

Alec Burks' Colorado journey an eventful one

Sophomore fulfilling NBA dream may help Boyle, Buffs on recruiting trail

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Who was the most talented recruit of the Dan Hawkins era?

Alec Burks.

On Sept. 18, 2008, the skinny, wide-eyed kid from Grandview, Mo., made an official visit to Boulder after Jeff Bzdelik had discovered the unappreciated prospect that summer.

That fateful evening Colorado beat No. 21 West Virginia in overtime on national television. Burks joined the student body in the storming of Folsom Field following the upset victory.

And the long-suffering basketball program turned out to be the big winner. Burks committed to CU instead of Kansas State and quickly developed into one of the greatest Buffs to ever lace them up.

"I'm very amazed," Burks reflected on the journey from lightly recruited high school player to projected NBA lottery pick. "A lot of people didn't expect this from me, and I probably didn't expect this from myself. A lot of people felt like I was going to come out here, go back home, and work at the local price shop or something.

"I proved a lot of people wrong. I worked hard for this day."

During a press conference on Thursday at the Dal Ward Center, Burks announced that he will not return to CU for his junior season, opting instead to enter the NBA Draft.

The decision was not a surprise to anyone paying attention to the 2010-11 season. Burks, a unanimous All-Big 12 First Team selection and Wooden Award finalist, averaged 20.5 points and 6.5 rebounds to lead the Buffs to 24 wins and to the National Invitation Tournament semifinals.

Bzdelik believed Burks could be a great player at CU from the moment he first saw him play. When Burks sprouted from 6-2 to 6-6 before packing his bags for Boulder, the longtime NBA scout and former Denver Nuggets head coach realized a future professional was joining the program.

"I'm going to go out on a limb and say this," the cautious Bzdelik said during Burks' freshman season. "It's up to both him and me for him to realize his potential, and if he does, he has a chance to be really special."

One and (almost) done

Burks made Kansas and Missouri rue the decision not to recruit the local prep star when he averaged 17.1 points and shot 53.8 percent from the field en route to Big 12 Freshman of the Year honors.

The Buffs had suffered three consecutive last-place finishes in the Big 12 before Burks arrived. During the 2009-10 season CU finished eighth in the conference and would have qualified for the NIT if not for a loss to Texas Tech in the opening round of the conference tournament.

The program would instead experience some April madness as Bzdelik abruptly left to accept the head coaching position at Wake Forest last spring.

When CU athletic director Mike Bohn decided to ignore Burks' request to promote assistant Steve McClain to head coach, the disgruntled star was "80 percent gone."

"I was hurt that they would not choose coach McClain and I thought I should go somewhere that they treat people better," Burks explained.

But Burks' mother, Dina, told her son not to rush into an emotional decision. The family would give the new coach a chance to make his pitch.

Which also makes Burks the most talented recruit of the Tad Boyle era to date.

"I was in full-blown recruiting mode," Boyle said. "This year is a little different. A lot of people have asked, 'What are you doing to try and keep Alec?' The role myself and our staff and the players over these last few weeks has not been recruiting. It has been supporting him and the decision he is faced with. Alec has had an unbelievable two years at Colorado. Our job has been to support him and guide him and be there for him for whatever he may need."

The relationship between Burks and Boyle wasn't always been smooth between the lines.

After a loss to San Francisco on Nov. 20 -- a game in which the much-hyped sophomore scored 29 points on 20 shots with NBA scouts watching court side at historic War Memorial Gym -- Burks and Cory Higgins found themselves on the bench for the next game against Alcorn State.

Burks responded with a better defensive effort in a 40-point blowout victory at the Coors Events Center, finishing with 22 points on 8-for-13 shooting with six rebounds, a block and a steal in 19 minutes.

"I feel like I was trying to prove (Boyle) wrong and show him I could play defense. That was my main thing coming off the bench," Burks said that night. "He showed us who the best five defensive players from the San Francisco game were, and I wasn't one of them. So I knew I wasn't going to start."

It was the only game Burks and Higgins did not start during their stellar collegiate careers. From that point on, Boyle and the marquee players he inherited were on the same page.

CU finished fifth in the Big 12, made it to the Big 12 Tournament semifinals for the first time, and responded to an NCAA Tournament snub by making it to the NIT Final Four at Madison Square Garden.

"It has been a great year for Colorado basketball on a lot of different levels," Boyle said. "Our team achieved a lot of success on the court and as a result of that a lot of our individual players had some nice awards at the end of the season."

Finding the next Alec

Replacing Burks will not be easy for the Buffs. His teammates realized No. 10 was a special breed from the moment he stepped on campus.

"He's just a fun kid. He always brings energy and he's a great teammate. Everyone has seen the things that he can do. I've watched him for two years now and he still finds stuff that I can't believe he does," said center Shane Harris-Tunks, a member of Burks' recruiting class. "Playing pick-up before our freshman season even started he had a couple of those 'Wow!' moments where you knew he was going to be good."

"Once Alec realized what he was capable of he just took off."

There are only a handful of blue blood programs that are able to reload consistently after losing players early to the NBA. Kentucky, for example, reached the Final Four this season despite having a record five players drafted last summer.

CU is not a program that usually needs to worry about the controversial one-and-done trend. Chauncey Billups (1997) and David Harrison (2004) are the only other Buffs to ever leave early for the NBA and did so after their sophomore and junior seasons, respectively.

The coaching staff plans to turn Burks' departure into a selling point on the recruiting trail.

"Especially with all Alec did here, it opens the door for a young kid to say, 'I can do that for you,' " said Rodney Billups, the younger brother of Chauncey and CU's director of basketball operations.

The move to the Pac-12 already helped Boyle sign three freshmen-to-be from the Los Angeles area -- Spencer Dinwiddie, Askia Booker and Damienne Cain -- in November. The trio will try to replace outgoing seniors Higgins, Levi Knutson and Marcus Relporhe.

Jeremy Adams, a 6-5 shooting guard who spent one season in junior college, signed a letter of intent this spring and will help replace Burks.

"I'm proud of Alec. This is something we can use as a positive as we move forward in our recruiting efforts and talking about kids' dreams," Boyle said. "Part of coming to this campus is following your dreams, whether you're a basketball player or if you're a chemical engineer, or a pre-med major. Alec's dream was to play in the NBA. He has realized that at Colorado. That's something we can sell when we go out into homes and talk about future Buffs."

New York, New York

CU's trip to New York last month allowed Chauncey Billups, the Knicks' point guard, to watch the Buffs play at Madison Square Garden.

"Mr. Big Shot" was also able to give Burks some advice having been in his shoes 14 years earlier.

"Chauncey has been wonderful. Not just with Alec, but with the whole Colorado team," Dina Burks said. "He has kind of taken them all under his wing and given them guidance. He's a really good mentor, he's a good man, and he's a blessing for the university."

As Billups' stellar career winds down, Burks has a chance to become CU's next NBA star if he continues to work hard and develop a game to match his talent.

"The perfect storm would be Chauncey, this is his free agent year, if he ended up on the same team with Alec," Rodney Billups said. "That would be a perfect Buff story. It's time for some new CU energy in the NBA from a basketball standpoint. It's great for the program."

On March 29, the Buffs were trailing Alabama by one point with possession of the ball and only seconds remaining in the NIT semifinal.

Burks pulled up for the winning shot. The ball bounced off the back of the rim. The Buffs' season ended with a 62-61 loss and without a storybook ending.

On June 23, less than three months after Burks' CU career ended with the agony of defeat at Madison Square Garden, he is expected to be back at the "World's Most Famous Arena" to shake hands with David Stern after the commissioner calls his name early in the NBA Draft.

"Honestly, the first day of pick-ups when we got here, I could see his game was extra unique and effortless," said CU point guard Shannon Sharpe, one of Burks' best friends. "I'm happy for this man and what he's about to go accomplish."

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