

Ross to lead committee to fill Marshall's shoes

Hempen's Buffs have sights on Big 12 title

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Do you think you're the very worst player out here?

That's the blunt question Colorado soccer coach Bill Hempen hit Kelly Ross with after her first collegiate practice.

"I said yes," Ross, now a senior defender and one of the program's most important players, recalled during CU's fall sports media day on Saturday at the Dal Ward Center. "I thought I was the worst player on the team."

Believe it or not, the humble and self-critical Nikki Marshall felt the same way after her first CU practice. Now the Buffs will have to continue their quest of winning a Big 12 regular-season title without the former All-American and current Washington Freedom defender.

Last season Marshall scored eight of CU's 26 goals. She finished her career as the program's all-time leading scorer with 42 goals and nine assists from 2006-09.

But it's not like Hempen's program is suddenly void of star power. The little girls who screamed for the hero from Mead at Prentup Field also know everything about Ross (Monarch High School), junior midfielder Kate Russell (Silver Creek) and perhaps even true freshman Anne Stuller (led Fairview to the state title this spring).

"We went through the same thing with Fran Munnely. Life does go on," Hempen said. "We're going to bring in other players; none of you really knew who Nikki or Fran was, but you got to know them. More often than not, our kids were like, 'Give it to Nikki and she will save us.'"

"Now Kate has more responsibility, and she needs to take more responsibility. All of the kids that were surrounding Nikki have to step up. It's going to be more by committee than it has in the past."

Russell might have been one of the rare freshmen who did fit right in during her first CU practice. For two seasons she has been a solid starter alongside Marshall. Now, after scoring only one goal last season, she will be counted on to find the back of the net with more frequency sans No. 17.

"Since freshman year, I sat in the coach's office and we've talked about leadership from day one. With Nikki gone, it is more needed now because I think everyone looked up to her," Russell said. "Without her, there is a lot more responsibility placed on each individual player. Hopefully, Kelly and I and a couple others can step up and fill those big shoes she left."

Ross and Amy Barczuk should be one of the top defensive combinations in the Big 12. The team will probably be leaning on the duo until the offense develops its scoring touch and Hempen finds a replacement for graduated goalkeeper Kara Linder.

"I expect everybody to put winning the Big 12 Championship first," Ross said. "I expect everybody to do whatever it takes to get there."

This could be the Buffs' final opportunity to hang a Big 12 regular-season championship banner if the program moves to the Pac-12 in 2011. CU will face future conference foes Washington State and UCLA during a challenging non-conference schedule before opening up the Big 12 slate on the road against likely favorite Texas A&M.

"I know Stanford was in the NCAA final last year. They have been in the Final Four the past four years, and UCLA has been there the past six. USC has won a national championship," Hempen said when asked about moving to the Pac-12. "And there has never been a Big 12 team that has been in the Final Four. It's pretty easy to figure out that it is going to be a test. The good news is that we get UCLA and Washington State this year, so we will probably be judged a great deal about our future based on those two games."

CU opens the regular season at home against Wyoming on Aug. 22 and welcomes Nebraska to Prentup Field for the final time as conference rivals on Oct. 29.

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Time flying by for former Silver Creek soccer star Russell

By Brian Howell
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BOULDER — It's hard to believe, but Kate Russell is already a junior at the University of Colorado.

The former Silver Creek High School standout — and 2008 Times-Call girls soccer player of the year — is set to begin her third season with the Buffs.

"I'm thrilled to be here having those last two seasons under my belt," she said. "Being healthy, I hope to stay that way. I'm just super excited about this season."

A midfielder, Russell started all 15 games in which she played last season (she missed four games with a rib injury). During her career, she has nine assists, which ranks seventh in CU history.

She's hoping this will be her best year yet.

"I'd like to think that I'm better (than in high school)," she said. "As a freshman, I liked to hold the ball a lot more than I should. Especially in the Big 12, you get annihilated by girls that are 50 pounds heavier than you and three times as fast.

"Playing in the environment that we do, (it has) helped me grow tremendously as a player."

Russell also said she has enjoyed playing with fellow Longmonters Shaye Marshall (from Skyline High) and Lauren Shaner (from Niwot High).

"It's a blast being with them and getting to know them better and being able to share this experience with one another," Russell said.

The Buffs open the season with an exhibition at home against Air Force on Aug. 15. Their first official game of the season is at home against Wyoming on Aug. 22.

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