



CU Coach Tad Boyle wants his team to overcome the 'dog days.'
Photo Courtesy: Tony Harman



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Brooks: Buffs Need Strong Wills To Finish Strong

BOULDER - College basketball coaches like to talk about grind-it-out wins, but this is a grind-it-out month. It's the portion of the season where mental fatigue can even override physical fatigue - particularly for teams such as Colorado and Texas Tech.

BUFFALO EXTRAS



Game Notes #28: at Texas Tech

The Buffs and Red Raiders, opponents Wednesday night in Lubbock, each are pursuing late stability (read: strong finishes) after being wildly erratic thus far in the Big 12 Conference.

CU is one game better than Tech in the Big 12 (5-7 vs. 4-8) and owns the better overall record (16-11 vs. 12-15). Both have enjoyed three-game winning streaks in league play, but that seems like the distant past. Momentum isn't something either team has been able to sustain.

After opening with three consecutive wins, the Buffs have won just twice in their past nine games. After opening with four consecutive losses, the Red Raiders won three in row, then lost four straight before breaking that streak with a 78-69 win Saturday at Baylor.

And that victory was as impressive as it was unlikely - first for being on the road, and second because it was accomplished without Tech's second-leading scorer, Mike Singletary, who sat out with a calf injury. To boot, Coach Pat Knight lost two players - forwards Jaye Crockett and D'walyn Roberts - to fouls. Crockett sat down with 14:34

remaining and Roberts about 4:30 later.

"We were kind of strapped with Singletary not being able to play, so we had to go with what we had," Knight said. "You've got to ride the horse 'til it bucks you off. It bucked us off with about 15 minutes to go, because they both fouled out."

In the second half, Baylor cut Tech's lead to two points six different times, but the Red Raiders didn't crumble. Given the circumstances that seemed stacked against his team, Knight couldn't downplay the win's overall degree of satisfaction.

"Yeah . . . it's satisfying enough just getting a road win in this league," he said. "But doing it the way we were able to, with our back against the wall, having one of our best players not play, then two of our guys foul out, it made it a little better."

"These guys haven't given up. We've had some bad stretches, some tough stretches, but we've actually played well. We had that three-game win streak, then we didn't play well against Kansas (88-66 loss). But we had a really good second half against Texas (76-60 loss at UT), then we were right there against A&M (70-67 loss) and Missouri (92-84 loss at MU).

"We just kept telling them if they keep playing that way, they're due to win a big game and they have a chance to win on the road if they just give that type of effort . . . the kids really believed they could still win some games."

It's a belief the Buffs can't leave Boulder without. What began as a promising Big 12 season has dwindled to a final four regular-season games and the Big 12 tournament. Must-win mode arrived awhile ago.

"Yeah, we've been that way," senior guard Levi Knutson said. "We know how important every Big 12 game is. We've got to get as many as we can down the stretch before going into the tournament. We know how important this game is for sure."

CU and Tech finished the 2009-10 regular season in Boulder, with the Buffs winning that game before being ousted by the Red Raiders from the Big 12 tournament and postseason (NIT) consideration. But none of that is pertinent Wednesday night in what mainly will come down to a clash of wills. Physically, Tech and CU match up well and play similar styles (motion offense, mostly man-to-man defense).

Buffs CU Coach Tad Boyle planned to emphasize to his team on Monday the importance of fighting through the "mental fatigue" that can zap teams in late February. "These are the dog days and every team goes through it," Boyle said. "I think it's maybe one of the reasons you saw so many top teams in the country this past weekend get beat. I think it's more mental than physical . . . I think the fight you have to fight as a coach is the mental fatigue."

"That's something we're going to talk to our team (Monday) before we take the floor is just the mindset of our team, where we are right now and what we have ahead of us and how important it is to focus and dial in mentally in these last two weeks. It's an important time of the year; every win is magnified, every loss is scrutinized in the month of February."

Knutson hoped mental fatigue wouldn't be a problem. He said with teams playing a similar number of games "everybody physically is in the same boat . . . I think we've got some experienced guys who have been through the grind before. So I think we should be up mentally for all these games."

Providing the Buffs with a physical break might be easier than providing a mental remedy. Cutting back on the length of his team's practices can help "save their legs," and Boyle believes the leadership of his seniors who play the most - Cory Higgins, Marcus Relphorde and Knutson - will help with the mental portion.

"It's where you've got to have great leadership," Boyle said. "It really helps when you've got guys who've been there before. That's what I'm counting on with our team . . . we've got to dial in mentally as we head down the stretch."

The Buffs have been victimized by inconsistency "not only from being a home team to a road team, but also within a game - even within halves at times this year," Boyle said. "When we go on the road, we've got to rebound, we've got to

defend to give ourselves a chance. When we've done that we've been in games. We just haven't played well enough down the stretch."

Knight's message to the Red Raiders will sound very, very similar. He'll also emphasize the two required constants - rebounding and defense - that Boyle could count on when Big 12 play opened, but not so much lately. Tech rediscovered both last weekend. Standout Baylor freshman Perry Jones III was limited to just four shots. He finished with 10 points, but eight of them were on free throws.

"We concentrated on staying on him . . . man up. Whoever had him had no help responsibility," Knight said, probably offering a hint as to how Tech could defend CU's Alec Burks. At any rate, Knight targeted Burks and Higgins as the pair of Buffs he doesn't want to find a scoring rhythm. He doesn't want Knutson locating it either.

"Defensively we're going to have to really play, do a good job talking and not letting some of their guys get away from us," Knight said. "We've had that problem in the past; we'll focus pretty well on defense for a little while, then we'll have a terrible five- or ten-minute stretch. We just can't have that against them."

Knight reflects on the victory at Baylor as "a really good win . . . but what it does it makes you even more frustrated because you start thinking about the ones you let get away from you."

As his first and last Big 12 season draws to a close, Boyle knows that feeling all too well. In a game of "what if," Boyle and Knight would be pretty evenly matched - but it's a game both had hoped to avoid.

NATE UPDATE: CU point guard Nate Tomlinson finally returned to the court Saturday in the Buffs' 89-63 loss at No. 1 Kansas, playing six minutes. Tomlinson had missed the previous two games with a sprained ankle/bone bruise.

He said Monday he believes he can play at Texas Tech, but added, "It's up to coach how much he wants to play me. I feel like I can make this team better."

Boyle agrees - provided Tomlinson's injury allows him to play at 100 percent. Tomlinson said he could deal with playing through the pain: "I'm not too worried about that. It's just getting the stability back. That was the main thing . . . if I can play through the pain it doesn't bother me."

AROUND THE RIM: CU's game Saturday against No. 5 Texas is sold out, marking the fourth home sellout this season for the Buffs. That's a first for CU's men's hoops while playing in the Coors Events Center. Other sellouts were against Oklahoma State, Kansas and Kansas State . . . No word out of Lubbock Monday on the status of Singletary for Wednesday night. The Baylor game was the first Singletary has missed this season . . . Against Baylor, four of Tech's five starters reached double figures, and the Red Raiders outrebounded the Bears, 31-30. Tech also shot 50.9 percent from the field . . . Every Big 12 team is ranked in the top 150 of this week's RPI, with seven of the league's teams in the top 63. CU is at No. 93, Nebraska - the Buffs' final regular-season opponent on March 5 - is at No. 63 after its upset of then-No. 2 Texas on Saturday.

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