

Higgins key to CU Buffs' revival

After two 20-loss seasons, Buffs have won 33 last two years

By Ryan Thorburn Camera Sports Writer
Boulder Daily Camera

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Cory Higgins has endured 70 losses during his Colorado career.

Perhaps none was as deflating or disappointing as the bubble-busting 95-90 defeat against Iowa State on Wednesday night at the Buffs' hurt locker known as Hilton Coliseum.

CU had a chance to move into a fifth-place tie in the Big 12 and into the projected NCAA Tournament field with a win. Instead, Higgins and his senior class will likely end up with their noses pressed against the glass outside the Big Dance.

But fans who have followed Higgins, who was 4-for-12 shooting with 15 points against the last-place Cyclones, know the unflappable 6-foot-5 guard will bounce back during the regular-season finale against Nebraska at the Coors Events Center.

"People that get easily discouraged are people that aren't very mentally strong," Higgins said when asked to reflect on his college career. "Obviously, you have to go through growing pains to get a program to where it needs to go. I just told myself I was going to stay the course."

Right before one non-conference game during Higgins' first season in Boulder, former CU head coach Jeff Bzdelik came out of the locker room, looked at about 10,000 empty seats, and then shook his head in disgust.

Higgins promised that by the time he was a senior the place would be packed.

The Buffs will play in front of the fifth sellout crowd of the season at the Coors Events Center against the Cornhuskers.

"I just believed in the guys that were coming in. And me being a centerpiece of this program, I just believed we could make this place special if we all stuck together," Higgins said. "The thing that's going to be the most gratifying about being a part of Colorado basketball is that I was a part of a group that really changed this program."

Last year a skinny freshman with unlimited potential joined Higgins in the backcourt. Alec Burks gives his mentor a lot of credit for helping him blossom into a potential NBA first-round pick.

"It's crazy. I came in and I didn't know much. He helped me out a lot," Burks said of Higgins' influence. "He helped me deal with the spotlight, expectations, the NBA, all that. He's been a great teammate the two years I've been here."

During Higgins' first two seasons in Boulder the Buffs suffered through 20-loss campaigns before winning 15 games last season.

At 18-12 overall, this year's team will produce the program's first winning season since 2005-06.

And although the NIT isn't the tournament the seniors dreamed of playing in this March, an invitation would be a step in the right direction as the program prepares to transition to the Pac-12.

Higgins deserves a lot of credit for getting CU basketball out of the Big 12 basement and into the national spotlight with wins over three ranked teams this season.

"Cory has been our rock this year," said first-year head coach Tad Boyle, who asked Higgins to keep the team together during the emotional weeks that followed Bzdelik's departure for Wake Forest. "He has done so many things, not only for the team this year, but for this program over the last four years. He's one of those seniors that you hate to see go."

Fans will have a chance to say goodbye to Higgins and fellow seniors Levi Knutson, Marcus Relphorde, Javon Coney and Trent Beckley while also seeing Nebraska for the final time at the Coors Events Center as a conference opponent.

"I've never had a senior night, not even in high school or anything. I don't know what my emotions will be like," Higgins said. "It will be a lot of different things. I'm just excited for it to let the fans know how much they meant to me over the past four years."

Higgins set a school record by playing in his 124th career game on Wednesday night. He is one of two players in CU history with over 1,800 points, 500 rebounds, 300 assists and 150 steals (Donnie Boyce is the other).

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Bufs set sights on Nebraska

CU men's basketball celebrates senior night Saturday

By Caryn Maconi on March 4, 2011

When the Buffs take on the Nebraska Cornhuskers, it will likely be the seniors' last game for Colorado.

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After the Buffs upset the No.5 Texas Longhorns last Saturday, their hopes for an NCAA Tournament bid started to grow. But after losing to the Iowa State Cyclones Wednesday night, Colorado is now an unlikely choice for the big dance.

"I felt like we didn't come out with the same focus in the second half [against Iowa State] like we did against Texas," said sophomore guard Alec Burks.

The Buffs want to make the most out of their last game of the season—especially the seniors. Cory Higgins, Levi Knutson, Marcus Relphorde, Javon Coney, Trent Beckley, and Carlon Brown will be honored for their contribution to the team during Senior Night on Saturday.

"From a coaching standpoint, I look at how much I'm gonna miss coaching the guys," said head coach Tad Boyle. "They're all great young men."

Boyle will remember Cory Higgins, whose 124th career game on Wednesday broke the CU record, for his leadership during the coaching transition last year.

"When I got the job, he's a guy I really leaned on," Boyle said. "I challenged him to keep the group together... and he really responded to that."

Higgins has had an impressive career at Colorado, having started in every game since his freshman year. He is one of two Buffs in history with over 1,800 points, 500 rebounds, 300 assists, and over 150 steals.

Teammate Levi Knutson was not always a starter. Averaging only 12.7 minutes per game his junior year, Knutson improved to 26.4 this season, and is now the team's third-highest scorer.

"We're gonna be telling the Levi Knutson story for years to come," Boyle said. "He's a tremendous role model for our younger players [in terms of] off-season work ethic... confidence, persistence, and patience."

Marcus Relphorde, a transfer to CU his junior year, said he's had a leadership role ever since he started with the Buffs. He's averaged 11.5 points per game as a senior and 11 as a junior. He said he thinks the leadership will continue with remaining players, despite the graduation of strong players this year.

“I think a lot of the guys are ready to step up,” Relphorde said. “Andre Roberson has progressed a lot this year, and Austin [Dufault] and Nate [Tomlinson] are going to be seniors next year, so they’re going to carry the load pretty well.”

Burks said he will take on the leadership role if he needs to, but that older teammates will have the most responsibility.

“I’ll be a leader if the team needs me to be a leader,” Burks said. “But the seniors-to-be... want to take pride in their senior year.”

The seniors won’t be the only ones taking on Nebraska for the last time this weekend. With CU’s move to the Pac-12 and Nebraska’s move to the Big Ten next year, Saturday’s game will mark the two teams’ last conference matchup.

Boyle said his Buffs will be focusing on defense over the next few days, hoping to improve off of Wednesday’s loss to ISU.

“We’ve had some disappointing losses,” Boyle said. “When you give up 95 points... you have to go back to your basics.”

Relphorde said Nebraska also poses a strong defensive threat.

“They’re a really good defensive team, they kind of pack it in,” Relphorde said. “We’ll just try to make extra passes and try to get shots.”

Nebraska leads the all-time series against CU 77-71, and they lead the Buffs 18-13 in Big 12 play.

Saturday’s game also marks the fifth time the Coors Events Center has sold out this season, a school record that reflects the strong fan support the Buffs have harnessed this season.

Tip off is scheduled for 7 p.m. on Saturday at the Coors Events Center in Boulder.

Contact CU Independent Staff Writer Caryn Maconi at Caryn.maconi@colorado.edu.

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