

Battle set for Big 12 rookie coaches

Jeffery to return to CU's lineup today vs. Missouri

By Joshua Lindenstein Camera Sports Writer
Boulder Daily Camera

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Linda Lappe recently picked up her 60th win as a head basketball coach. Robin Pingeton is closing in on No. 350. But they both got the same amount of respect in the Big 12 Conference preseason coaches poll.

Little.

Pingeton's Missouri Tigers and Lappe's Colorado Buffaloes were picked to finish 11th and 12th, respectively,

Life as the new coaches on the Big 12 block -- where all but three bosses have been in their current posts for five years or more -- isn't easy. Pingeton's win total (347) is a nice career for many coaches; it's middle-of-the-road in the Big 12.

"As new coaches, it's definitely a challenge," Lappe said after Friday's practice.

Today the rookies square off against one another as both squads scrap for more respect in the nation's toughest conference. The Buffs (10-7, 1-3) host the Tigers (9-9, 1-3) at 4 p.m. at the Coors Events Center.

While both coaches have already guided their teams to wins over ranked league foes -- CU over Iowa State and MU over then-No. 22 Texas -- the squads have also taken their share of lumps and have long treks to the top of the heap. Both coaches inherited, after all, teams that have been at or near the bottom of the Big 12 in recent years.

Lappe said the most difficult aspect of coming into a new conference is facing scouting all of the different styles and schemes and players for the first time, duties that fall heavily on assistants. But she said opposing coaches are largely in the same boat scouting CU and Mizzou.

"I think that's probably the toughest part is just going into the unknown a little bit," said Lappe, who played at CU from 1998-2003. "The good thing for us is that probably half the coaches in the league when I was a player are still around. So Iowa State, you kind of know what to expect from them. Nebraska, you know what to expect from them. Kansas State the same thing."

While Lappe came to CU from the Division-II ranks, Pingeton joined MU after a successful seven-year run at mid-major Indiana State where she spent guided the Redbirds to 22 wins or more in each of her last four seasons.

Lappe might be as familiar with Pingeton's style as anyone in the Big 12. The CU coach was an assistant at Missouri Valley conference member Drake for Pingeton's first three seasons at Indiana State. Pingeton was also an assistant at Iowa State when Lappe was a player for the Buffs.

"She turned around that program," Lappe said. "They were always high-scoring, high-powered offensive teams.

"These aren't her players (at MU) but at the same time she's made her mark on Missouri, and I feel like they're a very good team."

Lappe and Pingeton might be a chunk of wins from earning more respect around the conference. But both seem to have commanded such from their players early on.

Pingeton's players have stayed competitive despite weathering a brutal early schedule. The Buffaloes rave about the passion and school pride Lappe has instilled in them. And intangibles aside, CU senior guard Chelsea Dale said the players have bought into the young Lappe's basketball acumen as well.

"If anything, I think she's prepared us better for any team we've played," Dale said. "There's no doubt in my mind when I

go out there who I'm marking up and what's expected of us."

Today's game is pivotal for both teams if they hope to start making their way up the conference ranks.

MU lost both games to CU last season and will be looking for revenge. CU, meanwhile, needs to defend its home court with winnable games against the Tigers and Kansas State before hitting the road for six of nine.

The Buffs do get a big boost today with the return of point guard Chucky Jeffery, who has missed the last two games with a concussion.

"She gives us a lot of our transition offensive game back, and I feel like we've missed that the last couple of games," Lappe said.

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Today's CU basketball games

By Brian Howell
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CU men (14-5, 3-1 Big 12) at Oklahoma (9-9, 1-3)

When/Where: 11:30 a.m. today, at Lloyd Noble Center in Norman, Okla.

TV/Radio: Big 12/760 AM

The series: Oklahoma leads 87-49, including 48-12 in Norman.

Leading scorers: CU — Alec Burks (19.8 points per game); Oklahoma — Andrew Fitzgerald (14.1 per game)

Notes: CU has won 12 of its past 14 games. ... The Buffs have not won in Norman since 1980. ... Oklahoma is 9-1 at home this season. ... CU point guard Nate Tomlinson has 43 assists and just 23 turnovers in his 16 starts this season.

Missouri (9-9, 1-3) at CU women (10-7, 1-3)

When/Where: 4 p.m. today, at Coors Events Center in Boulder

TV/Radio: No TV/760 AM

The series: CU leads 40-27, including 21-8 in Boulder. The Buffs have won five of the past six against the Tigers.

Leading scorers: Missouri — RaeShara Brown (16.8 points per game); CU — Brittany Spears (17.5)

Notes: The Buffs hope to have guard Chucky Jeffery back today. She has missed two games with a concussion. She has averaged 15.3 points, 9.2 rebounds and 4.7 assists per game this year. ... Both teams have upset wins against top-25 teams during Big 12 play. ...