

Boyle's CU Buffs embracing NIT opportunity

Men's squad one win from Madison Square Garden

By Ryan Thorburn Camera Sports Writer
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How's your bracket?

Not the NCAA Tournament bracket, which is likely stained with ink cross-outs or inside the office shredder.

Colorado fans might want to start keeping track of the National Invitation Tournament bracket.

The Buffs are already just three wins away from winning the 32-team tournament.

CU, which was awarded a No. 1 seed by the NIT after getting snubbed by the NCAA Tournament selection committee a week ago, has cruised into the quarterfinals with wins over Texas Southern (88-74) and Cal (89-72) at the Coors Events Center.

"It's always fun playing a game of basketball," Alec Burks said of CU embracing the NIT opportunity. "A lot of people don't get to play anymore. A lot of people are either hurt or their season is over."

The Buffs' (21-13) season will continue on Tuesday when they host the Fairfield-Kent State winner at the Coors Events Center (7 p.m., ESPN) with a trip to the Final Four in New York on the line.

No. 6 Fairfield upset No. 3 Colorado State in Fort Collins, and No. 7 Kent State stunned No. 2 St. Mary's on the road. Fairfield and Kent State play today at 10:30 a.m. on ESPNU.

"We have to be ready to play whoever we play on Tuesday because obviously Fairfield and Kent State have proven that they can go on the road and beat good teams," CU head coach Tad Boyle said. "Colorado State is a good team; St. Mary's is a good team. They are going to come in here, whoever it is, and expect to win.

"So we'll have to be ready to go. And we will be."

At least one of the No. 1 seeds in the NIT, Boston College, will not make it to the Final Four. The Eagles were beaten by No. 4 Northwestern, 85-67 on Saturday.

No. 1 Virginia Tech hosts No. 4 Wichita State today (9 a.m., ESPN), and No. 1 Alabama hosts No. 4 New Mexico on Monday (7 p.m., ESPN).

Ten was enough

Mike Montgomery, who has been a head coach in the Pac-10 for two decades at both Stanford and Cal, isn't exactly as thrilled about having CU and Utah joining an expanding conference next season as those programs are.

"The decision, I think, was mostly a football decision to get to 12, so that we could have the playoff game. I don't think basketball played very heavily one way or another," Montgomery said after Cal's season-ending loss in Boulder "I'm a little bit of a traditionalist. I don't know that we needed to add anybody, to be honest with you, but those aren't my decisions. ...

"I thought we had a pretty good product the way it was, but these days with the whole television thing and dollars and cents are making a lot of the decisions, so we needed to do what we needed to do."

CU will play at Cal on Jan. 12, 2012, and the Bears will visit the Coors Events Center again on Feb. 25, 2012.

Bears will roar

Cal finished the season a disappointing 18-15, but anyone who was paying attention on Friday realizes there are some nice young pieces in place for Montgomery going forward.

The Bears played three juniors, two sophomores and four freshmen during the game.

Junior point guard Jorge Gutierrez, a former prep star at Denver's Lincoln High School, scored 16 points before the intermission before getting injured in the second half. His backcourt mate, Allen Crabbe, was named the Pac-10 Freshman of the Year.

"They are going to be good," Boyle said. "They have the freshman of the year in the Crabbe kid. They have Harper Kamp, who is one of the better low post players around. And they have Jorge, who I think is one of the best players in college basketball that no one has heard of or talked about because he can really play and I have a lot of respect for him."

Top play-maker

The final field goal of Friday's game for CU was the most spectacular. Shannon Sharpe's follow-dunk in the closing seconds was the No. 1 highlight on ESPN SportCenter's "Top Plays" segment.

"I thought it was crazy," Burks said of Sharpe's gravity-defying play. "I knew he could do that stuff since he got here. Everybody got to see it like I have. I knew he was capable of that."

Sharpe, who finished with six points, one assist and no turnovers in 12 minutes against Cal, will likely have to play more minutes in the NIT quarterfinals on Tuesday.

Starting point guard Nate Tomlinson separated the AC joint in his left shoulder during the second half and did not return.

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college basketball

CU will host Kent State in Tuesday's NIT quarterfinal

By Natalie Meisler
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BOULDER — With apologies to Billy Joel, Colorado basketball coach Tad Boyle can't get in a "New York State of Mind" just yet.

All that stands between top region seed CU and a trip to Madison Square Garden for the NIT semifinals is upstart No. 7-seed Kent State (25-11). The Buffs, with the best record in program history at 23-13, host the Golden Flash at 7 p.m. Tuesday.

"We have to play a good team to get to New York," Boyle said. "There's no reason to talk about New York until after Tuesday."

The Golden Flash and its traveling NIT road show opened in northern California to shock No. 2-seed St. Mary's. Then the Golden Flash went cross-country to Bridgeport, Conn., on Sunday and knocked out Fairfield 72-68.

"They are a bunch of tough-minded guys," Boyle said of the Mid-American Conference East champs. "They have a big (6-foot-8) guy (Justin Greene) and good guards who can pass, dribble and shoot."

CU starting guard Nate Tomlinson remains questionable with a slight shoulder separation.

Senior Levi Knutson has been a key contributor off the bench and is CU's third-leading scorer. Freshman Shannon Sharpe, whose monster dunk against California was highlighted on ESPN, also will see more playing time. Boyle said he sent Sharpe a text congratulating him on making ESPN's top play of the day.

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