



Tad Boyle set the bar high in his first year at Colorado.-
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Brooks: Boyle Takes Look Back, Ahead At CU Hoops

NEW YORK - The morning after a final-second, one-point loss might be neither the time to turn reflective nor visionary, but Tad Boyle was good doing both here Wednesday. All right, he was OK with it, although still a little stung - as one might expect - by his Colorado basketball team's 62-61 loss the previous night against Alabama.

Coming close wasn't what Boyle and the Buffs had in mind for the NIT semifinals. It wasn't the way anyone wanted his first record-setting season at CU to end. That the Buffs won more games (24) than any other men's team in school history was only small consolation in the wake of how Tuesday night's game was lost to the Crimson Tide.

As difficult to digest as the loss was the fact that Boyle awoke Wednesday morning with no practice to conduct, no game to prepare for. "It's hard to believe the season is over with - but that's a good sign," he said. "There's so many times in such a long year that sometimes when the season is over, it's a relief.

"There's no sense of relief with any of our players. That's a good sign; it's refreshing. You put things

in perspective, you look at 24 wins and a lot of the things we accomplished this year, it was a very good year, a good starting point. But each year is its own year . . . next year's team will be completely different."

Boyle's first Buffs team stepped took the court in mid-October and immediately received bad news. Center Shane Harris-Tunks had suffered a knee injury that would require surgery and sideline him for the year. Before the first official practice, CU had lost a 6-foot-11, 260-pounder that would force coaches and some players to rethink their approach to the season.

Boyle wound up playing four and five guards at a time and asking other players to play out of position. Still, the players gave enough of themselves and the coaches got enough out of them to win two dozen games. Sure, some of the 14 losses were regrettable and winnable - enough to keep CU out of the NCAA Tournament.

"I don't care what season you're talking about, you're going to look at a handful of games and say what if?" Boyle conceded. "But I think overall, we got a lot out of this group. We had a lot of guys inside playing out of position; they battled, fought, clawed . . . a lot of guys sacrificed and stepped their games up. That's what makes a team so special."

The Buffs get Harris-Tunks back for 2011-12. Freshman surprise Andre Roberson, who set CU first-year records for rebounds, blocks and steals, has a season of experience. Sturdy signee Damienne Cain (6-7, 230) could make an impact inside as could in-coming freshman guards Spencer Dinwiddie and Askia Booker.

Boyle, of course, is reluctant to make any predictions sight unseen. "All have the opportunity . . . but I try to not expect too much out of freshmen," he said. "But I love what all three bring to the table. When the opportunity presents itself, I hope they're ready like Andre was."

Boyle can speak highly (and does) of Utah transfer Carlon Brown ("He's already proven himself at a high level") and University of Denver transfer Sabatino Chen ("He's good at a lot of things; I compare him to a utility infielder.")

Brown, in particular, will be looked at to help fill a leadership void created by the loss of seniors Cory Higgins, Levi Knutson, Marcus Relphorde, Javon Coney and Trent Beckley. Boyle said "all five will be missed," but the 6-5 Brown has practiced with the Buffs for a season and already proved himself to be among the better players. Add a penchant for being vocal and the respect factor, and a leadership candidate emerges. Plus, said Boyle, "He's very mature and understands things from a coach's perspective."

Other returning players will be guards Nate Tomlinson and Shannon Sharpe, forward Trey Eckloff and center Ben Mills.

Boyle's second CU team will venture into the Pac-12 Conference, uncharted territory for players and their coach. Boyle is excited about the idea of a conference change, but admits he doesn't yet "have a feel" for the new league or many early answers on how his team might compete.

"There's a lot of question marks," he said. "There's hope, optimism and everybody's feeling good about what just happened, but next year's a new year. As a first-year coach, we had a lot of seniors and a pretty special sophomore (Alec Burks) who produced for us. The seniors are gone, the

sophomore may or may not be . . . if he leaves, there are a lot question marks. That doesn't mean we're back to square one, it just means there are a lot of question marks."

Burks, who averaged 20.5 points and 6.5 rebounds this season, is deliberating on leaving school early for the NBA or returning for his junior season. He's said his discussions will involve his family, Boyle and probably some of his teammates. As long as he doesn't retain an agent, he can "test the waters" and determine his potential draft position without losing his eligibility.

Boyle wants Burks to satisfy his and his family's needs. CU students and fans want Burks back, imploring him to return with chants of "One More Year" during the season's final month.

Bufs fans had a louder voice this season than in the past - mainly because more of them turned out. A record five sellouts were recorded at the Coors Events Center, and three NIT home games saw crowds spiral upward from 6,299 to just over 9,000 for the Kent State game. The Buffs were 18-2 - the 18 wins were a school record - at the Events Center this season, losing only to then-No. 1 Kansas (82-78) and then-No. 22 Texas A&M (73-70, OT).

Boyle loved the increase and the January-March buzz around the Buffs. His goal, though, is for CU to draw fans who "get to point where they are coming to watch CU play, CU develop and not who we're playing. I think we started that this year . . . the trick is to sustain it. And the key is our fans understanding that. I'm no dummy; I know we have to win. But I do think our fans saw the improvement in our team this year."

With its non-conference schedule cited as a major factor in keeping CU out of the NCAA Tournament, Boyle agreed that scheduling future non-conference games isn't to be done on a whim. "It makes you think about it; it doesn't mean you have any more control over it," he said, noting that CU is initiating series with Air Force and Wyoming, which join Colorado State. One - AFA or Wyoming - will begin in Boulder, the other on the road.

In addition to those non-conference foes, Georgia will visit Boulder and the Buffs will play in the Puerto Rico Tip-Off Tournament, whose field includes NIT finalists Alabama and Wichita State, as well as Iona, Maryland, Purdue, Temple and a school to be named.

Per scheduling, Boyle reiterated a thought first expressed on Selection Sunday: "There's no reward for going on the road, we found that out this year . . . you schedule road games that you can win or road games that won't hurt you if you lose. That's going to be the trick."

Not merely making a judgment by the number of wins, Boyle said he viewed his first season as successful because there was month-to-month and week-to-week improvement: "Success is measured . . . by how much you improve as the season goes on. Are you getting better every month, every game, or are you regressing? I thought we got better. So I think this was a successful year."

As CU moves forward, Boyle said the hoops job he'll have been in for a year in mid-April is better than it was five years ago. "A much better situation," he said, noting the new \$12 million volleyball-basketball practice facility and a renewed commitment by the administration. "We've got everything we need to be successful. But again, next year is a new year. What I want to do is built a program that can sustain success.

"I don't want to have a year where you're losing 80 percent of your production in one year. That

makes it difficult for the following year. It's not rocket science; you just have to recruit and develop. You have to be smart in 'layering' classes and how you redshirt. Once we're able to put some recruiting classes back-to-back-to-back and build some depth and redshirt some kids, then I'll say OK, it's a different job."

And that - a different job - is something he doesn't want to pursue.

"I certainly love CU and Colorado," he said. "My family loves it; there are a lot of things we feel very, very good about. I don't even worry about that stuff (his name being mentioned in job speculation). It doesn't enter my mind. I'm just fortunate to be the head coach at Colorado and I don't feel any different today than I did last April 19 when they hired me. This is where I want to be."

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