

Expectations big for CU Buffs' Ben Mills

Future looks bright for young center

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Ben Mills is averaging 2.0 points and 0.9 rebounds a game. He has played a total of 51 minutes this season. And it might be two or three years before the 7-footer develops into an impact big man in the Pac-12.

But you won't find a more popular player inside the Colorado locker room or at the Coors Events Center near the end of a lopsided game.

"When we recruited Ben he was real quiet. He didn't talk much. He still doesn't talk much around the coaches," CU head coach Tad Boyle said. "But when we had recruits in this fall we would ask them who stood out on our team. And they always said, 'Ben's funny!'"

"He has a great personality. I think in the locker room away from the coaches he's a pretty enjoyable kid and other guys are really drawn to him. I know his teammates really like him. Our fans really like him, I think that's also pretty apparent."

Mills originally committed to play at Boise State but decided to open up the recruiting process again after the school fired head coach Greg Graham in March. He chose CU over Georgia Tech and Oregon State during the spring signing period about a month after Boyle was hired to replace Jeff Bzdelik.

"When I came to Boulder I felt I could learn a lot from coach Boyle. I got along with him well, and it seemed like a really good program he was building," Mills said. "I like it a lot here so far. I'm having a lot of fun."

Mills is from Hartland, Wis., but the Badgers of the Big Ten did not have a scholarship for him after another Wisconsin native, 6-10 freshman center Evan Anderson, committed to the program early.

"Everybody always asks me that same question," Mills said on why he didn't end up in Madison. "There's a guy in Wisconsin who is about the same height as me, but he was about 6-10 in eighth grade, so he committed to Wisconsin his freshman year. And that really took away my spot."

Mills was 6-4 as a high school freshman. He grew five inches before his sophomore year and was 6-11 and counting as a junior.

Being a teenager is tough enough. It has to be even more awkward to have to duck your head to get through the door at the senior prom.

"It wasn't too bad," Mills said. "A lot of guys that grow that fast have some growing pains. I didn't have anything like that. I just kind of eased into my body. I was pretty lucky."

Even though Mills isn't an established Big 12 star like Cory Higgins or Alec Burks, he does enjoy life as the big man on campus.

"I like it. A lot of people say they don't like being tall, but I like the attention," said Mills, CU's first 7-foot player since David Harrison (2001-04). "Walking around campus I know everyone is looking at me saying, 'There's that freshman on the basketball team.'"

"I have no problem with that."

Shane Harris-Tunks, CU's 6-11 sophomore center, added 25 pounds of muscle during the offseason. Mills has a more wiry build and might not be able to add a lot of lbs. to his 215-pound frame.

"Ben has to move his feet and get a lower center of gravity and get stronger in the weight room," Boyle said. "He has the body type where I don't know how much weight he'll put on. But I know (strength) coach (James) Hardy loves those kind of challenges, and Ben has a great work ethic."

Boyle would have preferred to redshirt Mills this season and let him develop behind the scenes in practice. A season-ending knee injury to Harris-Tunks will force the freshman, ready or not, to play some critical minutes in the post during Big 12 play.

"I'm really looking forward to it. I'm working every day to try and prepare myself for it," Mills said. "Hopefully when my team needs me I can be there for them."

During a game earlier this season, Mills had the home crowd on its feet after swishing a hook shot Kareem Abdul-Jabbar would be proud of.

"I don't know if he's going to have Kareem's sky hook, but he's going to have a heck of a jump hook," Boyle said. "Right now he's very confident going over his left shoulder. What we're working with him on in practice every day is a counter move to that. As time goes on people are going to be scouting him and knowing that move is coming and he has to have a counter move to it."

"But when he gets bigger and stronger and learns how to keep the defense off balance, that jump hook is going to be pretty potent."

Before a recent practice Trey Eckloff was filming a segment with BuffsTV to air on the new video boards at the Coors Events Center. One of the questions the junior forward was supposed to repeat and answer was: Other than basketball my favorite sport is ...

"Say Quidditch!"

The suggestion to go with a fictional sport from the Harry Potter books came from a smiling Mills off camera.

"Ben is a goofy guy," Austin Dufault said. "But on the court he's very serious. It's hard to get him to talk any trash or anything like that. He's really focused on working on his game day in, day out."

"He has a little brother feel to him. It's fun to go to practice with him every day and see him improve each day."

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