

# CU Buffs basketball team motivated by Maui

## Tournament months away, but Colorado already hard at work

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If you drop by the Coors Events Center early enough you can already hear the sounds of the 2009-10 basketball season echoing off the hardwood.

Sneakers are squeaking, balls are bouncing and coaches are cackling.

After three consecutive seasons of 20-loss purgatory, the Buffs are motivated by a scheduled trip to paradise.

CU, despite a lack of tradition and success in men's college basketball, will be in the national spotlight when Jeff Bzdelik's team competes in the EA Sports Maui Invitational from Nov. 23-25.

The Buffs open the nation's premier early season tournament against Gonzaga. They will play either Arizona or Wisconsin in the second round. Cincinnati, Maryland and Vanderbilt are on the other side of the bracket.

And facing host Chaminade in the seventh-place game is an unacceptable scenario.

Even for the Big 12's basement tenant.

"Everyone is really looking forward to it. We definitely want to make an impact over there and put ourselves on the map, hopefully, early in the season," sophomore point guard Nate Tomlinson said before a workout this week. "We're just getting ready right now, doing all we can do to get ready for that."

The Buffs have a lot of work to do before they are ready for prime time (the Maui Invitational will be aired on the ESPN family of networks).

Bzdelik needs Tomlinson, Austin Dufault and Trey Eckloff to play at a much higher level as sophomores, the way Cory Higgins improved his game after his freshman season.

Junior college transfer Marcus Relphorde will be asked to drastically improve the team's rebounding and take some of the focus and pressure off of Higgins' shoulders.

And freshmen Alec Burks, Shane Harris-Tunks, Shannon Sharpe and Keegan Hornbuckle need to live up to the hype and also remain in the program.

"One of the coaches said that if we didn't do anything this offseason we'd still be a better team next year," Dufault said during an interview with the Camera over the summer. "But we've been working extremely hard this offseason, and hopefully with the new guys coming in, combined with the experience we got last year, we can put it together and have a good year."

CU opens Bzdelik's third season with some cupcakes -- Arkansas-Pine Bluff, Coppin State and Texas Southern -- before saying Aloha to the big boys.

"I think that's going to be a huge opportunity for us to play against some of the best of the best," junior shooting guard Levi Knutson said. "I got excited just looking at the tournament link on-line. I think it's something we're looking forward to because it's a great opportunity for us to win some big games."

Bzdelik's team was 0-10 in true road games last season. The Buffs' only victory outside of Boulder was an 80-63 win over Coppin State at the Rainbow Classic in Honolulu, but CU finished 1-2 in the less prestigious Hawaiian tournament with losses to Buffalo and Vermont.

"I didn't know about it until I got here and they told me about the schedule," Burks said of the Maui Invitational. "Free trip to Hawaii. Man, that's going to be great."

The older players, desperate for some wins and respect, will have to make sure everyone on the flight to Maui is all business.

If not, it's going to be paradise lost for the Buffs.

"There are a lot of good teams going to be there," Dufault said. "And we realize if we win a couple games or win the whole thing, that would be pretty special and pretty impressive. That would give us some national attention."

Unfortunately, so would a loss to Chaminade.

"The games are going to be on ESPN," Burks said. "That's just extra motivation for us to get ready and show people we can play."

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