

Thorburn: Boyle's Buffs show signs of improving

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After Colorado's thrilling 90-83 overtime victory over Colorado State on Wednesday night, Tad Boyle gave his players a few days off to study for final exams.

Which makes it a good time for the Camera to grade the Buffs after a 5-3 starter to the season.

Point guard

Jeff Bzdelik bragged a lot about Shannon Sharpe last season and felt like the Buffs would have won a few more games and possibly made the NIT if the athletic freshman was healthy.

So far Sharpe, who redshirted last season after sustaining a torn ACL during his first CU practice, hasn't had much of an impact, averaging 1.4 points a game with 13 assists and nine turnovers through eight games.

However, Sharpe is a good on-ball defender and is making Nate Tomlinson a better player in practice.

Tomlinson, who missed most of the Texas-Pan American game due to a neck injury, is averaging 4.0 points and 1.8 rebounds per game. The junior from Australia played very well in the intense win over CSU with eight points -- including a momentum-changing 3-pointer as time expired on the first half -- three assists and one turnover.

Grade: C-

Shooting guard/wings

Alec Burks (20.5 ppg) and Cory Higgins (16.9 ppg) make up one of the best scoring tandems in the country. Stealing these two players on the recruiting trail was Bzdelik's greatest gift to CU.

Although improving, Burks still has work to do on the defensive end.

Higgins surprisingly missed three free throws in the final minute of regulation to allow the Rams to force overtime, but the senior has played through some painful injuries this season and is a great leader. He even filled in at point guard when Tomlinson went down.

You get the feeling these two are saving their best for conference play.

Marcus Relphorde (11.9 ppg, 4.5 rpg) and Levi Knutson (11.8 ppg, 3.4 rpg) have been terrific during the recent three-game win streak. If this hard-working duo can continue to complement Burks and Higgins at a high level the Buffs are going to win 20 games this season.

Grade: A

Big men

Losing Shane Harris-Tunks in the preseason was devastating. The 6-foot-11 center was the most improved player during the offseason and was poised to have a breakout season similar to Knutson.

The good news is Austin Dufault has played bigger than his 6-9 frame and is a much more productive and confident player this season than he was during a sophomore slump. Against CSU standouts Andy Ogide and Travis Franklin, Dufault scored eight points, grabbed four rebounds and blocked three shots. He is averaging 8.3 points and 4.5 rebounds this season.

True freshman Andre Roberson has really helped CU's rebounding issues by averaging a team-high 6.6 boards, despite averaging only 18.8 minutes per game.

Ben Mills (7-foot) and Trey Eckloff (6-10) have size and some skill but are not a part of Boyle's rotation at this point.

Grade: C

Coaching

Boyle and his staff inherited a talented roster that lacks size in the paint and was soft defensively after playing zone defense during the Bzdelik era.

After some shaky performances during disappointing losses at San Francisco and Harvard, the Buffs have responded with much better efforts on the glass and guarding man to man.

Burks and Higgins have played unselfishly, allowing capable role players like Knutson to thrive.

Boyle will be the first to tell you that this is still a work in progress. But so far CU is a better team in December than it was in November. That's a good sign.

Grade: B

Overall

The Buffs should be at least 6-2. The loss to San Francisco was inexcusable as the program continues the road woes (0-3) that haunted Bzdelik's teams.

The head-scratching performances outside the Coors Events Center must change or March will be nothing more than maddening at CU again.

The dominating victories over Texas-Pan American and Oregon State coupled with the thrilling win over a solid CSU squad were clearly major steps forward for Boyle's Buffs.

"Colorado State was trying to grind it out on us ... that tells me we have an opportunity this year to play a lot of different styles," Boyle said. "The resiliency and the pride and the toughness is starting to develop."

Entering Thursday night's games, CU ranked 17th nationally in scoring (82.0 ppg) but 243rd in rebounding (34.0 rpg). The Buffs also had an RPI of 208.

After two layups at home (vs. The Citadel and Longwood), CU will have a chance to pick up some quality wins at the Las Vegas Classic before Christmas against New Mexico and either Indiana or Northern Iowa.

"Our grit and our toughness and our pride has to translate to a neutral floor and eventually to a road game," Boyle said.

Grade: B-

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