

Kritza's Buffs face 3 top-10 teams in row

CU next faces No. 10 Cyclones, No. 8 Huskers, No. 2 `Horns

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Is there such a thing as rookie hazing for coaches?

It has to feel like it when first-year Colorado coach Liz Kritza takes a good look at the Big 12 volleyball schedule.

The Buffs open conference play tonight at No. 10 Iowa State before home games against No. 8 Nebraska and No. 2 Texas.

These are clearly the three teams to beat in the Big 12 this year, although Baylor is ranked 24th and both Kansas State and Texas A&M are receiving votes in the latest AVCA top 25 poll.

CU's inexperienced squad finished nonconference play with a 5-4 record. The players say they are confident they can compete with the elite teams in the conference because the team is improving from set to set as it adjusts to Kritza's demanding system.

"The best way for our team to approach what we've got coming in these first three games is to look at it as a huge opportunity," Kritza said. "We have to play the top teams, not just in our conference, but in the country. For a young team really trying to master a system and play a high level of volleyball ... to be one of the best teams you have to play them."

The Buffs upset then No. 2 and undefeated Nebraska last year. Even though the program couldn't build any momentum off the upset and a coaching change was made at the end of the season, the result does give the veteran players a belief that they can do more than just compete in the next three games.

"I really feel like we're kind of on the upswing," said redshirt sophomore Rosie Steinhaus, who had a career-high 14 kills during CU's 25-19, 28-26, 26-24 sweep of Cal Poly last Saturday. "We're learning a lot of new things and kind of putting them into our play and we've really been progressing. ...

"To play against those caliber of teams will be awesome. Every night it just depends on who comes out fighting."

CU has been without Schylur Edelman, one of the most talented and experienced players on the roster, all season due to a high ankle sprain. She is not expected to be in the lineup in any of the next three games.

"What's good is when she's been out the entire team has actually been rallying around the idea of the team being our strength and the system being our strength," Kritza said.

No matter what happens on the court this week, the rookie Big 12 coach is going to use the schedule she was dealt as a recruiting tool.

"We're in a very unique situation and it's a very good recruiting point to make to very competitive elite players," Kritza said. "You don't get to play three top 10 teams in the same week anywhere but in the Big 12."

Not left out

Speaking of tough schedules ... CU's soccer team, fresh off a 3-1 loss at No. 14 Florida in Gainesville, will play No. 3 Stanford on Friday in Palo Alto.

Despite a 4-3 record to date, the Buffs are still ranked No. 23 based on the competition they've faced. Bill Hempen's team has defeated two ranked teams (Oklahoma State and Denver) and lost to two ranked teams (Florida and Illinois).

The Buffs will wrap up their appearance in the Stanford Invitational against No. 12 Santa Clara on Sunday.

Notable

Jenny Barringer will be honored during halftime of Saturday's football game against Wyoming at Folsom Field. She will be presented her award for being selected as the Honda Track & Field Athlete of the Year. ... The men's golf team will be in action at the Air Force Invitational this Saturday and Sunday while the women's team will compete at a tournament in Albuquerque, N.M.

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