

CU Buffs' turnaround would be complete with NCAA bid Sunday

Record 22-loss season a thing of the past thanks to Boyle

By Ryan Thorburn Camera Sports Writer
Boulder Daily Camera

Posted: 03/12/2011 05:19:21 PM MST

KANSAS CITY, Mo. -- It has been both the best of times and worst of times for about half the members of the Colorado men's basketball program.

Seven players -- including seniors Cory Higgins and Levi Knutson -- were a part of CU's record 22-loss season two years ago.

After becoming just the third team in the program's history to win as many as 21 games, the 2010-11 Buffs will gather Sunday at head coach Tad Boyle's house to watch the NCAA Tournament selection show (4 p.m., CBS).

The Buffs -- who finished dead last in the Big 12 for three consecutive seasons (2007-09) -- are expected to go dancing this March before moving on to the Pac-12.

"I've been through a season with the most losses in Colorado history and now I'm part of a season where we're one of five teams to win 20 games at Colorado," junior forward Austin Dufault reflected. "Being a part of that turnaround and seeing how it all works is really special. It has been tough and at times I've thought about what it would be like if I went to other places. But now there's no doubt I made the right choice. I'm happy just to be a part of it right now."

Last season CU made some progress, moving up to eighth place in the Big 12 standings entering the conference tournament. But a head-scratching loss to Texas Tech in the opening round cost the Buffs an NIT bid.

Jeff Bzdelik left for Wake Forest in April before the rebuilding project was complete. To his credit, instead of talking about what the program would be like down the road, Boyle told the seniors exactly what they wanted to hear after taking the job.

"We talked about it before the year started, it's about the seniors ... it's about their last go-round," Boyle said after CU's 90-83 loss to top-seeded Kansas in the conference semifinals on Friday at the Sprint Center. "That doesn't mean it's not important to the underclassmen. But we've got to live in the present. You prepare for the future, you learn from the past, but we've got to live in the present."

"That's what we try to do this year is not talk about last year or next year."

After avenging a bad regular-season loss against Iowa State and beating No. 19 Kansas State for a third time in the program's final Big 12 Tournament appearance, the Buffs (21-13) believe they have played their way in to the NCAA Tournament.

However, it's not a slam dunk. ESPN "Bracketologist" Joe Lunardi had CU as one of his "last four in" on Saturday. That would mean a trip to Dayton, Ohio, for the First Four round.

The consensus inside the Sprint Center was that the Buffs had not only proven to be worthy of the expanded 68-team field, but were capable of surviving and advancing next week in the 64-team bracket just as they did here.

"I think the Big 12 got us ready for anything we're going to see in the postseason," Higgins said after scoring only six points against the Jayhawks. "We just played a No. 1 seed and we didn't play our best game, especially me, and we were in it. We'll be confident going into the postseason."

CU went 4-4 against ranked teams this season, including upsets of Missouri and Texas when the Tigers and Longhorns were in the top 10. The Buffs also have six wins against teams in the RPI top 50, which is twice the number many of the other "bubble teams" can brag of.

"Whoever faces us is going to be dealing with some pretty potent offensive players," Boyle said. "Now we have to make sure we defend and rebound."

Alec Burks was spectacular at the Sprint Center, averaging 25.3 points and 8.7 rebounds. The 6-6 sophomore was the first CU player ever named to the All-Big 12 Tournament team.

Higgins ran out of gas against KU but delivered what should be the NCAA Tournament berth-clinching win over K-State with 28 points on 10-for-15 shooting.

Knutson, the Big 12's best 3-point shooter, will create matchup problems for any team coming off the bench. True freshman Andre Roberson, a dynamic rebounder, was showing off in SportsCenter highlights all week. Marcus Relphorde, Nate Tomlinson and Dufault are all experienced, capable role players.

"We're resilient and we're capable of playing with any team on any given night," Boyle said. "That's what the NCAA Tournament is about. You want teams in there that are capable of playing the tough teams tough. We're capable of doing that. ...

"I will let our résumé and our wins and losses speak for themselves."

Close Window

Send To Printer

denverpost.com

THE DENVER POST

colorado

Colorado leaving Big 12 on a high

By Tom Kensler
The Denver Post

Posted: 03/13/2011 01:00:00 AM MST

Updated: 03/13/2011 01:18:59 AM MST

KANSAS CITY, Mo. — It's only human nature for the Colorado men's basketball team to gain an extra level of satisfaction, if not retribution, for reaching the semifinals in its final Big 12 Tournament.

In its last visit here before heading off to the Pac-12 Conference, Colorado (21-13, 8-8 Big 12) earned a No. 5 seed after being picked to finish ninth in the Big 12 by the league's coaches in their annual preseason poll.

Many national college basketball analysts and "bracketologists" expect the Buffaloes to hear their name called today when the 68-team bracket for the NCAA Tournament is announced (KCNC-4, 4 p.m.)

It would be quite a feat. Colorado has made just 10 appearances in the NCAA Tournament, only two

(1997 and 2003) in the past 42 years.

"Our players came up to me after our final home game and said, 'Coach, remember they picked us ninth,' " first-year Colorado coach Tad Boyle said Friday night after the Buffs lost 90-83 to top-seeded Kansas. "So, yeah, there is some pleasure in (proving them wrong)."

Picked to finish ninth? Really? Colorado returned all five starters from a team that placed eighth the previous year.

"We looked upon that as a slap in the face," CU senior guard Cory Higgins recalled Friday.

Any thoughts of vindication go back further than that. With thanks to Blue Ribbon College Basketball Yearbook for compiling the list, let's review some comments made last summer when Colorado and Nebraska announced that they were leaving the Big 12, with CU heading west and Nebraska signing on with the Big Ten (the Huskers were picked to finish 10th in the preseason poll and ended up tied for seventh).

- Kansas men's basketball coach Bill Self: "Our league just got better. No disrespect to those other schools (CU and Nebraska), but we got better."

- Texas A&M coach Mark Turgeon: "Not to take away from Colorado or Nebraska, but our basketball league just got even

better."

Advertisement



Send flowers for any occasion

Bouquets from \$19.99^{+s/h}

ProFlowers

Order ONLY at
proflowers.com/happy
or call 1-877-888-0688

Print Powered By  FormatDynamics™

denverpost.com

THE DENVER POST

March Madness

[Play The Denver Post's College Basketball Tournament Contest.](#)

[Compare your bracket against a panel of celebrity pickers, including Ty Lawson and Troy Tulowitzki.](#)

[Scan today's matchups and scores in men's college basketball.](#)

[Scan today's matchups and scores in women's basketball.](#)

[View slide show of teams practicing for NCAA Tournament at Pepsi Center on March 16.](#)

[View slide show of BYU senior guard Jimmer Fredette.](#)

[View slide show of NCAA Tournament getting underway March 15.](#)

[More photos from throughout the NCAA Tournament.](#)

[Pore over today's TV and radio listings for college basketball.](#)

- Oklahoma assistant coach Bryan Goodman: "Not that we lost two cupcakes or anything. . . . But those two, if they're coming into your home, you probably would think you should beat them."

- Even Missouri governor Jay Nixon got in the act, dissing Colorado and Nebraska as "the two weakest basketball programs in the Big 12."

Historically, Colorado and Nebraska may indeed

rival Baylor for a history of futility in men's basketball. But this season's successes have been especially gratifying for CU, including two victories in the Big 12 Tournament and reaching the semifinals for the first time in the 15th and final try.

"We've heard what other people said about us before the season and that kind of drove us all year," CU junior forward Austin Dufault said Friday night after the Buffaloes' 64-year association with the Big Seven/Big Eight/Big 12 came to an end with the semifinal loss to Kansas.

"We can go to the Pac-10 with our heads held high. I thought we had a pretty good run at (the Big 12 Tournament)," Dufault added. "We did some things our program had never done before. We can be proud of that. And hopefully there is a lot of basketball still to be played."

On Thursday, after Colorado defeated 19th-ranked Kansas State in a quarterfinal, Higgins reflected on the progress made by the program during his four years in Boulder.

During his first three seasons under then-CU coach Jeff Bzdelik, Higgins played on Buffs teams that went 12-20, 9-22 and 15-16. The combined Big 12 record of those three seasons was 10-38, including 3-13 and 1-15 stinkers for the first two.

"I can't even put into words what this season means to me," Higgins said. "Just to experience that, with these guys around me and especially w

Advertisement



Send flowers for any occasion

Bouquets from \$19.99^{+s/h}

ProFlowers

Order ONLY at proflowers.com/happy or call 1-877-888-0688

Print Powered By  FormatDynamics™

denverpost.com

THE DENVER POST

ith the guys that have been through the lows of Colorado basketball, it means the world to me."

Tom Kensler: 303-954-1280 or
tkensler@denverpost.com

CU's chances

Former NCAA Tournament selection committee chairman C.M. Newton liked to say that the 10 committee members have the duty to evaluate "the beauty marks and warts" of every possible candidate for the at-large bids. Here is how Colorado looks:

BEAUTY MARKS

Six marquee victories over teams among the top 50 in the Ratings Percentage Index (RPI), including one over Texas (No. 14 RPI) and three against Kansas State (No. 24).

Reaching the semifinals of the Big 12 Tournament.

Near-misses at home against Kansas (82-78) and Texas A&M (73-70 in overtime), and on the road against Baylor (70-66).

Eight wins over RPI top-100 teams.

Played four true road games (not including neutral-site games) during nonconference schedule (losses at Georgia, Harvard, San Francisco and win at Cal State-Bakersfield).

Finishing strong with six wins in its last nine

games. Two of the losses were to No. 2-ranked Kansas.

WARTS

No. 64 RPI entering the weekend is among the weakest of the perceived bubble teams.

CU's strength of schedule is ranked a ho-hum 75th nationally, even including Big 12 games.

Very little help from nonconference schedule. Biggest victory outside Big 12 would be against Colorado State (No. 48 RPI).

Midseason slump of six Big 12 losses in seven games.

BOTTOM LINE

It says here that Colorado gets into the field. The difference between the Buffs and most other bubbles is CU's number of wins over top-50 teams. That's huge. The selection committee also could take into account that a reason for the team's slow start (CU began 2-3) and relatively high number of losses was due to players adjusting to an entirely new coaching staff. And the committee won't overlook those near-misses and top-shelf opponents. The committee does look closely at scores, not just wins and losses.

Some questions of note

Who is coming to the Pepsi Center?

Advertisement



DIRECTV has more of what you want to watch!

Switch today! 1-888-778-0985



Offer ends 2/9/11. Credit card required (except in MA & PA). New approved customers only (lease required). \$19.95 Handling & Delivery fee may apply. Applicable use tax adjustment may apply on the retail value of the installation. Call for details.

Print Powered By FormatDynamics™

denverpost.com

THE DENVER POST

The Pepsi Center will host second-round (Thursday) and third-round (Saturday) games, and it is anyone's guess as to which NCAA Tournament teams will be shipped here.

The only probable "lock" to be sent here is Brigham Young because the selection committee tries to reward the teams seeded in the top four lines by keeping them as close to home as possible. BYU could be seeded as high as No. 2 or No. 3.

It's unlikely that a No. 1 seed will come to Denver because of geographical considerations afforded to high seeds. But that doesn't eliminate the possibility that the Pepsi Center will get some good teams. Last year, for example, among the teams sent to early-round games in Spokane, Wash., were Michigan State, Purdue, Texas A&M and Maryland.

CU and UNC ticketed for Denver?

The odds may be against that happening. Both will draw a low seeding in the 68-team field, and the committee tries to avoid matchup scenarios in which a better seed is at a disadvantage because of crowd support. In other words, if, say, Big Sky champion Northern Colorado is a No. 12 seed, would it be fair for a No. 5 seed such as a West Virginia to travel across the country and face a hostile crowd that favors a much lower seed?

The committee insists that it only positively "protects" the top four seeds in each region from potentially avoiding those scenarios. But there

are countless examples over the years that displayed a sensitivity to that issue regarding midlevel seeds.

Colorado might have to be a No. 8 or 9 seed to play at the Pepsi Center. A seeding that high for a team that has lost 13 games would come as a surprise.

Bufs and Bears going to Dayton?

Unfortunately, there's a decent chance of that. The four lowest seeds (Nos. 16) among automatic qualifiers and the four lowest seeds among the at-large bids will be the only teams required to play a first-round game Tuesday or Wednesday. Then they go to one of eight sites (including Denver) for the second and third rounds. Some analysts believe CU's third victory over Kansas State might have pushed CU ahead of enough at-large teams to avoid the first round. But at last glance, respected ESPN "bracketologist" Joe Lunardi had CU booked for Dayton, Ohio. Not UNC, which he pegged as a No. 15 seed. In any case, one thing is certain about the announcement of every NCAA Tournament bracket: There are always surprises.

Advertisement



SAVE up to **64%**
Plus, get
3 FREE Gifts



Special Code: 45069ZWN

To Order: www.OmahaSteaks.com/print71 or call 1-877-605-0496

Print Powered By  FormatDynamics™