

# THORBURN: Buffs face pressure of raised expectations

By Ryan Thorburn, Camera staff writer  
Boulder Daily Camera

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The Buffs were used to winning at the Coors Events Center in front of 6,000 empty seats.

Tad Boyle's team racked up home wins over the dregs of college basketball -- Idaho State, Alcorn State, Oregon State (yes, the Beavers of the Pac-10 are awful), The Citadel, Longwood, Maryland Eastern Shore and Western New Mexico -- during non-conference play.

No apologies necessary.

Most programs from major conferences schedule confidence-building cupcakes in November and December. Colorado is actually one of the few teams from a power conference willing to challenge itself on the road against mid-major opponents (at San Francisco, Harvard and Cal State Bakersfield).

On Saturday the Coors Events Center was sold out without any help from Jayhawks fans.

The Buffs' bandwagon is getting full and the bull's-eye is now on their backs.

It was interesting to see how the team handled the greater expectations. Boyle was wondering about that himself when CU was trailing Oklahoma State by 12 points with 16 minutes left.

"Our fans are starting to get behind this team now. It is our team's responsibility to reward them with our effort," Boyle said. "One thing about Colorado fans, if you put out maximum effort and play your tails off, they like winning and this state is hungry for college basketball. You can sense it."

After the Buffs rallied and beat the talented Cowboys 75-71, the 11,000-plus fans who filed out of the building with smiles on their faces are no doubt hungry for more.

CU, now 14-4 overall and 3-0 in Big 12 play, has a chance to crack the national polls today.

The Coors Events Center will be full again on Jan. 25 when Kansas visits. One can only imagine what theatmosphere will be like if the Buffs are able to win road games at Nebraska and Oklahoma ahead of the Jayhawks' final visit to Boulder as a conference foe.

"Oklahoma State came in here ready to play Colorado. We got their best shot ... it is different than in years past when people come in here and expect to win," Boyle noted. "Maybe Missouri was (just expecting to win), I don't know if they were or if they weren't, but we are going to get people's best shot now because I think we've opened other people's eyes.

"That is different for our players because they have never been through that before. It is something that we have to talk about every single day. When I talk to them, it is about being hungry and humble."

## My AP ballot

I can guarantee you the Buffs will at least be in the "receiving votes" portion of the Associated Press poll when it is released today.

They got my vote.

The Big 12 leads the nation in non-conference winning percentage and wins against top-25 non-conference opponents. A team on top of the standings in such conference, even at 3-0, deserves to be ranked in the top 25 this week.

I voted Colorado No. 23, right behind No. 22 Georgia (the Buffs lost in Athens earlier this season) and just ahead of No. 24

Arizona.

My top 10: 1. Ohio State. 2. Kansas. 3. Syracuse. 4. Duke. 5. Pitt. 6. San Diego State. 7. Villanova. 8. Connecticut. 9. BYU. 10. Texas A&M.

### **Bzdelik struggling**

I still believe Jeff Bzdelik to be a brilliant basketball mind. He also deserves some credit for CU's success this season (remember, he's the one who found Cory Higgins and Alec Burks on the recruiting trail). The former Nuggets and Air Force coach also forced CU's administration to commit to supporting basketball before agreeing to come to Boulder.

Still, you have to think Bzdelik -- despite the more lucrative contract -- wishes he were enjoying the fruits of his labor at CU this season instead of suffering through a woeful season at Wake Forest.

The Demon Deacons are now 7-11 overall and 0-3 in the ACC after an admittedly humiliating 94-65 loss at Virginia Tech on Saturday.

"We've just been embarrassed," Wake Forest freshman Travis McKie told the Winston-Salem Journal. "I feel sad for the people who buy season tickets, and they come out and see us perform like this. I feel sad for players who used to play here, and they've got to see us play like this. It's horrible. We've got to do it as one, we can't do it as individuals. It's just embarrassing."

### **The Turgeon tree**

Boyle, of course, cut his teeth in college coaching under Texas A&M head coach Mark Turgeon. Not surprisingly, the Aggies are also 3-0 in Big 12 play and headed for yet another NCAA Tournament.

Athletic directors in search of a talented assistant coach to take over a program might want to take a hard look at Boyle's top young assistants, Mike Rohn and Jean Prioleau.

The Turgeon coaching tree is a strong one.

### **Seventh heaven?**

The Buffs have now won their last six Big 12 games. They beat Iowa State, Nebraska and Texas Tech to finish the 2009-10 regular season.

My colleague Brian Howell of the Longmont Times-Call did the research and determined that the last time CU won seven consecutive conference games was during the 1961-1962 (won the last two) and 1962-1963 (won the first five) seasons.

The Buffs will be searching for lucky No. 7 on Tuesday night at Nebraska.

It won't be easy. The Huskers led Kansas by 10 points on Saturday in Lawrence before the Jayhawks used the Allen Fieldhouse magic to pull off a 63-60 win.

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## Colorado basketball short of cracking AP poll, remains unranked

*The Denver Post*

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Colorado's men's basketball team is inching closer to its first Associated Press ranking since the 1996-97 season.

But the Buffaloes didn't sneak into The AP's latest rankings released Monday morning. They were fifth among teams also receiving votes. Cincinnati was ranked 25th with 125 points. CU had 78 points, behind Temple (99), Georgia (89), Kansas St. (86) and Gonzaga (84).

"It doesn't matter a bit," CU coach Tad Boyle said. "I don't talk to our guys, don't care about it. You control the things you can control. With the focus we want our players to keep, that's the last thing we're thinking about."

CU didn't receive any votes in last week's poll, but beat then-No. 21 Kansas State and Oklahoma State since then.

That followed a 89-76 victory over then-No. 9 Missouri on Jan. 8.

The Buffs (14-4) are 3-0 in the Big 12 for the first time since 1996-97, when they opened 6-0.

Colorado hasn't been ranked in The AP poll since the final ranking of the 96-97 season, when it was 24th.

Ohio State (18-0) jumped up to the No. 1 spot this week when Duke (16-1), which headed the previous poll, fell to No. 4 after it's loss last Wednesday to Florida State.

The Buffs weren't ranked in the latest ESPN/USA Today coaches poll released this morning, either, but were seventh among teams also receiving votes.

Ohio State also led the coaches poll. Arizona was 25th with 60 points. CU, which had 23 points, followed West Virginia (54), Georgia (52), Temple (44), Cincinnati (42), Gonzaga (39) and Utah State (24).

CU hasn't been ranked in the coaches poll since the 2005-06 season, when it was 25th for two consecutive weeks from Jan. 30-Feb. 12, 2006, according to CU sports information.

— Tom Kensler

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## Barfknecht: Huskers-Buffs matchup a big deal

By [Lee Barfknecht](#)

WORLD-HERALD STAFF WRITER



### THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

First-year Colorado coach Tad Boyle gave up life as a stockbroker to chase his hoop dream. Now he has the Buffaloes within reach of the Top 25.

This column is for all of the big-talking college basketball fans in this area who have bellyached for years about having nothing worthwhile to attend.

I'm calling you out.

There's a game you need to view in Lincoln at 6 p.m. Tuesday. So get your fanny to the Devaney to eyeball the surprise of the nation, Colorado (14-4, 3-0), against the surprise of last week, Nebraska (13-4, 1-2).

Colorado basketball? Are you kidding? Why go see that?

Maybe to check out the first-year coach, a former stockbroker who has the CU program — picked to finish ninth in the Big 12 — receiving Top 25 votes this week.

Tad Boyle played collegiately at Kansas. Under Larry Brown, he was a Jayhawk captain as a senior, though he played less than 20 minutes a game.

After college, Boyle worked at a Boulder-based financial firm. One day 16 years ago on his way to work, a driver ran a red light and slammed into his car. That brush with mortality made Boyle rethink his life.

He decided to follow his passion for basketball, so he gave up six-figure earnings and joined the Oregon staff as a \$16,000-a-year restricted earnings assistant.

Boyle then followed his good friend and former KU teammate Mark Turgeon, now the head coach at Texas A&M, to two assistants jobs before transforming the program at Northern Colorado — in four years going from 4-24 to 25-8 — and then taking over this season at Colorado.

If that doesn't interest you, how about watching a probable NBA lottery pick?

Colorado sophomore Alec Burks, as a junior in high school in suburban Kansas City, was a scrawny 6-foot-2 guard drawing lukewarm recruiting interest.

The Buffs saw him at an out-of-the-way summer camp in rural Kansas and took a chance, getting in ahead of Kansas State, the only other major suitor.

Now, Burks is a 6-6 wing and the second-leading scorer in the Big 12 at 19.7 points a game. He is a bear at breaking down defenders off the dribble. Ask Missouri, touted for its athleticism and speed. Ten days ago, Burks burned the Tigers for 36 points and eight rebounds.

This week, the website nbadraft.net has Burks as the No. 8 pick in the first round of this June's draft.

One other thing to note about this game:

This is the last chance for Nebraska fans to boo the Buffaloes in person before the two schools join new leagues. Plus, CU sold out its game Saturday against Oklahoma State. Do Husker fans want to get one-upped in that category?

"We don't win that game without the crowd," Boyle said Monday. "The crowd gave our guys the energy to get over the top."

By the way, Nebraska isn't half-bad to watch, either.

Most pundits had the Huskers kicked to the curb before the season started. Even after a 13-2 start, the critics said NU had played no one of consequence and would get pistol-whipped last week in road games at No. 15 Missouri and No. 3 Kansas.

Wrong and wrong.

Nebraska was within four points of Missouri in the final 30 seconds and had a last-second 3-pointer to try to force overtime at Kansas, which trailed the Huskers for nearly half the game.

If you think that NU can't function against top teams, check the combined numbers from those two games:

Field goals made: MU-KU 48, NU 47.

Rebounds: NU 79, MU-KU 70.

Free throws made: MU-KU 31, NU 26.

Turnovers: MU-KU 24, NU 30.

"We showed we can play anywhere," Husker point guard Lance Jeter said. "We're disappointed we didn't win, but we're not hanging our heads. Now, we've got to win at home."

Nebraska coach Doc Sadler adds a hearty "amen" to that for the Colorado game.

"It's bigger than the Missouri and Kansas game combined," he said Monday. "You're talking about a team that may be playing as well as any team in the league."

Nebraska has gone 56 straight home basketball games without a sellout.

Having the game on ESPN2 will hurt the gate. But give your ears a rest — the color analyst is paid-by-the-word Doug Gottlieb — and make the drive in from Omaha and Grand Island and Norfolk and Kearney.

Or else stop complaining because this is hoops worth seeing in person.

## **Easy does it at ISU**

Besides learning how to be a basketball coach this season at Iowa State, Fred Hoiberg is working on his tightrope-walking skills, too.

His balancing act involves how to play up-tempo basketball with a depleted roster, yet keep his players fresh through a long season.

The Big 12 minutes-played list shows three ISU players in the Top 10: No. 2 Diante Garrett at 34.8; No. 3 Scott Christopherson at 34.3; and No. 9 Jake Anderson at 32.5.

That means practice, Hoiberg said, "is short and sweet."

"It's very rare that we go over an hour," he said Monday. "It's hard for me to have a marathon practice because we've got to have our guys fresh for the games. Most nights, we have four guys play over 35 minutes."

"We go hard in practice. A lot of it is preparing our guys mentally for the upcoming game, but just not doing a lot of live stuff. We cannot afford to lose somebody in practice."

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