



Alec Burks led CU with 25 points.
Photo Courtesy: Joel Broida



03/22/2011 B.G. Brooks, Contributing Editor

Bufs Win, Punch Ticket For Big Apple, NIT Semis

BOULDER - Colorado finally put away Kent State Tuesday night in the final minute - make that a New York Minute - and booked its trip to the NIT semifinals. With the Coors Events Center's PA system blaring Frank Sinatra's *New York, New York*, the Buffaloes celebrated Tuesday night's 81-74 quarterfinal win over Kent State that sends them to Madison Square Garden for the first time since the 1990-91 season.

CU will play the winner of Wednesday's Alabama-Miami (Fla.) game on Tuesday, March 29 in the NIT semifinals. The NIT championship game is Thursday, March 31.

The top-seeded Bufs' win Tuesday night completed a three-game home romp through the NIT and might have soothed some of the NCAA-driven heartache of the last 10 days. First-year CU Coach Tad Boyle and his players insisted that page has been turned - partially in his case.

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Being excluded from the NCAA Tournament, said Boyle, is "going to be with us the rest of our lives, especially our seniors . . . I don't know if it takes the sting away, it refocused us. But it hasn't taken the sting away from me."

Added senior Cory Higgins, who along with sophomore Alec Burks played through flu symptoms Tuesday night: "We can get more satisfaction out of what we're doing now . . . if we can win this tournament, we'll have no regrets whatsoever."

The Buffs, winning for the 18th time at home (two losses) and improving to 24-13 in a record-setting season, were energized by the largest of their three home NIT crowds. Their first-round game against Texas Southern attracted 6,299, their second-round game against California drew 7,614. Tuesday night, 9,065 turned out to watch CU and Kent State, the MAC regular-season champion, go knuckle-to-knuckle in a game that saw 19 lead changes and 12 ties.

"You've got to really honor Kent State," Boyle said. "We beat a good team . . . you can tell a lot from a team when you watch film, and we knew going into this thing it was going to be a battle."

"Two good teams," said Kent State Coach Geno Ford, whose team saw its season end at 25-12 and as a No. 7 seed was the lowest seed still playing. "I thought it was criminal (CU) didn't get into the tournament. I have a lot of respect for their program; they have good players and are well-coached.

"They made plays at the end; we couldn't get them stopped when we needed to and that's been our trademark all year - getting stops down the stretch. We just weren't able to do it and that's because they had better offense than we had defense."

Much of the Buffs' offense came from Burks, who needed an IV at halftime. With Higgins missing his first six shots and ending the first half with just four points, CU needed a first-half punch from somewhere. Although ailing, too, Burks provided it, scoring 15 of his game-best 25 points.

Higgins recovered enough to finish with 13 points and a team-high five assists, and he hit both ends of a clutch one-and-one with 1:13 remaining to send the Buffs up 79-74.

"Cory's been fighting the bug all week long," Boyle said. "I could tell he didn't have his legs . . . he fought through it."

The Buffs' flu-ridden pair was backed up by 17 points from senior Marcus Relphorde, who turned in a solid overall game, and a fifth double-double of the season from freshman Andre Roberson (13 points, 12 rebounds.) CU outrebounded Kent State 38-28, committed just eight turnovers and scored 12 points off of nine of the visitors' miscues. The Buffs shot 49.2 percent from the field (32-of-65), the Golden Flashes 50.0 (30-of-60). CU also had 20 assists - the high in the three NIT games thus far.

CU was without starting junior point guard Nate Tomlinson, who suffered a left shoulder separation in the second-round win over California. Tomlinson, who was dressed in street clothes, said he hoped to be ready to play in New York. Senior Levi Knutson started in place of Tomlinson, but Higgins - as he's done on other occasions this season - opened at point guard and got relief from Shannon Sharpe.

The Buffs took their biggest lead of the first half (36-31) on a layup by Roberson - the assist went to

Burks - with 4 seconds before intermission. It was Burks' only assist of the first half, but that wasn't indicative of what he did for CU.

With Higgins not getting his first basket until 3:20 left before intermission - he was 0-for-6 to that point - the Buffs needed all that Burks could give them. And he was the CU gift that kept on giving. He finished the half with 15 points, four rebounds and three steals - more than making up for Higgins' uncharacteristic cold snap. (He had averaged 23.1 points in the first two rounds, Burks 26.)

On the court's other end, the Buffs had as much they could handle in 6-foot-8, 230-pound Justin Greene, the MAC player-of-the-year. Greene, who finished with a team-best 20 points, led the Golden Flashes with 12 first-half points, all in the paint. At various times, CU used Relphorde, Roberson, Austin Dufault, Trent Beckley to try and defend him.

Kent State held the lead until Roberson canned a three-pointer at the 13:23 mark to put CU up 9-8. From that point until a 24-24 tie, the lead went back and forth until the Golden Flashes - whose 2-3 zone gave the Buffs problems - took their biggest lead of the half, 24-19.

If the Buffs needed a wakeup call, that might have been it. They closed the half with a 17-7 run and took their 36-31 lead to the locker room, but the advantage didn't last long.

Kent State tied the score at 41-41 on a conventional three-point play by Carlton Guyton with 17:08 to play - and for the next 2 minutes there were three more ties. The Golden Flashes regained the lead (55-54) for the first time since 29-28, converting a Buffs turnover into a Randall Holt layup.

Then it was back to back-and-forth . . . Of the game's first 121 possessions, only eight times did one team have the ball when trailing by four or more points.

After Holt and Relphorde exchanged three-pointers, with Relphorde's trey giving CU a 59-58 advantage with 10:45 to play, Higgins hit a pair of free throws and the Buffs led 61-58. Kent State freshman Eric Gaines - in when senior Rod Sherman picked up his fourth foul - hit one of two free throws to cut CU's lead to two, and Michael Porrini stole the ball from Burks and drove for a layup to tie the score at 61-61 with 8:38 left.

When Holt's three-pointer settled into the net just under a minute later, the Golden Flashes were up 64-61 and the boisterous Events Center crowd quieted. The noise returned (and increased) when Higgins hit a layup off a fast break, was fouled and converted the three-point play to tie the game at 64-64 with 6:38 left.

A minute later, Roberson rebounded a missed Knutson trey attempt and put it back in for a 66-64 CU lead. But the Golden Flashes hadn't crisscrossed the country for the past week - they won games in California and Connecticut - to roll over in the quarterfinals.

Porrini's three-point play pushed Kent State in front 67-66, but Relphorde matched that (69-67) and Burks sent the decibel level soaring with an uncanny reverse layup to give CU a 71-67 lead with 4:29 showing.

The crowd, said Knutson, was "great . . . they've been great all year. We didn't know what to expect after the events of last week, so it's been great . . . the student section was packed - and we're on spring break, so we can't say enough about how great the fans have been, especially the last couple

of games."

The Buffs and their fans were getting a whiff of the Big Apple, and it got stronger when Burks hit a short post-up jumper in the lane out of a timeout to push CU in front 75-69 - the Buffs' biggest lead of the night to that point.

No way the Golden Flashes were done. They closed to 77-74 on five consecutive points by the bullish Greene, before Higgins converted his one-and-one with 1:13 to play, giving CU its 79-74 lead.

Roberson went to the line with 36.3 seconds left, but missed his one-and-one front end. No matter; Relphorde rebounded and was fouled. He hit a pair and CU - up seven points - was on its way to NYC.

Winning for a final time in the Events Center, said Higgins, "was huge. I know how much it meant to all our seniors to go out as winners on our home court. That's something they can never take away from us, and I think we really left our mark on this program."

Another can be left next week in New York. Higgins has been in Madison Square Garden before - as a ballboy for his father (Rod) in the NBA. He was too young to form any memories of the Garden then, but those will come.

Lasting memories were made this season, said Higgins, who needs eight more points to surpass Donnie Boyce as CU's No. 2 career scorer and 14 to become No. 1: "It means the world to go out like this, especially with the other seniors who have been through it with me, because there have been some real lows in this program.

"To end our careers like this (with an NIT title) would be a dream."

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NIT has been good for Buffs

By Brian Howell
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BOULDER — This isn't so bad, is it?

Everyone knows where the Colorado men's basketball wanted to be this month. Every team in the country aims to play in the NCAA Tournament.

"That's the premier place you want to be in at the end of the season in college basketball," CU senior Levi Knutson said.

But if the Buffs had made it to the tourney, would they still be dancing?

Big 12 foes Missouri and Texas A&M were bounced in the first round. Kansas State and Texas — teams the Buffs went 4-0 against this season — are done, too.

As for the Buffs, they're still playing.

They didn't make it to the NCAA Tournament, but the Buffs (24-13) are headed to Madison Square Garden in New York for the semifinals of the National Invitation Tournament.

"It's the Mecca of basketball," Buffs star Alec Burks said. "Everybody wants to go to New York, especially in Madison Square Garden."

Fifty-two of the 68 teams that made the NCAA Tournament field are done, and there's a good chance a lot of those players sat home watching ESPN as the Buffs beat Kent State on Tuesday night.

Coach Tad Boyle said CU's NIT success "hasn't taken the sting (of being left out of the NCAA Tournament) away from me."

Yet, in hindsight, the NIT might have been the best thing to happen to the Buffaloes.

"I think this is a great thing we have going on right now, winning postseason games and getting to the final four of a national tournament," Knutson said. "It's a great thing for Colorado."

Who knows, maybe the Buffs would have made it through the first two rounds of the Big Dance and advanced to this week's Sweet 16. We'll never know.

"I think our team is good enough to have gone to the NCAA Tournament and won multiple games," Boyle said. "I don't know how many. It all depends on the matchups."

What we do know is that the NIT has given CU a chance to showcase itself on a national stage and taste postseason success for the first time in years.

From 1992 to 2010, CU won two postseason games. The Buffs have won three in the past seven days.

“No matter what tournament you’re in, it’s huge,” Boyle said.

As a No. 1 seed in the NIT, the Buffs also have gained experience in a new role.

“This is a tournament where it’s going to be good for our program,” Boyle said last week. “We’re most comfortable in the underdog role. This tournament is giving us an opportunity to feel what it’s like for people to come after us and be the hunted.

“We have to be able to handle that, because in the future, that’s the position we want to be in.”

So far, the Buffs have handled it. They wouldn’t have been favored during the NCAA Tournament. History suggests that, as a probable lower seed, they wouldn’t have won as many games.

So, what’s better — barely getting into the NCAA Tournament and exiting early or heading to Madison Square Garden with a chance at the NIT title?

That’s not an easy answer, but senior Cory Higgins may have said it best.

“We’re not even thinking about (the NCAA Tournament) anymore,” he said. “I think we can get more satisfaction out of what we’re doing now. The goal is to win the tournament. If we do that, we won’t have any regrets whatsoever.”

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Burks helps Colorado advance to NIT semifinals


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 [Colorado forward Marcus Relphorde \(5\) dunks against Kent State center Justin Manns \(33\) during the first half of an NIT college basketball tournament game, Tuesday, March 22, 2011, in Boulder, Colo.](#)

 [Kent State forward Justin Greene \(34\) goes up for a shot against Colorado during the first half of an NIT college basketball tournament game, Tuesday, March 22, 2011, in Boulder, Colo.](#)

 [Colorado guard Shannon Sharpe, left, and Kent State guard Michael Porrini, right dive for a loose ball during the first half of an NIT college basketball tournament game, Tuesday, March 22, 2011, in Boulder, Colo.](#)

 [Colorado guard Andre Roberson \(21\), Austin Dufault \(33\), Shannon Sharpe \(2\) and Kent State forward Mark Henniger \(13\) go up for a rebound during the first half of a quarterfinal NIT college basketball tournament game, Tuesday, March 22, 2011, in Boulder, Colo.](#)

 [Kent State guard Rodriguez Sherman \(32\) is consoled by a teammate in the final minute during the second half of a quarterfinal NIT college basketball tournament game against Colorado Tuesday, March 22, 2011, in Boulder, Colo. Colorado beat Kent State 81-74 to advance to the semifinals.](#)

The Colorado Buffaloes turned a snub into a spark, riding the sting of disappointment all the way to Madison Square Garden.

They're in the Final Four, a big deal — even if it's in the NIT instead of the NCAA tournament.

Alec Burks led the way to the Big Apple, scoring 25 points and grabbing 10 rebounds as Colorado held off Kent State 81-74 on Tuesday night to advance to the semifinals.

Ignored by the NCAA selection committee, Colorado has used the oversight as motivation, routing Texas Southern and California by a combined 31 points. The Buffs had to hang on against pesky Kent State, converting 4 of 5 free throws in the final 1:13 to advance.

The Buffs (24-13) will play the winner of Alabama and Miami next Tuesday as they try to capture their first NIT crown since 1940.

"We're showing everyone we should've been in the (NCAA) tournament," said Burks, who had an IV at halftime as he battled a bug that zapped his strength. "I feel like we're a tough team, so we just bounced back from the disappointment."

Justin Greene finished with 20 points for the Golden Flashes (25-12), who were playing their third straight NIT game on the road.

"We knew we were going to be on the road in every round and we just wanted to come out and play hard and be a scrappy bunch like we are," Greene said. "Give ourselves a chance to win down the stretch."

"Unfortunately, we didn't get it done tonight."

Colorado took control late in the second half when Marcus Relphorde converted a three-point play to make it 69-67 Buffs and Burks hit a reverse layup to extend the lead to four with 4:29 remaining.

Try as they might, the Golden Flashes couldn't tie the game back up as the Buffaloes punched their ticket to New York. Burks dribbled out the final seconds near midcourt, setting off a celebration as Frank Sinatra's "New York, New York" blared over the loudspeakers.

"We're trying to change the culture around Colorado basketball," Burks said. "This shows it's a bright future for everybody."

"Everyone wants to go to New York and play basketball."

Especially when Houston — site of this year's Final Four — was never an option, despite the fact that many analysts thought the Buffaloes deserved a spot in the 68-team field.

"The goal is to win the (NIT) tournament, so if we do that, I don't think we will have any regrets whatsoever," senior Cory Higgins said.

Freshman Andre Roberson had 13 points and 12 rebounds, and Higgins inched closer to the school's scoring record with 13 points. He needs 13 more to tie Richard Roby's mark of 2,001 points. Higgins played alongside Roby as a freshman.

Higgins already owns Colorado marks for games played (131), started (130), minutes (4,446) and made free throws (567).

His records might be one day be challenged by Burks — provided, of course, the sensational sophomore decides to stick around instead of bolt for the NBA.

Burks recently broke CU's 40-year-old single-season scoring mark, amassing 759 points by utilizing a smooth jumper and a quick first step that gets him around defenders.

The 6-foot-6 Burks was the first Buffs player in the 15-year history of the Big 12 championship to make the all-tournament team, helping the squad beat Iowa State and Kansas State — for a third time this season — before being eliminated by Kansas.

Colorado thought for sure its body of work was enough for inclusion into the NCAA tournament. So much so that coach Tad Boyle held a gathering at his house, a watch party to celebrate the Buffs making the field.

But elation turned to dejection as the Buffs were left out of the brackets.

Instead out pouting, the Buffs have been performing on the court.

"I've tried to put that behind me since this tournament has started," Levi Knutson said. "Our team has done a great job of that. We're just focused on this tournament and going to New York."

The Golden Flashes, who have only one senior on the roster, have looked impressive in the NIT, knocking off Saint Mary's and Fairfield on the road. They've logged more than 8,000 miles and played in three different time zones in an effort to make their first NIT trip to Madison Square Garden.

It's been a solid season for the Golden Flashes as they became the first Mid-American Conference team in more than two decades to capture back-to-back outright regular-season titles. They captured plenty of awards as well, including MAC player of the year (Greene), coach of the year (Geno Ford), defensive player of the Year (Michael Porri) and sixth man of the year (Carlton Guyton).

"Colorado is just a little bit deeper and a little bit better," Ford said. "If it was a neutral court game, maybe we could have pulled it out. On the road, we just weren't quite good enough to get it done."

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CU Buffs punch ticket to NIT Final Four in New York City

Bufs outlast Kent State to advance to NIT Final Four

By Ryan Thorburn Camera Sports Writer
Boulder Daily Camera

Posted: 03/22/2011 09:21:33 PM MDT



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The Buffs are going to make a brand new start of it ... in old New York.

Colorado punched its ticket to Madison Square Garden on Tuesday night with an excruciating 81-74 victory over Kent State in a National Invitation Tournament quarterfinal at the Coors Events Center.

Several key CU players, including senior Cory Higgins and Alec Burks, were battling the flu bug in addition to a talented and determined opponent.

But after six ties and eight lead changes in the second half, a three-point play by senior Marcus Relphorde gave CU the lead (69-67) for good.

And an impressive crowd of 9,065 celebrated as Frank Sinatra's "New York, New York" played over the postgame loudspeakers.

"I know how much it meant to all our seniors to go out as winners on our home court," Higgins said. "That's something they can never take away from us, and I think we left our mark on this program."

The Buffs (24-13) are two wins away from hanging an NIT championship banner from the rafters next to the one from the 1939-40 season.

CU, which also made it to New York in 1991 and finished third, will play today's Alabama-Miami winner in the semifinals on March 29.

"It's been great to see how far the program has gone from when we got here until now," senior Levi Knutson said. "That's something I just take a lot of pride in."

The Golden Flashes (25-12) took a 64-61 lead after a 3-pointer by Randal Holt with 7:39 remaining.

After a three-point play by Michael Porrini, Relphorde's answer started a 15-7 CU run to close the game.

"Two good teams," Kent State head coach Geno Ford said. "I thought it was criminal (Colorado) didn't get into the (NCAA) Tournament. I have a lot of respect for their program. They have good players and are well coached. They made more plays at the end. We couldn't get them stopped when we needed to and that's been our trademark all year."

Burks scored three consecutive baskets for his team to give the Buffs a 75-69 cushion with just over three minutes to go. Higgins and Relphorde shut the door with clutch free throws in the final minute.

"This team is setting a standard for future teams to adhere to. That's what special about this," CU head coach Tad Boyle said. "It's very important our younger players see what kind of senior leadership we're getting."

The Buffs led 36-31 at the intermission behind 15 points from Burks.

Back-to-back hoops by Justin Green, the Mid-American Conference Player of the Year, and a dunk by Justin Manns had given the Golden Flashes a 22-17 lead.

Kent State, the No. 7 seed that had already beaten No. 2 St. Mary's and No. 6 Fairfield on the road in the tournament, played with a swagger throughout.

"You have to really honor Kent State. I have a lot of respect for their coaching staff and their players," Boyle said before taking questions at his postgame press conference. "They've gone coast to coast and won two road games. They're not intimidated by anybody."

After missing his first six shots, Higgins knocked down a couple field goals, and Andre Roberson scored on the final possession of the first half to complete a 17-7 run over the final 7:04.

The Buffs were playing without starting point guard Nate Tomlinson, who separated his left shoulder against Cal.

"I was really proud of our team as a group and certainly some individuals showed some unbelievable toughness and grit," Boyle said. "Because it wasn't easy."

Burks finished with 25 points on 11-for-18 shooting and also grabbed 10 rebounds for his fifth double-double of the season.

"We're showing everyone we should have been in the (NCAA Tournament)," Burks said. "I feel like we're a tough team, so we just bounced back from the disappointment."

Relphorde had 17 points, Roberson had 13 points and 12 rebounds, and Higgins added 13 points in his last game at the Coors Events Center. CU went 18-2 at home this season.

Now the Buffs will see if they can make it in New York.

"We're going there to win the tournament and not to just be happy to be in New York," Boyle said. "It means everything going back to where we were on (NCAA Tournament selection) Sunday and what the goal of these seniors and this team has been since that day."

Colorado 81, Kent St. 74

KENT ST. (74)

FG FT Reb

Min M-A M-A O-T A PF PTS

Greene 35 9-13 2-3 4-7 6 3 20

Manns 23 4-6 0-0 2-7 1 1 8

Porrini 34 6-11 1-1 1-4 5 2 14

Holt 32 4-11 0-0 0-1 2 3 11

Sherman 30 5-11 0-0 0-2 3 5 12

Gaines 10 0-0 1-2 0-2 0 1 1

Guyton 26 2-8 3-3 1-2 1 3 7

Henniger 9 0-0 1-2 0-1 0 0 1

Leonard 1 0-0 0-0 0-0 0 0 0

Totals 200 30-60 8-11 9-28 18 18 74

Percentages: FG .500, FT .727.

3-Point Goals: 6-18, .333 (Holt 3-7, Sherman 2-6, Porrini 1-3, Guyton 0-2).

Team Rebounds: 2.

Blocked Shots: 5 (Porrini 2, Gaines, Henniger, Manns).

Turnovers: 9 (Sherman 2, Porrini 2, Greene 2, Holt, Manns, Guyton).

Steals: 5 (Holt 2, Manns, Sherman, Greene).

Technical Fouls: None.

COLORADO (81)

FG FT Reb

Min M-A M-A O-T A PF PTS

Dufault 22 2-4 0-0 3-6 1 0 4

Relphorde 27 6-10 3-3 2-4 3 2 17

Burks 33 11-18 3-5 3-10 4 2 25

Higgins 35 4-14 5-5 0-0 5 2 13

Knutson 37 2-8 0-0 1-2 3 1 5

Sharpe 15 1-3 2-2 1-2 2 1 4

Beckley 2 0-0 0-0 0-0 0 1 0

Coney 2 0-0 0-0 0-0 0 0 0

Roberson 27 6-8 0-1 4-12 2 2 13

Totals 200 32-65 13-16 16-38 20 11 81

Percentages: FG .492, FT .813.

3-Point Goals: 4-15, .267 (Relphorde 2-4, Roberson 1-1, Knutson 1-5, Burks 0-2, Higgins 0-3).

Team Rebounds: 2.

Blocked Shots: 2 (Sharpe, Higgins).

Turnovers: 8 (Burks 3, Relphorde 2, Higgins 2, Knutson).

Steals: 6 (Burks 4, Sharpe, Knutson).

Technical Fouls: None.

Kent St. 31 43--74

Colorado 36 45--81

A -- 9,065.

Officials -- Kevin Brill, Chris Rastatter, Keith Kimble.

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Kent State men's basketball team sees NIT run end with loss to Colorado

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By Special to The Plain Dealer

Chris Tomasson / Special to The Plain Dealer

BOULDER, Colo. — Well after the final buzzer sounded Tuesday night, a bunch of fans were waiting in the bowels of the Coors Events Center, chanting: "We want Burks. We want Burks."

The Kent State Golden Flames didn't want Alec Burks. But, like it or not, they got him.

The sophomore guard, who is projected to be a top-10 pick in June's NBA Draft, scored 25 points to lead Colorado to an 81-74 win over the Golden Flames in a National Invitation Tournament quarterfinal.

Just as Kent State's deepest run ever in the NCAA Tournament came to an end in 2002 one win short of the Final Four, its deepest NIT run ended at the same stage.

The Buffaloes (24-13) advance to New York's Madison Square Garden for an NIT semifinal next Tuesday against the winner of today's quarterfinal between Alabama and Miami (Fla.). It only was appropriate that Frank Sinatra's "New York, New York" blared out of the loudspeakers after the final buzzer.



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Jack Dempsey | Associated Press

Colorado guard Alec Burks (10) and Kent State guard Rodriguez Sherman reach for a rebound during the first half Tuesday in Boulder, Colo.

"He's really good," Kent State coach Geno Ford said of Burks. "There's a reason why he's on everybody's draft board. . . . We don't see a wing that big [6-6] and that athletic [in the Mid-American Conference]."

Burks was the first expected NBA lottery pick the Golden Flashes have run into all season. Their top player, forward Justin Greene, scored 20 points, but it wasn't enough as Kent State finishes the season 25-12.

It would have been a tough task for Kent State, a No. 7 seed, to defeat No. 1 Colorado as its third straight win in an NIT road game. Since the NIT went to campus sites in 1979, only three schools have won three straight games on the road to advance to New York.

Still, the Golden Flashes were in the hunt for another unexpected win when they led, 67-66, with just over five minutes remaining. But the Buffaloes then took the lead for good by scoring five straight points, including a spectacular reverse layup by Burks for a 71-67 advantage with 4:21 remaining.

Kent State closed it to 77-74 before guard Rod Sherman's 3-pointer to tie clanged off the iron with 1:30 left. Colorado then hit four straight free throws to secure the win.

"Nobody wanted it to end right now," said Sherman, the team's only senior. "We felt like we deserved to be in the Garden. We've been playing our butts off."

The Golden Flashes were playing a third game in eight days in a third different time zone. They had logged more than 8,000 miles in the NIT, starting with St. Mary's in Moraga, Calif., before playing a second-round game last Sunday against Fairfield in Bridgeport, Conn.

Throw in playing Tuesday at an altitude of 5,345 feet, which is prominently written on a wall in the arena, and one would think the Golden Flashes would be weary. But that hardly was the case as Kent State stayed close until the end.

"They were pretty down after the game," Ford said of his players. "There were a lot of guys crying. We wanted to win. We wanted the season to go on. I'm sure in another week or so, we'll look back on it and feel good about what we accomplished with the [MAC regular-season] championship, the 25 wins and the third round of the NIT. But right now, they're just hurt from the loss."

Point guard Michael Porrini added 14 points and five assists for the Golden Flashes. Sherman scored 12 points.

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The Golden Flashes, who refused to use all their recent travels as an excuse, fell behind, 36-31, at halftime thanks to Burks. He shot 6-of-8 from the field for 15 points in the half en route to going 11-of-18 for the game while also pulling down 10 rebounds.

But any momentum Colorado had didn't immediately carry over to the second half. The Golden Flashes took a 58-56 lead on a 3-pointer by guard Randal Holt with 11:20 remaining. But Colorado guard Cory Higgins, the son of former NBA player and current Charlotte Bobcats General Manager Rod Higgins, drilled a 3-pointer and later hit a pair of free throws to put the Buffaloes up, 61-58, with 10:15 left.

Kent State, though, was far from done. The Golden Flashes took a 64-61 lead on a 3-pointer by Holt with 7:40 remaining. And they went up for the final time at 67-66 when Porrini made a layup with 5:05 left.

But then the Buffaloes had their key 5-0 run. The final two came on a Burks drive that is sure to show up plenty on the highlights.

"That was a backbreaker," Ford said.

The Golden Flashes weren't looking forward to seeing Burks the way those fans were after the game. But they got him.

Chris Tomasson is a Denver-based freelance writer.

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THE DENVER POST

dave krieger

Krieger: Buffs making best of bad break

By Dave Krieger
The Denver Post

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BOULDER — On the day you're skunked out of the NCAA Tournament by a selection process more byzantine than Egyptian electoral politics, it's impossible to see an NIT bid as anything other than a lame consolation prize.

Ten days and three wins later, with a trip to Madison Square Garden next on the itinerary, it is tempting to call it a blessing in disguise. Just don't succumb to that temptation while you're talking to first-year University of Colorado coach Tad Boyle.

"I've been asked that a lot," Boyle said Tuesday night after his squad outlasted Kent State 81-74 to earn that trip to New York for the NIT semifinals. "I think our team's good enough to have gone to the NCAA Tournament and won multiple games."

CU could easily spin this as a worthy makeup call. The three extra home games were an NIT-sponsored bonus. Even during spring break, a crowd of 9,065 nearly filled the Coors Events Center and made it sound like the inside of a snare drum down the stretch of Tuesday's quarterfinal victory.

But there's a difference between making the best of a bad break and settling for it. If you're serious about building a better basketball program at CU, you do the former but not the

latter.

"It hasn't taken the sting away for me," Boyle said. "I don't know if it has our players or not. I'm just proud of the way they've responded."

Getting to finish their final season at the Garden is certainly a better ending for CU's seniors than being eliminated at home because they were still nursing hurt feelings about the NCAA snub.

"After the craziness associated with the NCAA Tournament field announcement, it's just really neat to see how our fans, our team, our coaches all really rallied around a competitive spirit that I believe we really needed, not only as a basketball program but as an athletic department as a whole," said athletic director Mike Bohn.

But it's important for CU not to forget the NCAA snub because this is all just the beginning — not only of Boyle's program, but also of the new chapter that begins this fall when CU moves into the Pac-12.

"We've been working on this for six years," Bohn said. "All the investments we've put into the basketball enterprise, to include the basketball practice facility that'll be done in June, the new floor, the new baskets, the new video board, the

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new offices, the locker room, the weight room, all those things are a commitment to men's and women's basketball here.

"So it's something we've been working on hard, which is why when we really felt like we should be a part of the NCAA Tournament, it was so difficult for us to really understand. We have five sellouts this year. We'd never had more than two in 105 years of basketball at CU."

All those infrastructure commitments from the university were necessary conditions to make the program competitive, but they were not sufficient. Boyle has to bring it the rest of the way, and he's made a pretty good start this season.

There have been markers along the way — the home wins over Missouri and Texas, the sweep of Kansas State — but none more important than the heartbreak of Selection Sunday and the team bouncing back, beginning with practice the next day, to play the hand it was dealt.

"This is a point in the history of Colorado basketball where we can start our own traditions in a new conference," Boyle said. "It's almost like we're beginning new. And this is a great season to kind of springboard into that.

"We're going to lose a lot (of seniors) next year, but we've got some good guys coming in, good guys coming back, and it's onward and upward from here."

When that 2011-12 squad congregates for the first time, you can be sure Boyle will mention what it has to do to avoid letting a bunch of bureaucrats decide its fate. In fact, 10 years from now, I'm guessing he'll still be telling the story of Selection Sunday 2011 as a cautionary tale.

But that doesn't prevent his first CU team from pursuing the opportunity in front of it now. Of all his players, the only one who has played in the

Garden before is senior Cory Higgins, who shot around there as a ball boy when his father, Rod, played in the NBA.

"The goal is to win the tournament," Higgins said. "I think if we do that we won't have any regrets whatsoever."

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college basketball

Bufs heading to NIT semifinals in New York after 81-74 victory over Kent State

By Natalie Meisler
The Denver Post

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BOULDER — All along, Colorado's players left the angst over the NCAA snub to their coaches, fans, radio talk shows and bracket analysts. The Buffs just wanted to keep playing, somewhere.

CU extended its season another week with a late scoring burst to hold off travel-weary but determined Kent State 81-74 on Tuesday night in a NIT quarterfinal.

CU isn't going just anywhere after playing to three raucous Coors Events Center crowds, topped by Tuesday night's gathering of 9,065. The Buffs are headed to Madison Square Garden for the NIT semifinals. If his schedule permits, CU will even have its No. 1 alumnus and MSG performer, Chauncey Billups, leading the cheers.

CU (24-13) will play the winner of tonight's

Alabama-Miami winner Tuesday night.

"If he's in town, he'll be there," CU coach Tad Boyle said of Billups, the ex-Nugget turned Knick.

While seniors Cory Higgins and Levi Knutson reflected on all the program has endured in their careers, freshman Andre Roberson was his usual wide-eyed self.

Roberson had yet another breakout game off the bench with 13 points and 12 rebounds, his fifth double-double of the season.

"There have been a lot of historical things that have happened there," Roberson said. "It will be my first time playing there, so it will be a joy."

He has three more cracks at getting to the NCAA Tournament. Boyle has mixed emotions, from the lingering sting of missing the NCAA cut to how his players responded with three consecutive home wins.

"We're not even thinking about that anymore," Higgins said. "I think we can get more satisfaction out of what we're doing now. The goal is to win the tournament, so if we do that, I don't think we will have any regrets whatsoever."

Knutson echoed that sentiment: "I've tried to put that behind me since this tournament has started. And I think our team has done a great job of that."

If anything, the Buffs might have been

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looking ahead to New York at the onset.



Buffaloes guard Alec Burks (10) grabs a rebound during the first half of an NIT quarterfinal against Kent State on Tuesday in Boulder. (John Leyba, The Denver Post)

With CU point guard Nate Tomlinson on the bench with a separated shoulder, CU initially had trouble finding the best way to match up with Kent State's smaller, quicker backcourt of Michael Porrini (6-foot-1) and Randal Holt (6-2).

The Golden Flashes refused to go away after trailing 36-31 at halftime. In all, there were 19 lead changes and 12 ties.

On a night the Buffs took turns with a big play, CU gained the lead 69-67 on a Marcus Relphorde slam and free throw with 5:01 left. Relphorde, Alec Burks (25 points, 10 rebounds) and Roberson finished off the game for the Buffs.

"They made more plays at the end," Kent State coach Geno Ford said. "We couldn't get them stopped

when we needed to."



Colorado coach Tad Boyle observes the NIT quarterfinal against Kent State from the sideline Tuesday at Coors Events Center. (John Leyba, The Denver Post)

Although Boyle opened his postgame remarks crediting Kent State's toughness, Ford said, "I thought it was criminal Colorado didn't get into

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the NCAA Tournament."

In the past week, Kent State (25-12) traveled from its Ohio home to California (Saint Mary's) to Connecticut (Fairfield) to Boulder.

CU will be making its first trip of this tournament with one goal.

"We're going there to win the tournament and not just to be happy to be in New York," Boyle said.

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This will be Colorado's fourth trip to the NIT final four. The other appearances:

1991: Lost to Oklahoma 88-78 in semifinals; beat Massachusetts 98-91 in third-place game.

1940: Beat DePaul 52-37 in semifinals; beat Duquesne 51-40 to win championship.

1938: Beat New York University 48-47 in semifinals; lost to Temple 60-34 in the championship.



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