

Bufs aim to take next step in Vegas

Boyle's team faces New Mexico in Las Vegas Classic tonight

By Ryan Thorburn Camera Sports Writer
Boulder Daily Camera

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LAS VEGAS -- Steve Alford is the next Bob Knight.

In New Mexico.

The legendary Hoosier, who won a national championship playing for Knight at Indiana in 1987, has guided the Lobos to back-to-back Mountain West titles and compiled an 84-27 record since leaving Big Ten country (he was Iowa's head coach) and taking over the program in Albuquerque.

Alford's New Mexico debut was a 54-47 victory at Colorado on Nov. 9, 2007, which was Jeff Bzdelik's first game as the Buffs' head coach.

First-year CU head coach Tad Boyle -- whose Buffs play New Mexico tonight in the 10th annual Las Vegas Classic at Orleans Arena (8 p.m., CBS College Sports) -- believes Boulder can also be a college basketball hot bed.

Eventually.

"I know they draw very well at home. The people in Albuquerque show up. It's a very well known and documented fact that they have a great fan base," Boyle said. "It's something for us to shoot for. What I ask myself is: Why can't we do that?"

When it comes to taking care of business at home against weaker non-conference foes, CU is New Mexico's equal this season.

The Lobos (9-1) are 7-0 at The Pit, where they are averaging 14,814 fans per game.

The Buffs (7-3) are 7-0 at the Coors Events Center, where they are averaging a Big 12-low 4,686 fans, despite a 19-game home winning streak vs. non-conference opposition. The next step is beating quality opponents outside of Boulder. CU's three losses this season were on the road at Georgia, San Francisco and Harvard.

"I think our players are ready to make a statement," Boyle said after his talented team finished a confidence-building home stand 5-0. "It will be a great opportunity and a great challenge. I have great respect for that program and their players. They won 30 games last year and they're an NCAA-caliber team. It's a great opportunity to play them on a neutral floor."

Although officially a neutral-site game, more hoops junkies are expected to drive the 774 miles from Albuquerque to Las Vegas than take the short flight here from DIA.

CU will face either Indiana or Northern Iowa on Thursday. A Buffs-Hoosiers matchup would give Alec Burks and his teammates a chance to play against Steve McClain, a popular finalist for the CU job amongst the returning players who is now an assistant at Indiana.

Of course, the Las Vegas Classic would stand a much better chance of making SportsCenter if Alford and the Lobos take on the Hoosiers. Boyle's job is to get CU basketball on the marquee by March.

"The way we can do that is by winning basketball games, being consistent, being fun to watch. There's no reason why we can't," Boyle said. "I think we have a great core fan base to build upon. The key is to build upon it. That's the way it has been every place I've been. It's very rare that you walk into a ready-made fan base."

"You can probably count on one hand the programs that have that, and New Mexico might be one of them with Kentucky, Kansas and Duke."

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CU heads to Las Vegas Classic

By Brad Cochi

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For the University of Colorado men's basketball players, who have won five straight games, now is a good time to be headed to Vegas.

As if there was a bad time to be heading to Vegas.

The Buffs will take on New Mexico today in the 10th Annual Las Vegas Classic. It should prove to be a starkly different contest than their past two wins: 89-61 over The Citadel on Friday and 104-59 over the Longwood Lancers on Sunday afternoon.

The Lobos (11-1) enter today's matchup with equally decisive victories over both The Citadel and Longwood in the past several days. They beat Longwood 91-54 on Friday and The Citadel 84-58 on Sunday.

With a potential equally talented team on the horizon, sophomore leading scorer Alec Burks thinks the Buffs are up to the challenge.

"I feel like it's going to be a great test to show where our team's at," Burks said. "Especially in Vegas. I feel like we're going to do good, too."

The Buffs are in the midst of their hottest shooting streak this season. And no one's hotter than senior guard Levi Knutson, who has shot an insane .765 3-point percentage during the streak.

Winning five straight games has boosted the Buffs' (7-3) confidence, but what they really need is a win on the road. They boast an impressive 7-0 record at home but have lost all three of their road games so far.

"It was a big stretch for us after how we started," Knutson said. "We needed to take care of business here at home. Obviously, we've got some tests on the road now where we have to prove ourselves, but we needed to take care of business these last five games, and we did that. I think that gave us a lot of confidence heading to Vegas."

Helping the Buffs take care of business at home has been the all-around play of Andre Roberson. The 6-foot-7 freshman averaged 12.5 points and 11.5 rebounds in the Buffs' past two home wins, in addition to shooting 52.9 percent from the field.

Roberson attributes the Buffs' recent success to an increasing familiarity with first-year head coach Tad Boyle's offense.

"He still wants us to do certain things, but overall everybody feels comfortable with how coach is coaching us and how well we can just play instead of thinking a lot," Roberson said.

Boyle has been pleased with his players' hot shooting and how they've shared the ball. The major concern now, he said, is their post defense. Sunday against the Lancers, the Buffs allowed 16 points to 6-foot-6 Lancers center Antwan

Carter before he fouled out with 10:57 remaining in the second half.

“I thought what we did in the first half was we let him in for layups,” Boyle said. “That’s what we can’t do. We’ve gotta make guys earn it down there on the block. Part of that was our post defense; the other part was our help, you know, wasn’t there.”

Today the Buffs will have to contain Lobos forwards A.J. Hardeman (12) and Drew Gordon (11), who combined for 23 points against The Citadel on Sunday.

If the Buffs beat the Lobos in today’s 10 p.m. game at Orleans Arena, they will face the winner of the 7:30 p.m. game — Indiana vs. Northern Iowa — in the championship at 10 p.m. Thursday. If the Buffs lose, they’ll take on the loser of today’s 7:30 p.m. game in the consolation game on Thursday.

Brad Cochi can be reached at bcochi@times-call.com.



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Colorado (7-3) vs. New Mexico (9-1)

By Sports Network
The Sports Network

GAME NOTES: The Colorado Buffaloes and the New Mexico Lobos will collide this evening at the Orleans Arena as part of the Las Vegas Classic.

The winner of this contest will take on either Indiana or Northern Iowa tomorrow, while the losers will do battle as well.

Colorado enters this tilt on a major roll, as the team has posted five consecutive wins to move to 7-3 overall. The Buffaloes were most recently in action on Sunday when they cruised past Longwood by a 104-59 final, and those 104 points marked the squad's best offensive effort of the season. All seven victories have come at home for Colorado, a Big 12 Conference squad, which is set to play its first neutral-site affair tonight.

As for New Mexico, which has won two straight Mountain West Conference titles, it currently owns a longer winning streak than Colorado, as the Lobos have ripped off seven straight victories to move to 9-1 overall. Their lone defeat came over a month ago, as they fell to California on the road. The most recent triumph occurred on Sunday, as New Mexico bested The Citadel by an 84-58 final, and six of the seven wins during the current streak have come by double figures.

The all-time series between New Mexico and Colorado is tied at 6-6, and the Lobos have won the last two meetings.

There is a significant amount of talent in the lineup for Colorado, and Alec Burks is the best of the bunch. Burks is scoring 19.8 ppg on 50.4 percent shooting from the floor, and he is a tremendously accurate free throw shooter as well. The same can be said for Cory Higgins and Levi Knutson, who are both knocking down over 80 percent of their attempts from the charity stripe. Higgins is generating 17.1 ppg to go along with a team-high 30 assists, and Knutson is netting 12.2 ppg. Rounding out a foursome of double-digit scorers is Marcus Relphorde with 11.6 ppg for Colorado, which racks up 84.9 ppg while surrendering 70.3 ppg. The Buffaloes connected on 52.8 percent of their field goal attempts in the win over Longwood last time out, including a 10-of-17 showing from three-point range. They also racked up 23 assists against only eight turnovers and earned a 48-30 rebounding advantage. Higgins paced six double-digit scorers with 18 points.

Like Colorado, New Mexico has four double-digit scorers in the fold, and Phillip McDonald paces the club with 13.1 ppg and 6.4 rpg. Dairese Gary provides 12.5 ppg, and Kendall Williams is close behind with 12.0 ppg. Drew Gordon made his season debut against The Citadel last time out, and he managed 11 points in that affair. The Lobos are averaging 76.7 ppg, and strong defense has enabled them to limit opponents to 61.8 ppg on 38.5 percent shooting from the floor. Another key to the club's success has been rebounding, as it is securing over five boards per game more than the opposition. In the 26-point win over The Citadel, McDonald tallied 17 points in 21 minutes of action. The Lobos connected on 50.9 percent of their field goal attempts and earned a 35-26 rebounding advantage. Also, they finished with 24 assists against only eight turnovers.

In what figures to be a close game from start to finish, give a narrow edge to Colorado. The duo of Higgins and Burks will be the difference.

Fact Stats

Game Date and Time

Predicted Outcome

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