

CU Buffs become 'fighters' under Lappe's watch

Team exceeded expectation of finishing last in Big 12

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When Britney Blythe walked into the bleachers after Sunday's season-ending loss to thank fans -- as the Colorado women's basketball players have done after home games all season -- one message stood out most to the senior guard.

After a season with plenty of high highs and low lows, people were thanking Blythe and her teammates "for being fighters."

"I don't think we had that (trait) before," Blythe said in the post-game press conference.

The Colorado Buffaloes finished the season 18-16, their first winning campaign since going 19-15 in 2007-08. The record and run to the WNIT quarterfinals were, in the big picture, just small steps toward where the program would ultimately like to be.

But those results were more than most onlookers expected the Buffaloes to achieve in former CU standout Linda Lappe's first season as head coach. And to a group of players that had endured two straight dismal seasons, the achievements were just the tonic they needed to re-light their fire for the game and shake a losing mentality.

Lappe, who said she's not usually an emotional person, fought back tears as she called the 2010-11 Buffs one of her favorite squads she's coached.

"They're fun and they're exciting because of what they've been able to withstand and what they've gone through and how they've responded to everything that our coaching staff has asked of them," Lappe said. "We started off this season talking about Colorado pride and what that meant to be a Colorado player. And these guys really understand that now and what that means, and I'm proud of our seniors and proud of our entire team for everything that we were able to do."

There was indeed plenty of strife to overcome.

Lappe inherited a program that had gone 13-17 two years in a row, with back-to-back 3-13 marks in Big 12 play. Since reaching the NCAA Tournament in legendary coach Ceal Barry's second-to-last season in 2004, the Buffs had played in the postseason just once, a WNIT semifinal run in 2008. CU had gone 20-60 in Big 12 play during coach Kathy McConnell-Miller's five-year run.

Multiple players left the program before Lappe had even had much of a chance to get settled. Starting guard Alyssa Fressle transferred. Three players who could have stayed as fifth-year seniors -- Whitney Houston, Kelly Jo Mullaney and Courtney Dunn -- opted to play out their eligibility elsewhere.

Then, on the eve of the season opener, Shea Kelley, a promising freshman forward who figured to play a large role for the Buffs, shocked the coaching staff by leaving the program. Add to that two other players deciding to hang up their sneakers for good and another, sophomore Brenna Malcolm-Peck, getting injured in the preseason and the Buffs were left with nine players.

Big 12 coaches picked the Buffs to finish last in the league. After a 9-4 run through non-conference play, such a dubious distinction didn't seem out of the question. The Buffs lost six out of seven during the middle of the league slate and were just two losses away from the postseason passing them by again.

Instead, the Buffs upset No. 16 Oklahoma -- their second win of the season over a ranked foe -- and followed with their first two road wins of the year to ensure postseason eligibility and tie for eighth place in the Big 12, which sent seven teams to the NCAA tourney.

After getting ousted in the Big 12 tourney, CU reeled off three wins in a row in the WNIT before falling to future Pac-12 rival USC on Sunday.

"Our entire team stepped up to the challenge," Lappe said. "They knew where they wanted to go. I was able to see parts of them that I didn't know if we could get out of them at the beginning of the season. They did some unbelievable things this year."

No doubt there is more building to do before the Buffs are making regular NCAA tourney appearances again.

For starters, the team will have to figure out how to replace forward Brittany Spears, who leaves as the program's all-time scoring leader and averaged 24.9 points over CU's final nine games of the season.

And the Buffs will still be relatively green. While six players with significant playing experience return, they'll have to fill out the rest of their rotation with freshmen (and Brenna Malcolm-Peck if she's healthy).

But the strides made this season, maybe more important than anything, made the Buffs believe they could -- and should -- win again.

"We're just ready for next year," sophomore point guard Chucky Jeffery said of the returning players. "It does hurt to see (the seniors) go. But I know our mentality is different. I know mine is from last year. I think we're real excited to see what comes next with the younger (players) coming in. We're just going to be anxious to start over (next fall)."

A group of three seniors that came into the program expecting big things, meanwhile, at least gets to leave with heads held high feeling like they contributed to whatever future success might lie ahead.

"I feel like people can't sleep on Colorado anymore," Blythe said. "I know what I'm leaving behind with my teammates and I know what we have and what's coming in. And I'm really excited to see what they're going to do."

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