



Junior Julie Seabrook (15) and CU's inside players face a strong post challenge from Cal.
Photo Courtesy: CUBuffs.com



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Brooks: WNIT Second Round Offers CU Pac-12 Preview

BOULDER - Memo to Linda Lappe and her staff: Take very good notes - and don't lose them before Jan. 12, 2012.

Lappe's Colorado team plays California Monday night at the Coors Events Center (7 p.m.) in a second-round WNIT game. Remember it as a possibly telling preview of CU's first Pac-12 Conference home game on the date above.

The Golden Bears - the defending WNIT champs after their 6-0 romp through last season's tourney - might be among the youngest teams in this year's initial 64-team field. Cal's 12-player roster features just two seniors among six sophomores and four freshmen. And while the pair of seniors play 12-13 minutes a game, their roles this season haven't been as prominent as the underclassmen's.

Cal (18-15) is a team built for the future; the starting lineup usually consists of four sophomores and a freshman. Thus, the team CU sees Monday night will bear more than a slight resemblance to the one that visits Boulder next winter.

But next January's match-up isn't Lappe current focal point; she's wondering about her team's state-of-mind after its 71-62 first-round win over UC-Riverside three nights ago and what kind of first impression the Buffs will make on their new conference opponent.

"This is an important game for us as we move into the Pac-12," Lappe said Sunday. "We'd like to make sure they know what they're going to face for the next however many years . . . I think it's a very important game - one we should be extremely motivated for.

"As a coaching staff, we're trying to get our players ready to play a team we're going to be facing a lot. We're very similar over the season in that we've both had some really good wins and some bad losses. We've been up and down throughout the year. It's going to be a matter of which team shows up to play."

After not having played for nine days, the Buffs (16-15) muddled through a 71-62 win against UC-Riverside on Thursday. Lappe liked her team's late resolve, but there were obvious flaws in CU's first-round win. The Buffs let a 19-point second-half lead slip to two, but held on.

"The biggest thing is focusing; we had a lot of mental errors (against UC-Riverside)," CU senior Britney Blythe said. "I think it's really hard to pinpoint a couple of things because we know how to it - we've faced the press and we weren't doing the best against it. We'd been faced with simple rotations on offense and defense and we weren't doing that either.

"I feel like if we can focus and be here (mentally) as a team, then it'll be a lot different. People can say we were rusty, and I can say that, too, but . . . Cal will be a good test to see if we can get back in the groove of things."

The Bears might be more than a good test for the Buffs inside. Sophomore Cal post players DeNesha Stallworth and Talia Caldwell are 6-foot-3 sophomores who combine for almost 24 points and 15 rebounds a game. Stallworth is a 2009 McDonalds All-America selection and was on the 2010 Pac-10 all-freshman first team. Caldwell was a three-time honorable mention All-America by *Street & Smith*. Her 61.5 percent field goal percentage last season was the second-best in school history.

But Stallworth and Caldwell had their problems in last week's 74-60 first-round win at Cal Poly. They finished a combined 6-of-25 from the field, with Stallworth hitting only two of her 15 shots. Caldwell carried Cal's inside load with 12 points and 17 rebounds (eight offensive). Cal has outrebounded its opponents in 22 of 33 games this season, including 48-42 against Cal Poly. The Bears have lost all the games this season in which they didn't hold a board advantage.

In the WNIT opener, Cal also got stellar guard play from sophomore Layshia Clarendon, who had 20 points and six assists - both team bests - and freshman reserve Afure Jemerigbe, who added 15 points off the bench.

Some of CU's defensive burden inside against Stallworth and Caldwell will fall to 6-3 junior forward Julie Seabrook, who has finished the three most recent games with four fouls in each contest and probably can't afford to lose minutes Monday night to foul trouble. CU's only true center is 6-4 freshman Rachel Hargis, whose play at both ends has improved over the last month of the season.

In addition to hoping for an altitude assist in slowing down Cal's pair in the post, Seabrook believes weekly battles in the Big 12 Conference have prepped the Buffs to face strong inside games.

"Obviously, the Big 12 has helped us prepare for that, because we faced a lot of really good post players," she said. "We're doing some things similar with what did (defensively) against Baylor with double teams in the post. I think it'll be effective . . . it's a lot more of an aggressive defense and I think it'll be effective against (Cal)."

Added Blythe, a Californian (San Mateo) whose father, Donovan, had scouted Cal even before the Buffs got their official report: "(Stallworth) is physical, she uses her body well. She's got that All-American mentality that she's going to score . . . He said we're going to have to do our work early and not let her catch it on the block, and try to work hard or she can score over us or get a foul. He was saying we played good help defense against Baylor and Brittney (Griner), so if we can take that mentality into the game we should be able to do a lot of good work against her, make it tough on her."

Blythe's primary defensive assignment figures to be Clarendon, who has scored 20 or more points in two of her last three games and leads the team in double-digit performances this season (25).

After the Buffs eliminated the Highlanders on Thursday, some players blamed their inconsistencies on not having played since the Big 12 tournament on March 8. "It was hard being off for that long," Blythe said. "I just don't think people were in the same routine they've been in for the Big 12 season - two practices, then a game. I think we're getting back into the swing of things a little bit. And people should be a lot more rested now; this past week was mid-terms, so hopefully people are catching up on sleep and focusing on the game."

The recurring theme here is "focus" - an intangible that wasn't that abundant in Sunday's practice. Seabrook called focus, particularly in the postseason, "huge . . . it seems we're letting our guard down a little bit even though this should be the time when we're most wanting to play. It should be the time when we have our best focus."

That is essential, said Lappe, because Cal "does a lot of things that could get us off our game in terms of what they do defensively and how they change up their defenses, what they're going to throw at us offensively. We just have to make sure we're tough enough to handle whatever's thrown at us.

"They want to get you to rush everything. You have to stay disciplined and patient with what you're doing, stay fundamental . . . if we start getting into their speed, get rushed and let them dictate the pace, it won't be good for us."

Certainly not Monday night . . . and maybe not next January, either.

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SHOW MENU



Bufs get their WNIT shot

Postseason yearly goal for Lappe's team

By Joshua Lindenstone Camera Sports Writer
Boulder Daily Camera

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When Joanne Boyle took over the Cal women's basketball program, the Bears hadn't had a winning season or been to the postseason in 13 years.

Six seasons later, getting to the postseason is all the Bears know.

The turnaround is the kind any new head coach would love to make, even if most know such overnight transformations are an exception to the rule.

Boyle's Bears visit the Coors Events Center today for a 7 p.m. second-round WNIT matchup with the Colorado Buffaloes, who are themselves trying to set postseason success as the standard in Year 1 under a new coaching staff.

"We know it's a process," CU head coach Linda Lappe said after practice Sunday. "Building is always a process. Restoring a tradition is a process. But obviously the faster we can do that the better. None of us are extremely patient."

After a successful stint at Richmond, Boyle was a candidate to replace legendary CU coach Ceal Barry in 2005. Then Wisconsin-Green Bay coach Kevin Borseth was hired, but backed out on the job on the morning he was to be introduced to the public. A new search -- which ultimately led to now former CU coach Kathy McConnell-Miller's hiring -- was conducted. But by then Boyle was digging in at Cal.

Aided by a top-10 recruiting class that was in place when she took over, Boyle guided Cal to the NCAA tournament in each of her first four seasons, including a trip to the Sweet 16 two years ago.

Armed last season with a freshman class that was rated the best in the country, the green squad just missed out on the NCAA tourney. But Cal rolled to the WNIT title, beating in the final a Miami squad that turned into a top-15 team this year.

This season, though, the still-young Bears (18-15) hit some injuries and bumps, finishing 7-11 in Pac-10 Conference play to finish sixth in the league.

In some ways, the Bufs and Bears -- who start four sophomores and a freshman -- have had similar seasons, knocking off quality opponents only to also suffer frustrating lapses at times. Both finished the season strong, with Cal even advancing to the Pac-10 tourney semifinals.

While a quick turnaround like the one Cal pulled off would be nice, Lappe said first and foremost she wants to build success at CU for the long term.

The Bears are now scratching to prove they have just such staying power.

"The good programs that have been able to do it the right way have been able to sustain a high level for a lot of years," Lappe said.

One current major focus to that end is getting the Bufs (16-15) used to the routine of playing throughout the month of March, something CU players haven't experienced since a WNIT semifinal run three years ago and something they're still adjusting to as this postseason goes on.

Only senior forward Brittany Spears played much on the 2008 squad, and six of CU's nine healthy players this season weren't even on the team then.

"It's one whole month of your season in addition to what you already have," Lappe said. "It's a lot. Especially for young

players that aren't used to playing at the collegiate level, it can be a huge drain. You have to look at it the right way, and you have to be mentally tough at this time of the year."

The Buffs shouldn't have any trouble getting motivated today.

Starting next season, they'll meet the Bears twice per season as members of the Pac-12 Conference.

CU had a shot at a first impression with its new league during the non-conference portion of this season when it played at Southern Cal. But USC dominated in the second half of that matchup for a 68-54 win over the Buffs. That was three months ago, though, and the Buffs are confident in the strides they've made since then.

"I think we're way better than the team that played against USC," sophomore forward Meagan Malcolm-Peck said. "And I think we need to show everybody that Colorado is going to be a good team in the Pac-12. I think we need to make a good impression because it's always the first impression that counts."

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