

Cohesiveness coming together for Colorado men's basketball team

Role players stepping up for Boyle's Buffaloes

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LAS VEGAS -- Alec Burks didn't need 140 characters to describe the game.

Great team win today.

That was the Tweet @AlecBurks10 about an hour after Colorado's sweet 78-69 victory over Indiana on Thursday night at the Las Vegas Classic.

The Buffs prevailed even though Burks -- the Big 12's leading scorer entering the tournament -- fouled out early and finished with nine points in 18 minutes.

Burks only took three shots. One of them was a powerful dunk that drew a questionable technical foul call for nearly yanking the rim off the backboard.

Despite an individually frustrating evening at Orleans Arena, Burks was all smiles heading to the airport, thanks to CU's first win away from home.

"It was tough," Burks said of watching the drama unfold as the Buffs nearly squandered a 19-point lead down the stretch. "But my teammates pulled out the win, and I'm happy for everybody. I'm glad we won the game."

The previous night Burks played 35 minutes and scored 25 points on 7-for-14 shooting during CU's 89-76 loss to New Mexico.

Cory Higgins, also among the top-five Big 12 scorers, only had 10 points on 4-for-13 shooting against the Lobos. The senior made up for the off night with 22 points, including seven in the final two minutes, to hold off Indiana's second-half surge.

"He's that type of player. I felt like he carried us at the end," Burks said. "And I'm glad he's on my team and not somebody else's team."

Higgins and Burks take turns playing the role of Batman and Robin. But there are a lot of unsung super heroes on the team.

Marcus Relphorde set the tone against Indiana with aggressive play, Austin Dufault played a great game under the basket on both ends, Levi Knutson provided some much-needed poise off the bench when things were unraveling, and Andre Roberson gave the team 14 spectacular minutes.

"It's not a one-person team," Higgins said when asked about winning with his talented sidekick watching from the bench after fouling out. "I feel like if I wasn't out there it would have been the same thing. Unlike in years past, it is more of a team effort. When people are down, we can all pick each other up."

The Buffs are third in the Big 12 and seventh nationally in scoring offense, averaging 83.6 points per game. CU leads the conference in free throw percentage (78 percent) after knocking down 27 of 31 against the Hoosiers, and is second to Missouri in turnover margin (+5.08).

With Burks (19.3 ppg) and Higgins (16.9 ppg) leading the way this is a team capable of making a run into the postseason.

And when the role players are rolling this is a team capable of beating quality opponents away from home.

"We have to have our best players play well," CU head coach Tad Boyle said. "Alec played well in the first half and really didn't get in a flow in the second half and we overcame that. We need Cory to play well, we need Marcus to play well, we need Alec to play

well. ...

"We have a great supporting cast. But because we're not very deep we can't have nights where we have two or three guys not play well. We have to have all hands on deck."

Especially during Big 12 play.

But before Missouri visits the Coors Events Center on Jan. 8, the Buffs (8-4) have a chance to rack up three more non-conference wins against Maryland-Eastern Shore, Cal State Bakersfield and Western New Mexico.

"We have a bunch of guys who stick together in close games now instead of pull apart," Knutson said. "We never want guys in foul trouble, we want to play at full strength, but we have guys who want to step up and are ready to step up. We have a lot of guys who are itching to get into the game and make a difference."

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