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Challenge awaits CU men's, women's basketball

By Tom Kensler
The Denver Post

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University of Colorado officials can't recall if a U. S. president has ever visited the Boulder campus while in office. But what about a president's brother-in-law?

That will happen today, when Oregon State men's coach Craig Robinson brings the Beavers to the Coors Events Center for an 8 p.m. game against CU for the Big 12/Pac-10 Hardwood Series. Robinson is first lady Michelle Obama's brother.

"I think this will be really important, to measure ourselves against a good team," CU coach Tad Boyle said. "Oregon State plays a lot of zone, so we'll have to be prepared for that. The great thing is, it will give our fans a preview of next season in the Pac-12."

The CU women's team will open the doubleheader with a 5 p.m. battle against Illinois in the Big Ten/Big 12 Challenge.

In facing quality opponents, both CU teams get an opportunity to make a statement and gain some confidence early in their first season under a new coach. Boyle's men's squad (3-3) has played only once against a team from one of the "big six" conferences, losing 83-74 at Georgia on Nov. 16.

The Buffs will try to extend a six-game home winning streak dating to last season and hope to avoid going winless in the series, which is ending. Colorado is the only Big 12 team without a win (0-3) in the series.

Oregon State (3-3) has yet to defeat a quality opponent but, like Colorado, the Beavers have more potential than their early-season results would suggest. CU gets most of its points from the backcourt of sophomore Alec Burks (20.7 ppg) and senior Cory Higgins (18.5), while Oregon State relies heavily on 6-foot-9 senior forward Omari Johnson (14.7) and senior guard Calvin Haynes (14.2).

First-year CU women's coach Linda Lappe stresses defense, and her team is listening. For the first time in the program's history, the Buffs (6-1) have held consecutive opponents — Loyola-Chicago and Texas State — to under 40 points. But Illinois (3-5) figures to be a step up in talent.

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Lappe's Buffs set for first test

Lighter schedule has boosted CU women's confidence

By Joshua Lindenstein Camera Sports Writer
Boulder Daily Camera

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Colorado women's basketball coach Linda Lappe has said she'd like a little more balance between formidable foes and lower-level competition on future non-conference schedules.

The Buffaloes' new boss, however, doesn't deny that this year's slate built for early success has been a nice way for her inexperienced squad to get acclimated quickly and adjust to new leadership.

The road gets tougher starting tonight with a 5 p.m. game against Illinois at the Coors Events Center. But the Buffs head into the game riding a wave of confidence after a 6-1 start against lower-tier opponents that was capped by a pair of 30-point triumphs.

"I think it was perfect for this year," Lappe said Thursday of the schedule constructed by the former coaching staff. "Obviously we don't have a lot of numbers anyway. But we're able to get a lot of people a lot of minutes, which is important down the stretch because we need everyone on the team to be ready."

Four of Colorado's final six non-conference games feature foes from major or mid-major conferences.

Illinois was a WNIT quarterfinalist last season. Colorado State beat the Buffs in Fort Collins a year ago and owns a win this fall against Denver, the only team to top CU so far. USC went 19-12 last season before turning down a WNIT bid, and is receiving votes in the most recent Associated Press Top 25. And both Dayton and San Diego State — one of whom the Buffs will play in USC's tournament — were NCAA Tournament teams last season.

After home games against Colgate and North Dakota, Big 12 play begins. Twelve of CU's 16 games in conference play will be against teams that played in postseason tournaments last winter.

"I'm real excited because we're getting close to Big 12 season," CU leading scorer Brittany Spears said. "So the better the competition, the better it helps us out."

CU players, only three of whom were regulars in CU's rotation last season, said the softer start helped them build confidence in each other and chemistry on the floor. And Lappe added that there has been something different every game so far that the Buffs could take away and work on improving.

In Illinois, the new challenge will be facing a marquis frontcourt threat after going up against several undersized foes. Illini forward Karisma Penn, a 6-foot-2 sophomore, averages 15.4 points, 9.0 rebounds and 2.3 blocks per game.

She'll be the first of many such tests from now on as CU gets into the heart of its season. Squaring off against top-notch post players is a near-nightly occurrence in the Big 12.

"The post players that we're going to be going up against are going to be more challenging," CU forward Julie Seabrook said. "I think it will be good to help prepare us."

Lindow to suit up

Former Centaurus High standout and current CU volleyball player Nikki Lindow will suit up for Lappe's squad tonight as insurance for a thin bench.

Colorado has played so far this season with only eight players after losing four for various reasons.

Lindow — a 6-2 freshman who helped the CHS cagers to the Class 4A sweet 16 last spring and was third in kills for the

CU volleyball team this fall — has not practiced with the Buffs basketball team. Lappe said her status with the squad is day-to-day for now and that she would be used tonight only in an emergency.

CU expects to get senior wing Chelsea Dale, who has missed this semester for academic reasons, back once fall grades are posted.

“You never know what can happen,” Lappe said. “(Lindow) is our backup plan.”

Per NCAA rules, Lindow's scholarship this academic year will now count toward the basketball team's total. But CU began the season with 12 players and thus three open scholarships.

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Oregon State a test for Buffs

By Brian Howell
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Oregon State isn't exactly Duke or Kansas when it comes to college basketball.

Nevertheless, the University of Colorado men's basketball team views tonight's game against the Beavers at Coors Events Center as a barometer for how good the Buffs are this season.

"I think it's really important," Buffs head coach Tad Boyle said of beating Oregon State. "The great thing for us is it's a preview for our fans and hopefully our students to see what the Pac-12 is going to be like. It's a great game for where we are, and it'll be a good measuring stick."

No, the Beavers (3-3) aren't a juggernaut that fans will see making a deep NCAA Tournament run in March.

But Oregon State is a school from a BCS conference — one of just two or three that CU will face in 15 non-conference games (depending on the outcome of the Las Vegas Classic later this month).

The Beavers also are a future Pac-12 rival of the Buffs, when CU joins that conference in 2011. And the Beavers do have postseason experience in the past two years, even if it did come in the College Basketball Invitational. The CBI is a lower-level postseason tournament that picks up 16 teams that don't make the NCAA Tournament or National Invitational Tournament fields.

After playing relatively unknown teams such as Alcorn State and Texas-Pan American, it's a bit refreshing for the Buffs to welcome a big-name school to town.

"They like playing against the Georgias; they like playing against the Oregon States," Boyle said of his players. "They relish that. I was that way when I was a player."

Just how good they are at this point is anyone's guess, because the Buffs haven't been consistent.

CU is 3-0 at home but 0-3 on the road. The Buffs had a good effort in a road loss against Georgia but then lost to San Francisco and Harvard, two teams that'll make about as much noise in March as Oregon State.

Defense and rebounding have been issues. Boyle already has had a message-sending moment by leaving his best players on the bench for the start of the Alcorn State game on Nov. 23.

Oregon State (3-3) at Colorado men (3-3)

When/Where: 8 tonight, at the Coors Events Center in Boulder

TV/Radio: ESPNU/KKZN 760

The series: CU leads 5-2, including 5-0 in Boulder. Oregon State beat the Buffs 74-69 on Dec. 4, 2009.

Leading scorers: OSU — Omari Johnson (14.7 points per game); CU — Alec Burks (20.7)

Notes: This game is part of the Big 12/Pac-10 Hardwood Series. CU is 0-3 all-time in the series. ... Tonight is the second of five straight home games for CU. The Buffs have won six straight at home. ... Oregon State head coach Craig Robinson is the brother-in-law of President Barack Obama. First lady Michelle Obama is his younger sister. ... Oregon State has not played a BCS conference school this season. CU's only game against a BCS school was a loss at Georgia.

Illinois (3-5) at Colorado women (6-1)

When/Where: 5 tonight, at the Coors Events Center in Boulder

TV/Radio: No TV/KKZN 760

The series: CU leads 2-1, including 2-0 in Boulder. This is the first meeting between the teams since a CU win on Dec. 28, 1999.

Leading scorers: Illinois — Karisma Penn (15.4 points per game); CU — Brittany Spears (17.3)

Notes: CU has won five straight games, all at home. ... Illinois has lost three straight. ... Chucky Jeffery is

But the Buffs come into today following a solid performance against Texas-Pan Am, and they hope to take that momentum into the gym against Oregon State.

“The better teams we play, the more prepared we’re going to be for the Big 12,” senior guard Levi Knutson said. “It’s great for us to have good tests early in the season so we know where we stand and what we have to get better at.”

Oregon State should challenge the Buffs because Omari Johnson (14.7 points, 7.7 rebounds) and 280-pound Joe Burton (8.5, 7.3) will make them work on the boards. Andre Roberson, who comes off the bench, is CU’s rebounder, at 7.0 per game. Nobody else has more than 4.7 a contest.

averaging 16.6 points, 9.7 rebounds and 5.4 assists for the Buffs. She already has three double-doubles, including a triple-double. ... The 6-foot-2 Penn averages 9.0 rebounds per game. ... The game can be seen on BuffsTV, which can be accessed through CUBuffs.com.

— Brian Howell

The Beavers’ zone defense also will be a challenge for CU, Boyle said. That’ll make top scorers Alec Burks (20.7 points) and Cory Higgins (18.5) work for their points.

CU hopes to have the right answers for whatever Oregon State brings. And Boyle hopes that tonight can help the Buffs improve for the long run.

“The whole thing about the preseason is you want it to prepare you for your conference games,” Boyle said.

When Oregon State is one of the toughest teams on the non-conference schedule, it’s difficult to say how much the Buffs are getting prepared for Big 12 play. But Boyle does like the way the schedule has shaped up to this point.

The Buffs already have played three true road games (in the opponents’ gym). The other 11 teams in the Big 12 have played a combined six true road games, and three of those were in-state games.

“The schedule the way it’s been, it’s certainly challenged us,” Boyle said. “We’ve gone on the road early. We haven’t won those, but we’ve challenged ourselves.”

For a team that harbors hopes of going to the NCAA Tournament — or at least the NIT — it’s time for the Buffs to start winning those challenges, and that starts tonight.

“We know what we need to get better at. We know what our problems maybe are,” Boyle said.

One of those problems, so far, has been a lack of focus when playing a lesser-known opponent. That shouldn’t be a problem against Oregon State, but Boyle wants his team to take that same focus into every game.

Following tonight’s game, the Buffs host Colorado State, The Citadel and Longwood — three teams that an NCAA Tournament hopeful should beat anywhere, but especially at home.

“What we have to get better at is understanding it doesn’t matter who we’re playing, it doesn’t matter where we’re playing,” he said. “We have to come with the same mentality. That’s what we don’t do. That’s the challenge that we have. It should not matter, and right now it does to us. That’s where we have to get better.”