting any kind of swagger may be easier said than done, but Bzdelik says he has addressed the biggest problem areas coming off a 9-22 season — athleticism and rebounding. The Buffs were minus-6 in rebounding margin last year, a big contributor to the team losing seven games by five points or fewer.

"Rebounding is a will and a want-to," Bzdelik said. "The players understand that if you don't rebound the basketball, you won't win."

And Colorado wants to win. Desperately.

"I understand that we can do all these wonderful things, but the bottom line is to win, and we've got to start turning the corner," said Bzdelik, who is 21-42 in two seasons at CU.

Bzdelik will lean on five newcomers to help get the job done, starting with 6-foot-7 junior forward Marcus Relphorde, a transfer from Indian Hills (Iowa) Community College who played for Rick Majerus at St. Louis.

"He's the one I expect the most out of, and he knows that," Bzdelik said. "He can play four positions on the court. He's very skilled. He can make a 3(-pointer), or he can drive it both ways off the dribble. He can finish, and he can post up. He can take a defensive board and go coast-to-coast."

Then there is motivation. The preseason Big 12 coaches poll ranks Colorado last.

"We're tired of people just walking over us," said junior Cory Higgins, who led CU in scoring, rebounding and steals last season. "We probably have to do more to get that respect, and we know that. And we're going to do that this year."

Higgins and his teammates say they've seen positive signs in practice, but the story will be told when the regular season begins Nov. 13. After three "tune-up" games, the Buffs head to the Maui Invitational, where their first opponent will be Gonzaga.

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Bzdelik says extension remains far from mind

By Patrick Ridgell

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BOULDER — Colorado basketball media day had its normal waves of optimism Friday, as any media day usually does.

Then there was this from the head coach: Jeff Bzdelik said Friday that receiving a contract extension is the furthest thing from his mind as he embarks on his third year as coach of CU's men's program. He said, "I only want one if I deserve one."

Bzdelik said deserving one requires he has "a winning season and postseason play," goals the program hasn't reached the past two seasons.

Associate athletic director Tom McGrath said CU has had conversations with Bzdelik about extending his contract, and McGrath said the department received a similar message to the one Bzdelik gave Friday.

"We're pleased Jeff is the coach and excited about what he's done with the program to date," McGrath said. "As soon as he's ready to talk about (an extension), we certainly are as well."

Bzdelik is coming off two seasons at CU that ended with records of 12-20 and 9-22, including last-place Big 12 marks of 3-13 and 1-15. He's also had conversations each of the past two summer with NBA clubs about their coaching vacancies.

CU is a nearly unanimous pick in the Big 12 coaches' preseason poll to finish last in the conference for a third straight year.

The team returns four starters, including Cory Higgins, a third-team all-Big 12 choice last year. But the Buffs will have only one senior for the second year in a row, and some of its five newcomers — four high school signees and a junior college transfer — must contribute.

Bzdelik said transfer Marcus Relphorde, a 6-foot-7 guard, is the one from whom he expects the most.

Bzdelik said the program he inherited from former coach Ricardo Patton had problems he is still trying to overcome.

"Coach Patton did a wonderful, wonderful job when he was here," Bzdelik said. "I think the last year or two (of his tenure), he probably lost his spirit a little bit and things just unraveled in a way — from a GPA standpoint, from a citizenship standpoint and from a competitive spirit standpoint — that put us in the state that we were in.

"My vision is to build this program with a strong foundation of young players, collectively molding them as solid players as a basketball team that when they're juniors and seniors will be mature, deep enough, strong enough and experienced enough to have success in this league."

Part of building the program includes improving facilities. Athletic director Mike Bohn said last summer that he hoped ground could be broken on a proposed practice facility by Christmas.

McGrath said Friday there have been "utility issues" with the project that have arisen while the cooling facility, of which construction of CU's practice facility was supposed to be a part, has been slowed. He said the practice facility continues to move forward, and he thinks there could be some news on it by the first quarter of 2010.

Bzdelik said Friday he does not think about the practice facility.

“We live in a time where everybody is struggling economically, and we will win because of who we are as people, not because of what we have or don’t have,” he said. “The practice facility is the furthest thing from my mind as well. That’s in somebody else’s hands.”

Higgins said he also tries not to think about the proposed facility.

“I haven’t been following it because I don’t want to get caught up in that stuff, thinking it’s going to be here next year when it’s not,” he said. “I just focus on what’s here.”

ESPN.com reported in August that Higgins considered transferring. He said Friday that other programs approached him over the summer, during which he spent time in Charlotte and Las Vegas playing with NBA players and attending camps. But he didn’t want to leave CU.

Higgins said he told those other programs he was not interested.

“Those rumors were never true. I don’t even know how those rumors got out there,” he said. “I’m guessing because of a whole bunch of other people were leaving.

“But I came here as a freshman committed to this program. So I’m going to stay that way. ... I’m happy where I’m at.”

TIP-INS: CU recently hired Drew Long to be the staff’s third assistant coach. He replaces Charles Baker, who left the program last spring. Long played at Northwestern and worked with CU’s video department in 2008-09.

Read Patrick Ridgell’s CU sports blog at www.timescall.com/blogs/ridgell. He can be reached at pridgell@times-call.com.