

CU Buffs' Spears working hard for wins

CU senior leading effort to avoid rebuilding year

By Joshua Linden Camera Sports Writer
Boulder Daily Camera

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Brittany

Spears admits that she had chalked up her senior season as a rebuilding year when she first heard of the Colorado women's basketball team's coaching change.

Coming off of a 13-17 season in which the Buffaloes went 3-13 in Big 12 Conference play, there are plenty of repairs to be made.

New head coach Linda Lappe and her staff, however, quickly put to rest any fears Spears might have had that her final season would be written off in favor of building for the future.

"She said it's not going to be a rebuilding year, because we have three seniors," Spears said Monday. "She said she's not starting over with all freshmen or freshmen and sophomores. She said this will be a good year if we work hard."

The declaration was music to Spears' ears. As she puts a wrap on summer school this week, the 6-foot-1 forward from Pasadena, Calif., enters her senior year with a realistic chance to leave CU as the program's most prolific scorer. But as humbling as the scoring record would be, she would like even more to leave on a winning note.

"It's my last year and I want to win in the Big 12," Spears said. "Just knowing this is my last go at it makes me want to work that much harder."

That mentality is why Spears never went home when classes ended in May. She stuck around and took summer classes in May, June and July, the last of which she finishes this week. And, with most of the rest of the team sticking around Boulder as well, Spears has been leading the way in summer workouts for a squad that will need her more than ever next season.

Spears said the move has paid off in the form of a closer camaraderie with her teammates than she's had in the past, including the four incoming freshmen.

"In the weight room and running, I just try to push everybody to go harder and do what they have to do so we can be the best when we start practicing and playing basketball," Spears said. "We've got chemistry now. I think if I would have went home I never would have gotten to know (my teammates) like I do now."

Spears' efforts haven't gone unnoticed.

Lappe has been impressed with Spears' work ethic from Day 1 and said it is her star's example that will go a long way in determining whether the team can shake of the rebuilding stigma when the season begins in November.

Lappe said she never had to convince Spears to stick around Boulder this summer. The choice was one Spears said was easy to make.

"I think that's where she's going to make her biggest impact," Lappe said. "I think when you have a player of her caliber other players a lot of times will follow her work ethic. The best teams have their best player who is also their hardest worker."

Despite the focus on a winning season, Spears said it's been difficult not to let the thought of breaking Lisa Van Goor's 25-year-old school record of 2,067 career points creep into her thoughts and even help fuel her summer workouts.

Spears needs 535 points to surpass Van Goor. She has scored 530 and 532, respectively, the last two seasons.

"Of course you think about it because everybody's talking to you about it and mentioning it," said Spears, who is on track to graduate next year with a degree in sociology. "It would be a great feeling and a good accomplishment."

Opposing defenses will likely play a role next season in whether Spears breaks Van Goor's record. Three of the Buffs' other top five scorers have either graduated or transferred, meaning Spears could face even more attention -- though she rightfully notes that defenses have been keying on her her entire career.

Hardly a one-dimensional player, Spears figures to be the Buffs' center of attention regardless of her scoring line. She is also in position to leave CU in the top 5 on the school's rebounding, steals and blocked shots charts.

That versatility, Lappe said, is key. The coach said Spears will be called upon this season to do much more than score, from creating opportunities for other teammates to being a lockdown defender.

"We know she's on the verge of breaking all sorts of records," Lappe said. "But I think she'll tell you as much as I'll tell you that those won't mean nearly as much if our team isn't successful. It might mean she has to score 25 points per game for our team to have success. It might mean that she has to score 13 to have our team have success. I think she's willing to do whatever it takes."

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CU women aim for strong start to basketball season

Bufs leave state just once before Christmas

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The old Colorado women's basketball coaching staff had the non-conference portion of next season's schedule in place last spring before Linda Lappe was hired to lead the program.

That doesn't mean that the Buffs' new head coach would have necessarily drawn the slate up too much differently given her young squad will be trying to rebound from a tough 2009-10 campaign.

CU released the Buffs' 2010-11 schedule on Monday, and 10 of the team's 13 non-conference games will be played in the friendly confines of the Coors Events Center for the second year in a row.

The 2010-11 campaign — which begins with a Nov. 5 home exhibition game against Western State — also marks the second year in a row that the Buffs will leave the state just once before conference play begins.

"With a young team you really want to play at home as much as you can," Lappe said. "But at the same time we want to make sure we get a couple tough road games as well so we're not shocked when (conference play rolls around)."

After a Nov. 16 road game against the University of Denver, the Buffs play seven straight at home before heading to USC's tournament for a pair of games. Opponents for that tournament are yet to be determined, but NCAA tournament teams Dayton and San Diego State join the Buffs and Trojans in the field.

While the trip to California could be a rigorous one, Colorado's home non-conference slate is set up for success.

That should bode well for the Buffs, who return just three of seven players who contributed on a regular basis last season. One of those returnees is leading scorer Brittany Spears. The other two are sophomores Chucky Jeffery and Meagan Malcolm-Peck.

Sharpshooter Bianca Smith and Courtney Dunn both graduated in May. Guard Kelly Jo Mullaney is set to graduate this month and has opted not to return for her senior season of eligibility. And guard Alyssa Fressle, who would have been a junior, transferred to Boston College.

The regular season officially begins with a Nov. 12 home game against Division-II Regis and also includes the Thanksgiving weekend Omni Hotels Classic at the Coors Events Center. Evansville, Loyola-Chicago and Eastern Washington fill out the tournament field.

The Buffs also have home non-conference games against Santa Clara, Tennessee-Martin, Texas State, Illinois, Colorado State, Colgate and North Dakota.

The Big 12 season begins with a Jan. 8 trip to Texas A&M. As usual, the Buffs face every North Division team both at home and on the road. In the south, the Buffs have road games against the Aggies, Oklahoma State and Texas, and host Texas Tech, Oklahoma and Baylor.

All of the early-season home cooking will be balanced out by a brutal stretch to finish the conference slate. Six of CU's final nine games are on the road, with a trio of back-to-back road dates.

"I'm excited about our Big 12 schedule," Lappe said. "I think the start of our schedule is good, and I think that's important for us for where we are right now."

All game times and television slots are yet to be determined.

2010-11 Colorado women's basketball schedule

Fri., Nov. 5 -- WESTERN STATE (Exh)

Fri., Nov. 12 -- REGIS

Tue., Nov. 16 -- at Denver

Fri., Nov. 19 -- SANTA CLARA

Sun., Nov. 21 -- TENNESSEE-MARTIN

Fri., Nov. 26 -- OMNI HOTELS CLASSIC: vs. EVANSVILLE

Sat., Nov. 27 -- OMNI HOTELS CLASSIC: vs. LOYOLA-CHICAGO or E. WASHINGTON

Wed., Dec. 1 -- TEXAS STATE

Sat., Dec. 4 -- ILLINOIS

Wed., Dec. 8 -- COLORADO STATE

Sat., Dec. 18 -- at USC tournament

Sun., Dec. 19 -- at USC tournament

Thu., Dec. 30 -- COLGATE

Tue., Jan. 4 -- NORTH DAKOTA

Sat., Jan. 8 at Texas A&M

Wed., Jan. 12 -- KANSAS

Sat., Jan. 15 -- IOWA STATE

Tue., Jan. 18 -- at Oklahoma State

Sat., Jan. 22 -- MISSOURI

Wed., Jan. 26 -- KANSAS STATE

Sun., Jan. 30 -- at Texas

Wed., Feb. 2 -- at Kansas

Sat., Feb. 5 -- NEBRASKA

Sat., Feb. 12 -- TEXAS TECH

Wed., Feb. 16 -- at Kansas State

Sat., Feb. 19 -- at Iowa State

Wed., Feb. 23 -- OKLAHOMA

Sat., Feb. 26 -- at Missouri

Wed., Mar. 2 -- at Nebraska

Sat., Mar. 5 -- BAYLOR

March 8-12 -- Big 12 Tournament, Kansas City, Mo.

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