

Big 12 hoops riding high

Half of league`s teams have spent time in top 25 during preseason

By Ryan Thorburn Camera Sports Writer
Boulder Daily Camera

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Kansas never went anywhere.

Two of college basketball`s marquee players, Kansas State`s Jacob Pullen and Baylor`s LaceDarius Dunn, are back from suspensions.

Iowa State, picked to finish last by the coaches in the preseason poll, is 13-2 under first-year head coach Fred Hoiberg.

And the two perennial bottom-feeder programs that are leaving for the Pac-12 and Big Ten, respectively -- Colorado and Nebraska -- enter league play with a combined 23-6 record. The Buffs are ranked seventh nationally in scoring offense (84.3 ppg) while the Cornhuskers are second in the country in scoring defense (53.9 ppg).

The Big 12 appears to be as good as ever entering the 2011 grind.

"Our conference is dynamite this year," Missouri head coach Mike Anderson said on the Big 12 coaches teleconference on Thursday. "We have six teams that have been in the top 25 and other teams that are looming."

This week`s Associated Press poll includes: No. 3 Kansas, No. 9 Missouri, No. 12 Texas, No. 16 Texas A&M and No. 17 Kansas State.

Frank Martin`s Wildcats were ranked as high as No. 3 before losing Pullman and forward Curtis Kelly to a three-game NCAA suspension for receiving improper benefits.

"We`re a lot better basketball team right now than we were a month ago because the adversity has forced everyone to take ownership," Martin said. "I love my team."

Baylor was ranked in the top 10 before losing three of four games just before Christmas. But now Dunn -- the Big 12`s leading scorer and coming off a 43-point performance -- is back in form after being suspended for a domestic violence incident.

The Bears, a team still receiving votes in the AP poll, are capable of making another deep run in the NCAA Tournament.

"With other guys taking on different roles, we`re going to be a better team at the end of the year than we were at the beginning of the year," Baylor head coach Scott Drew predicts.

Entering this weekend`s conference openers, the Big 12:

Is undefeated (17-0) against non-conference opponents since Jan. 1.

Leads the nation in non-conference winning percentage, wins per team and record vs. top-25 non-conference opponents.

Has eight teams with an .800 win percentage or higher, tied with the Big East for the most of any conference. Ten of the 12 teams have double-digit win totals.

Has all 12 teams above .500 with six teams in the RPI top 40.

"It`s a grind, but it`s going to be fun though," Alec Burks said after scoring 20 points in CU`s tune-up victory over Western New Mexico on Wednesday night. "It`s a grown-man league."

Burks was one of six Big 12 players named to the Wooden Award's midseason candidates list. Pullen, Dunn, Missouri's Marcus Denmon, Texas' Jordan Hamilton and Kansas' Marcus Morris also made the final 30.

CU opens conference play against Missouri on Saturday at the Coors Events Center. Kansas State is at Oklahoma State, Baylor is at Texas Tech, Texas A&M is at Oklahoma and Iowa State is at Nebraska. Texas will take on Connecticut in a nationally-televised non-conference game.

"The first thing you have to turn up is the intensity level and the sense of urgency," Anderson said on the key to sustaining non-conference momentum in the Big 12. "Every play you have to play as if it's your last."

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Big 12 team capsules

By Ryan Thorburn Camera Sports Writer
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Here is the Camera's team-by team look at the Big 12 in order of predicted finish:

Kansas (14-0)

Head coach: Bill Self (8th season, 216-43).

AP ranking: 3.

Preseason Big 12 coaches poll: 2.

Best win: 81-68 over Memphis.

Worst loss: None.

Outlook: Self has another star-studded team, led by Marcus and Markieff Morris, Tyrel Reed and super freshman Josh Selby. The Jayhawks have the talent to win a national championship.

Coach says: "I look around the league and I see balance. I don't see any easy 'W's,'" Self said.

CU on: Jan. 25 in Boulder; Feb. 19 in Lawrence.

Missouri (14-1)

Head coach: Mike Anderson (5th season, 102-47).

AP ranking: 9.

Preseason Big 12 coaches poll: 5.

Best win: 75-64 over Illinois.

Worst loss: 111-102 (OT) to Georgetown (only loss).

Outlook: The Tigers, with junior Marcus Denmon moving from sixth man to spotlight player, are as tenacious as ever with their "40 minutes of hell" style of play. Mizzou should be in the mix for a conference title.

Coach says: "Our potential is this has a chance to be one of the deeper teams we've had. Guys are starting to figure out their roles and hopefully it will get even smoother when we get into conference play because we're going to need them," Anderson said.

CU on: Saturday in Boulder; Feb. 5 in Columbia.

Texas (12-2)

Head coach: Rick Barnes (13th season, 306-117).

AP ranking: 12.

Preseason Big 12 coaches poll: 3.

Best win: 67-55 at Michigan State.

Worst loss: 73-56 at USC.

Outlook: The Longhorns have better chemistry than last season and already have wins over Illinois, Arkansas, North Carolina, Michigan State and play Connecticut on Saturday. Barnes and the boys are already battle-tested and should be ready for a deep run into the NCAA Tournament by March.

Coach says: "We have the kind of program where we can get into homes (recruiting) anywhere in the world really because of the Texas name," Barnes said.

CU on: Feb. 26 in Boulder.

Kansas State (12-3)

Head coach: Frank Martin (4th season, 84-35).

AP ranking: 17.

Preseason Big 12 coaches poll: 1.

Best win: 63-58 at Washington State.

Worst loss: 57-44 to Florida.

Outlook: Preseason player of the year Jacob Pullen is back from a three-game NCAA suspension determined to lead the Wildcats to a Big 12 title. K-State has enough talent and experience to meet the October expectations and make it to the Final Four.

Coach says: "I love our team. We're just immature. We're the second-youngest team in the Big 12," Martin said.

CU on: Jan. 12 in Manhattan; Feb. 12 in Boulder.

Texas A&M (13-1)

Head coach: Mark Turgeon (4th season, 86-32).

AP ranking: 16.

Preseason Big 12 coaches poll: 6.

Best win: 63-62 over Temple.

Worst loss: 67-65 to Boston College (only loss).

Outlook: The Aggies are off to the second-best start in program history, and Turgeon says they haven't even been playing that well. A&M will be in the NCAA Tournament barring injuries.

Coach says: "Hopefully, like we have in the past, we'll just continue to get better," Turgeon said.

CU on: Feb. 9 in Boulder.

Baylor (10-3)

Head coach: Scott Drew (8th season, 119-106).

AP ranking: Receiving votes.

Big 12 preseason coaches poll: 4.

Best win: 68-54 over Arizona State.

Worst loss: 77-71 to Washington State.

Outlook: The Bears suspended LaceDarius Dunn after a domestic violence charge and have not lived up to preseason expectations. But Dunn is back and leading the Big 12 in scoring. This sizable roster is gifted enough to beat anyone on a given night.

Coach says: "In the non-conference I think we just took everybody's best shot. Sometimes that's hard to do," Drew said.

CU on: Jan. 29 in Waco.

Oklahoma State (12-2)

Head coach: Travis Ford (3rd season, 57-25).

AP ranking: Not ranked.

Preseason Big 12 coaches poll: 8.

Best win: 68-60 over Alabama.

Worst loss: 73-52 at Gonzaga.

Outlook: The Pokes have a good inside-outside mix with Marshall Moses and Keiton Page. OSU will likely be a bubble team for the NCAA Tournament.

Coach says: "We're glad we're 12-2 but out of those 14 games we're going to have to play better than we did to compete in the Big 12. And we understand that," Ford said.

CU on: Jan. 15 in Boulder.

Colorado (11-4)

Head coach: Tad Boyle (1st season, 11-4).

AP ranking: Not ranked.

Preseason Big 12 coaches poll: 9.

Best win: 78-69 over Indiana.

Worst loss: 83-81 (OT) at San Francisco.

Outlook: After a tough start that included three early road losses the Buffs have done a better job sharing the ball and playing defense. CU probably needs to win at least nine conference games to have a shot at the NCAA Tournament. Rebounding and interior defense remain weaknesses.

Coach says: "If you look at our team over the last three or four weeks, I like the track that we're on," Boyle said.

Iowa State (13-2)

Head coach: Fred Hoiberg (1st season, 13-2).

AP ranking: Not ranked.

Preseason Big 12 coaches poll: 12.

Best win: 60-47 at Virginia.

Worst loss: 60-54 at Northern Iowa.

Outlook: Hoiberg, the former Cyclones star, was a great hire. Iowa State was the surprise team in non-conference play and will be tough to beat again at Hilton Coliseum, despite a lack of depth or star power.

Coach says: "I think our guys have played with a tremendous purpose ... I'm happy with where we are, but we haven't accomplished anything yet. If we want to accomplish our goals we have to ramp it up."

CU on: Feb. 1 in Boulder; March 2 in Ames.

Nebraska (12-2)

Head coach: Doc Sadler (5th season, 82-60).

AP ranking: Not ranked.

Preseason Big 12 coaches poll: 10.

Best win: 60-58 over USC.

Worst loss: 70-67 to Davidson.

Outlook: Due to some added height in the post this is Nebraska's best defensive team under the defensive-minded Sadler, yielding less than 55 points per game (second nationally). The Huskers enter Big 12 play on a 10-game winning streak and could be in the mix for a postseason berth in March.

Coach says: "Although we have played some good teams we haven't played the caliber of teams consistently that we're fixing to play," Sadler said.

CU on: Jan. 18 in Lincoln; March 5 in Boulder.

Oklahoma (8-6)

Head coach: Jeff Capel (5th season, 90-57).

AP ranking: Not ranked.

Preseason Big 12 coaches poll: 11.

Best win: 73-60 over Oral Roberts.

Worst loss: 68-64 to Chaminade.

Outlook: These are not Blake Griffin's Sooners. OU's young team has trouble rebounding and is 0-6 outside of Norman, including a loss to Division II Chaminade at the Maui Invitational.

Coach says: "I think we've gotten better. Our guys have worked and played hard and had a good attitude. Hopefully because of that challenging non-conference schedule it's something that will help us be better in Big 12 play," Capel said.

CU on: Jan. 22 in Norman.

Texas Tech (8-7)

Head coach: Pat Knight (4th season, 45-49).

AP ranking: Not ranked.

Preseason Big 12 coaches poll: 7.

Best win: 70-58 over Stephen F. Austin.

Worst loss: 92-83 (OT) at North Texas.

Outlook: The Red Raiders have been the biggest disappointment in the Big 12. Seniors Mike Singletary and John Roberson have taken a step back, and Knight is on the hot seat in Lubbock.

Coach says: "The last four games have shown that they're starting to buy into everything and play like a team. But it has been a tough preseason from a senior (leadership) standpoint," Knight said.

CU on: Feb. 23 in Lubbock.

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