

CU women have little margin for error going forward

Lappe's squad needs at least three wins to make postseason

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No one expected miracles in Colorado women's basketball coach Linda Lappe's first season on the job.

That didn't keep Lappe or her players from setting the bar high.

Senior guards Britney Blythe and Chelsea Dale had bided their time for shots at helping the Buffaloes achieve success. Classmate and forward Brittany Spears will go down as one of the best players in program history yet hasn't tasted postseason play since her freshman year.

After two straight trying seasons that prompted coach Kathy McConnell-Miller's firing, all three made the most of a difficult situation and bought into Lappe and her staff's message: 100 percent effort at all times, defense, pride in wearing the Colorado uniform. And Lappe, rather than writing off the 2010-11 campaign as a dreaded rebuilding year, made it clear from the start that she and the underclassmen owed more -- preferably a postseason run, maybe even an NCAA tournament bid -- to the seniors.

Saturday's blowout loss at home to Texas Tech put Colorado's postseason aspirations on life support. Colorado is 12-11 overall and 3-7 and tied for eighth place in Big 12 Conference play.

Barring an extraordinary stretch run, an NCAA tournament bid already seemed unlikely, especially during a year in which the Big 12 could fall well short of the seven invites it received in 2010. But after trouncing Nebraska six days earlier, the Buffs still looked like a team poised to extend their season in the WNIT. Then they faltered against a Tech squad that brought a six-game losing streak to town.

The Buffs now need three wins in their last six regular season games -- or a surprise surge deep into the Big 12 tournament -- to ensure a .500 record overall, the baseline for WNIT eligibility. Four of those games come on the road, where the Buffs have yet to win this season. The other two are at home against top-15 squads Baylor and Oklahoma.

"I know it's on our minds," Spears said after Saturday's loss. "We haven't discussed it. But everybody knows we've got to win to make the postseason."

The silver lining is that three of the four road games come against teams the Buffs have beaten this season -- Iowa State (Saturday), Missouri (Feb. 26) and Nebraska (March 2). And the fourth -- Kansas State on Wednesday -- is certainly winnable. Another plus is that three more wins would likely get the Buffs (currently 101st) into the top 100 of the NCAA's RPI, and a Big 12 team with such credentials would be tough for the WNIT to pass up for its 64-team field.

But the Buffs also know they've got to start stringing together strong performances. They have yet to win back-to-back games in Big 12 play this season.

"As a staff we talk about (the postseason)," Lappe said. "But we also know we have to take care of business day-to-day. And in order to talk about postseason you can't be as inconsistent as we are right now."

Along with the continual quest to coax consistency from her players, Lappe has also preached the importance of teams rising to the occasion in February. So far, the Buffs are 1-2 at the start of the home stretch.

"It's where teams separate themselves in a lot of different ways," Lappe said. "And we want to make sure we're up there and not getting separated in the wrong direction."

To be sure, Lappe's Buffs have shown glimpses of progress this season. Beating a ranked ISU squad, for one, is something few would have predicted for the Buffs, who were picked to finish last in the Big 12 by the league's coaches. And the Buffs have at times shown the fight to overcome adverse situations that would have caused them to fold a year

ago.

But there are still plenty of strides to make.

And if the Buffs are to make this a season to remember rather than a mere rebuilding year, they can't afford any more letdowns like Saturday's.

"It kind of took our momentum away a little bit," sophomore guard Chucky Jeffery said. "We know what we did wrong. We've just got to get our minds right for the rest of the season. We've got four road games left so we've got to be ready."

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