

# Brittany Spears peaking good sign for CU Buffs

## CU senior gets game in shape as Big 12 play looms

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The best part about the Colorado women's basketball team finding its offensive legs again on Thursday night might have been senior forward Brittany Spears breaking out of her own personal funk.

If the Buffaloes are going to start making a splash in the Big 12 Conference when league play begins a week from today, consistent efforts from Spears like Thursday's in a rout of Colgate will be imperative.

Her 21-point, eight-rebound, four-assist night wasn't flashy or flawless. But it was steady. And it helped set the tone for a team that is generally fueled by its two stars -- Spears and sophomore guard Chucky Jeffery.

"We play in the Big 12, the best conference in the country," Spears said after the win over Colgate. "I have to step up my game and play better."

Spears was referring to CU's two previous games, losses to Southern Cal and Dayton.

Spears is averaging 17.0 points and 7.7 rebounds. But against USC she went 2-for-12 from the field for five points and had six rebounds. One night later against Dayton, she turned in a 22-point, 12-rebound double-double but went just 6-of-23 from the field to get her points.

Thursday's effort was more efficient, a 7-for-16 night that included going 3-for-8 from 3-point land and a 4-for-4 performance at the free-throw line. She also added a couple of steals and a block.

"It basically is just me setting my feet and having confidence in myself and working on my jumpshot and not being satisfied and working harder," Spears said. "Baskets go in when you work harder."

Spears has started all 105 games in her CU career, and when she leaves school she'll be atop or near the top of most of the school's major statistical charts.

She's currently fifth in scoring at 1,737 points, just 38 behind Shelley Sheetz for fourth on the list and within striking distance of Lisa Van Goor (2,067) for first. She'll also likely leave among the top five in rebounds and 3-point field goals made and among the top 10 in free throws made, steals and blocked shots.

But after improving her numbers during conference play as a freshman, Spears has seen her production drop off in each of the past two seasons as Big 12 foes have done their best to take away CU's marquee player. The biggest gap came last year, when her scoring average fell to 15.6 points per game in the Big 12 versus a 17.7 clip for the season.

To be sure, some drop-off is expected when the level of competition is raised. CU's non-conference slates have been weak in recent years. But the games against USC and Dayton were good measuring sticks for the Big 12.

"That's what you definitely hope for and want," first-year CU coach Linda Lappe said of Spears' numbers staying level in the Big 12.

CU's team overall did a better job of setting screens and mixing up its offense with inside and outside looks on Thursday. But the Buffs also did a better job of getting Spears clean looks, which in turn helped her with her shot selection, Lappe said.

"She had a couple of nice drives to the rim and was kind of pretty versatile in how she was scoring," Lappe said. "She didn't take all threes, but took a couple pull-up jumpers and nice drives."

Jeffery has been a consistent complement to Spears all season, filling up the stat sheet nearly every game with 15.5 points per outing and leads the team in rebounds, steals and assists.

But plenty of Big 12 squads have two solid defenders.

Senior Chelsea Dale showed promise Thursday that she could help free up space for Spears and Jeffery by keeping defenses honest as a third scoring threat.

The 6-foot-1 wing from California missed the first nine games this season while academically ineligible. But she returned for the losses to USC and Dayton, and then turned in the best performance of her career on Thursday. She scored 16 points on 5-of-9 shooting, grabbed three rebounds, had two assists and turned the ball over just once.

"I shoot the ball and that's kind of what my teammates expect from me," Dale said. "So when I get a pass out from Chucky or Spears I'm expected to knock that down, and I want to do that for them."

But Lappe also likes the tempo Dale brings and the calming effect it brings to the offense.

"She doesn't get in a rush," Lappe said. "She comes off with her feet set, ready to take her shots. She also is smart on her drives. She didn't force at all. She's just a smart player."

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