



CU redshirt freshman guard Shannon Sharpe (2) could get more minutes Tuesday night against Kent State.  
Photo Courtesy: Tony Harman



03/21/2011 B.G. Brooks, Contributing Editor

## Brooks: Buffs Await Unexpected Final Home Hurrah

**BOULDER** - Call it Senior Night, Part II . . . an unexpected (and until recently, unwanted) opportunity for Colorado's five upperclassmen to play a final game at the Coors Events Center. It comes Tuesday night in the quarterfinals of the NIT against Kent State (7 p.m., ESPN).

All things considered after the perplexing, gut-wrenching NCAA snub two Sundays ago, the Buffs didn't allow their spirits to be crushed by an afternoon that easily could have done it. They've righted themselves and moved to within one win of reaching the NIT semifinals in New York, pushing the NCAA by-pass far enough to the rear of their thoughts to not let it be a distraction yet keeping it close enough to remain a stimulus.

"I feel like that's going to be in the back of our minds throughout this whole tournament; we're still going to use that as motivation to try to win the NIT," redshirt freshman guard Shannon Sharpe said.

### BUFFALO EXTRAS



Game Notes #37: vs. Kent State (NIT Quarterfinals)

Sharpe and his teammates are following the form of Marches past, doing what hoops junkies do. Not being in the NCAA Tournament hasn't switched them to Comedy Central; when a tourney game is televised they're usually watching it.

"Yeah, I've seen a lot the games," Sharpe said. "There's a lot of excitement going on. I'm a fan of basketball; if it's on I'll watch it."

Added freshman Andre Roberson: "I'm watching, but when you do, you can't help wishing you were there . . . I think people are still holding that grudge as motivation for the NIT. But we've moved on; we can't change it."

The Buffs have coped well, their fans have responded well. Coach Tad Boyle's concern on Friday night was attendance going down because of spring break. In fact, it went up, rising from 6,299 for Wednesday night's first-round game to 7,614 for the second round on Friday night. And he's hopeful that Tuesday night's multi-faceted scenario - the final home game in a record-breaking season (23 wins); the final home game for seniors Cory Higgins, Levi Knutson, Marcus Relphorde, Javon Coney and Trent Beckley; the get-to-NYC ramifications - will attract an even larger crowd.

"There's a lot of excitement around town, around the campus, around the state about this team," Boyle said. "Hopefully the students that are (still) around will come support us."

The gregarious Sharpe produced a CU seasonal highlight - the best of ESPN's Friday night Top 10, in fact - in the Buffs' second-round win against Cal. Sharpe was flabbergasted that his slam topped the Top 10 because "there were so many good plays that night . . . I was watching and, yeah, I was really surprised."

Shortly after he signed with CU, one of his spectacular high school dunks was posted on YouTube, but he conceded Friday night's offering surpassed it: "I guess so . . . it was a little more national."

Try a lot more national. Sharpe said his cell phone was "on fire" Saturday with congratulatory messages and comments, but he's remained humble. When I asked him to rate The Dunk on a 1 to 10 scale, he laughed and said, "You can't ask me that question; I'm not good at rating myself. You got to ask somebody else that one."

The consensus of his teammates? You shouldn't have to ask.

Sharpe might get more minutes Tuesday night due to the left shoulder separation suffered by point guard Nate Tomlinson, and if his minutes increase Sharpe believes he will respond: "I feel like I've been improving, especially the last four or five games. I think I've been going out there and doing what's needed of me."

Coach Tad Boyle termed Tomlinson "day-to-day" and said his status likely will be determined by how much pain Tomlinson can tolerate. (FWIW, he believes he can play.)

A variety of injuries has cut into Tomlinson's junior season, often leaving Boyle to turn the point guard spot into a position-by-committee. "Our rotation might be down a man, but we'll be all right," he said. "Somebody will step up. They have to; it's what has to happen when somebody goes down."

Regardless of Tuesday's turnout, Kent State (25-11, 12-4 MAC) recently has grown accustomed to

playing on foreign courts. The Golden Flashes (one of the world's better nicknames) were only 5-8 in road games during the regular season. In the NIT, they're 2-0 - and as Boyle points out, "They've won true road games on different coasts."

Kent State has advanced to the quarterfinals via a 71-10 first-round win at St. Mary's (California) and a 72-68 second-round win at Fairfield (Connecticut). The Golden Flashes lost 66-65 in overtime to Akron in the MAC championship game.

Said Boyle: "They're a bunch of tough-minded guys and they're playing pretty well right now."

At No. 7, the Golden Flashes are the lowest seed still playing in the NIT, while the Buffs are one of two No. 1 seeds still playing. (Alabama is the other; Boston College and Virginia Tech have been eliminated).

Kent State's balance - five players averaging in double figures in the past five games - has been key in the NIT. The regular-season headliner was 6-foot-8, 230-pound forward Justin Greene, who averaged 15.5 points and 8.4 rebounds and was the MAC player-of-the-year. His numbers have slipped (9.1, 6.0) in the NIT, but compensation has come from what Boyle calls "a bunch of good guards who can all pass, dribble and shoot."

Guards Randall Holt (17.1 points), Michael Porrini (15) and Carlton Guyton (14.1) have taken up the slack in the two NIT games. The Golden Flashes have hit seven three-pointers in each game and averaged 35 rebounds (allowing 36) and 13 turnovers.

CU continues to receive potent off-the-bench productivity from Roberson, who has averaged 11.4 points and 10.0 rebounds in five postseason games (Big 12/NIT). For a freshman whose main goal at the start of the season was to "set myself up for future years," he's set the bar pretty high - setting freshman records for rebounding (281) and blocked shots (41). Both of those figures are team bests, as are his 49 steals - the first time a CU freshman has led in all three categories.

"It's been kind of surprising what I've accomplished so far," Roberson said. "I just want to keep it going, make it continue through my senior year. Right now, I'm motivated to get to New York - just like everybody else. I've never been there. But I think for all of us, a major thing is not getting an NCAA bid and sending a message."

This shouldn't be a surprise, but in critiquing his team's first two NIT wins, Boyle said the Buffs have "gotten away with some defensive mistakes." He specifically mentioned sub-par transition defense against Cal, which aided and abetted the Bears hitting six consecutive three-pointers to close out the first half.

"We were able to overcome that because we played so well in the second half offensively," Boyle said. "But we can't get lackadaisical at all. I just feel at times during the first two NIT games we've gotten a little lazy defensively. It hasn't cost us a game, but it's cost us possessions."

The Buffs are at the every-possession-is-precious point. When they reached the Big 12 semifinals in Kansas City, several players reminded that one of their preseason goals was to win a championship. The NIT wasn't what they had in mind, but it's what a very good season has left them chasing. No reason to call it off now.

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SHOW MENU



# CU knows not to overlook Kent St.

## Golden Flashes last stop before New York

**By Ryan Thorburn** Camera Sports Writer  
Boulder Daily Camera

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Colorado expected to be in the NCAA Tournament.

That's why Tad Boyle hosted a selection show watch party for his players with university big-wigs, prominent boosters and members of the media on the invite list.

Nine days and two cathartic wins later, the Buffs -- just one victory away from reaching the Final Four of the National Invitation Tournament -- aren't taking an appearance at Madison Square Garden for granted.

Even though diehard fans already have Frank Sinatra's "New York, New York" playing in their heads.

Boyle and his team understand they'll have to earn that trip tonight when seventh-seeded Kent State visits the Coors Events Center (7 p.m., ESPN) for a quarterfinals matchup with No. 1 CU.

"We're not expecting anything, we're not taking anything for granted, and we know what's at stake," Boyle said after Monday's practice. "We don't have to put any extra pressure on ourselves. What we have to do is come out and play Colorado basketball and be who we are."

The Buffaloes (23-13) are a very good home team with 17 wins in Boulder this season. The Golden Flashes (25-11) are a dangerous road team.

Kent State is 7-8 in true road games this season, including wins at No. 2 St. Mary's and No. 6 Fairfield during the NIT. Four of Kent State's losses away from home were against NCAA Tournament teams (at UAB, Florida, Morehead State and Akron).

"We can't look ahead because they've shown they can win on the road, obviously beating two good teams on the road in this tournament," Cory Higgins said. "We have to focus on our style of basketball, defending and rebounding, and we should be fine."

Higgins, who averaged 23.5 points in CU's wins over Texas Southern and Cal, is suddenly in position to finish his career as the program's all-time leading scorer.

The senior guard from Danville, Calif., is currently third on the list, only 26 points behind Richard Roby (2,001 points, 2004-08) and 20 points shy of Donnie Boyce (1,995 points, 1991-95).

"(The record) kind of snuck up on me. I really stopped thinking about it because I didn't think I had a shot," said Higgins, who played with Roby as a freshman. "That was one of the positives of playing in the NIT."

Higgins has played in a CU record 130 games (129 starts) and also owns records for free throws made (562) and minutes played (4,411).

"I think it shows my consistency and the type of work ethic that I have," said Higgins, who was not heavily recruited out of high school when he became Jeff Bzdelik's first commitment at CU four years ago.

Higgins' talented running mate, Alec Burks, is also lighting up the scoreboard in the NIT and etching his name in the CU record book. The sophomore has scored 52 points in the two postseason games and broke Cliff Meely's single-season scoring mark while piling up 25 points against Cal.

The backcourt tandem could be without starting point guard Nate Tomlinson tonight. The junior suffered an AC separation

in his left shoulder against the Bears and did not practice on Monday.

"The NIT is a good experience. I feel like we just need to continue to keep winning games and possibly win this," said redshirt freshman Shannon Sharpe, whose minutes will go up if Tomlinson can't play. "I feel like I'm still improving with each game. I improved a little bit when the season first started and then a little bit more in the Big 12. That's a good thing."

Sharpe's rim-rocking dunk against Cal was No. 1 on SportsCenter's popular "Top Plays" segment. The Buffs will continue to play on ESPN from this point on in the NIT.

"We've gotten a lot of national exposure lately, not always for the right reasons maybe," Boyle said. "You've got to take it in stride. We don't have to play any differently. You just have to understand the lights get a little brighter the longer you go."

If the Buffs win tonight they will be playing under the bright lights at Madison Square Garden in one week.

Start spreading the news ...Cal, is suddenly in position to finish his career as the program's all-time leading scorer.

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