

Thievery has become Jeffery's specialty

Sophomore's defense leads to easy baskets on offense for Buffs

By Joshua Linden Camera Sports Writer
Boulder Daily Camera

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Chucky Jeffery might be glued to the player she's guarding. But the University of Colorado guard stays in close proximity mostly by feel. Her eyes are locked on those of the player with the ball.

As the ball-handler looks away, Jeffery senses that the opponent will soon come back her direction with a pass. Four seconds later, the Buffs are celebrating a layup at the other end of the floor after another Jeffery swipe.

Whether it's Brittany Spears, Brittany Wilson, Meagan Malcolm-Peck or Jeffery herself finishing the play, the scenario is one that's played out plenty this season for the Buffs. At 3.5 steals per game, Jeffery leads the Big 12 Conference and is on pace to turn in one of the top five seasons in CU history in the category. And her opportunism has been a key catalyst for a squad that has struggled with its own half-court offense at times.

"I'm really good at timing things I guess," Jeffery said after Monday's practice as the Buffs wrapped up preparations for today's home game against the North Dakota Fighting Sioux (7 p.m., FSN Rocky Mountain). "I like playing defense and it gives the rest of the team energy when we get steals and easy transition points. I take pride in it."

Ironically, steals might not be the first things that come to mind when fans think of Jeffery's talents on the court. The 5-foot-10 sophomore is second on the team in scoring (15.5 ppg), first in rebounds (9.3 rpg) and first in assists (4.9 apg).

When she notched the second triple-double in school history earlier this season, she had only one steal. But she's had at least three in all but four games this season for the 8-4 Buffs. She's had at least six three times. And if she keeps up her current pace through 30 games, she'll have 105 for the season, which would trail only Laurie Welch's 120 from the 1981-82 season.

"She does a great job of getting her hands up, of jumping up, of reading eyes, of anticipation," CU coach Linda Lappe said. "To have that always as a threat for other teams I think is huge."

At no time has Jeffery's prowess for taking the ball away been more on display than in Thursday's win over Colgate. For one 40-second span in the second half, it was unclear whether the visiting Raiders would be able to get within 25 feet of the basket again.

Jeffery stole the ball on three straight possessions. The first she fired ahead for Spears. The next two she took to the basket herself to give the Buffaloes a 25-point lead and cause the Raiders to call timeout to try to regroup in a game that had essentially just been put away.

"I was just on a roll," Jeffery said. "It was exciting."

Freshman guard Brittany Wilson knows the peril opponents face against Jeffery from having to square off with her in practice. While anticipation is key away from the ball, Jeffery's game is all about disruption when she's guarding on the ball.

"Most of the time when someone is there in your face it's hard to focus on what you have to get done," Wilson said. "And Chucky's always in your face, always trying to swipe at the ball."

The importance of the havoc Jeffery causes at the top of CU's man-to-man defense will become even more important in the coming weeks as the Buffs begin Big 12 play. Tonight's game against North Dakota (2-12) is the final non-league game before Saturday's trek to Texas A&M.

The Buffs -- who are shorthanded inside against many of the Big 12's front lines -- will have to rely heavily on disruption out top to keep opponents from getting the ball inside in the first place.

"We've got to put tremendous ball pressure on," Lappe said.

Lappe is quick to note the role quick transition buckets have played for her team this season during offensive scoring droughts.

But that's not to say the coach wants Jeffery or anyone else on her team to gamble too often in going after the ball. Steals, Lappe said, can be a bad stat if they mean you're just as often getting burned by backdoor cuts and drives to the basket.

Lappe points out that Jeffery's steals often are products of her teammates playing tight defense and not letting their opposition get off a clean pass. Jeffery has become adept at reading and reacting to those situations, but Lappe has also pushed the former Sierra High School star to try and become one of the team's best all-around defenders.

The task of guarding opponents' top player is often given to other Buffs like guard Britney Blythe or Spears, a 6-1 forward.

"She's got to start guarding some good offensive players (in the Big 12)," Lappe said. "She's got to make sure that she gets those steals because she's in great position and not necessarily just because she's more athletic than everyone else."

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CU women vs. North Dakota

Camera staff
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TODAY: The Colorado Buffaloes (8-4) host the North Dakota Fighting Sioux (2-10) in a 7 p.m. game at the Coors Events Center.

BROADCAST: Television on FSN with Marc Stout (play-by-play), Ceal Barry (color) and Alanna Rizzo (sidelines). Radio on KKZN (760 AM) with Mike Rice (play-by-play) and Carol Callan (color).

STORYLINES: Tonight's game is CU's last non-conference game of the regular season. ... The Buffs have lost three of their last five but are coming off of a 74-52 trouncing of Colgate. ... CU is 8-1 at home this season. ... The Fighting Sioux, a former Division-II power, are coming off back-to-back losses to Montana and Toledo as they try to transition to the Division-I ranks.

KEY STAT: The Buffs are allowing just 49.8 points per game at home this season. Only twice have foes scored 60-plus at Coors.

COACHES: Linda Lappe is 8-4 in her first season at CU and 58-40 overall. Gene Roebuck is 594-128 in his 24th season at North Dakota and 681-142 overall.

PROBABLE STARTERS

Colorado: G Britney Blythe, 5-9, Sr., 4.0 ppg, 1.8 rpg, 1.5 apg; G Chucky Jeffery, 5-10, So., 15.5 ppg, 9.3 rpg, 4.9 apg; F Brittany Spears, 6-1, Sr., 17.0 ppg, 7.7 rpg, 1.8 spg; F Meagan Malcolm-Peck, 6-2, So., 7.6 ppg, 4.8 rpg, 1.8 apg; F Julie Seabrook 6-3, Jr., 6.3 ppg, 6.0 rpg.

North Dakota: G Charnay Mothershed, 5-7, Jr., 4.4 ppg, 3.1 rpg, 4.1 apg; F Madi Buck, 6-0, Fr., 5.6 ppg, 3.9 rpg, 1.3 spg; F Mallory Youngblut, 6-0, Sr., 11.8 ppg, 4.1 rpg, 2.5 apg; F Corey Lof, 6-0, Sr., 3.5 ppg, 5.0 rpg, 1.5 spg; C Allyssa Wal, 6-4, Fr., 9.8 ppg, 4.4 rpg, 2.5 bpg.

SERIES: CU has never played North Dakota.

UP NEXT: The Buffs travel to face Texas A&M at 6 p.m. Saturday in College Station.

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