



Coach Tad Boyle and CU seniors (from left) Marcus Relphorde, Levi Knutson, Cory Higgins and Javon Coney. Not pictured: Trent Beckley.
Photo Courtesy: Chip Bromfield, ProMotion Ltd.



03/04/2011 B.G. Brooks, Contributing Editor

Brooks: Higgins, Knutson & Co. Still Chase Seniors' Dream

BOULDER - First-year head coaches don't have a lot of say - make that no say - in the composition of their senior classes, how those upperclassmen take to the new guy and the senior leadership that might (or might not) emerge.

Tad Boyle considers himself lucky.

When he took the Colorado men's basketball job last April, he inherited four seniors (another would make a mid-year return) who eventually warmed to him, and him to them. Such acclimations can be lengthier than was required at CU, or might not occur at all.

"There's always some rough waters when you transition to a new coaching system, but I think we handled it well and were able to adjust," said Marcus Relphorde, who along with Cory Higgins, Levi Knutson, Javon Coney and Trent Beckley will be at the Coors Events Center on Saturday for the final regular-season game (Nebraska, 7:05 p.m.) of their CU careers.

Continued Relphorde: "Some of the rough times showed in the beginning with some of the losses we had - everyone just trying to see what the mentality of this team was going to be. But I think we transitioned pretty well."

BUFFALO EXTRAS



Game Notes #31 vs. Nebraska

Boyle's gauge for measuring how close he's become to his players is whether he will miss coaching them - "And I'm going to miss coaching these guys," he said. "They're all great kids, great young men . . . there's going to be a lot of things we're going to miss about all five of them."

The Buffs might be an NCAA Tournament bubble team, they might be destined for the NIT. But in either case there is this certainty: They want to finish strong on Senior Night, then make whatever postseason case must be made at next week's Big 12 Conference tournament in Kansas City. CU's seniors haven't played in March past the Big 12 tourney; they've never experienced a winning season.

Boyle will remember his first collection of CU seniors "each in their own way . . . The two walk-ons (Coney, Beckley) have been wonderful role models, great ambassadors. They come to practice every day and are selfless kids."

Relphorde is a JC transfer who has played for four different head coaches in the past four years. "He's had some good moments for us," Boyle said, and Relphorde calls his final season at CU "a pretty good time, especially in this building. We let some (games) get away, but I love my teammates and I had a good time playing with them."

"I didn't really know exactly what to expect coming in. I just knew that it was an opportunity for me to play and it was in a good conference. I knew we had some good pieces. I think we've done some good things this year. Obviously, you always you could do better. But I can't complain about what's happened so far."

Higgins has made his name prominent in the school's record book. He and Donnie Boyce are the only CU players to surpass 1,800 points, 500 rebounds, 300 assists and 150 steals in their careers. But Higgins stands alone in several other career categories, longevity among them. He played in a record 124th game Wednesday night at Iowa State.

"For the most part it has been (gratifying)," Higgins said of his time as a Buff. "I try to live without any regrets, so I feel like I got the most out of my time here . . . it feels good to be recognized for a few things, and for that hard work to be recognized. That part of it is gratifying."

"I'd just like to be remembered as a guy who came to work every day, tried to get better and tried to make his team better."

He's undoubtedly gone beyond that, as has Knutson, whom Boyle said "has had as good a senior year as any player I've been around, especially given his previous three years of production and playing time. He's been a heartwarming story for us, so it's great to see him go out with a bang."

Knutson's CU career started with more of a shudder. He persevered as an oft-injured, moderately productive reserve until this season. He currently leads the Big 12 in three-point field goal percentage (.484) and on Friday was named one of the conference's four finalists (11 nationwide) for the 11th annual V Foundation Comeback Award.

Of coming back from surgeries on both hips following his freshman and sophomore seasons, Knutson said, "I always took a positive attitude, no matter what was going on. I had confidence in myself as a player and my teammates were supporting me. I knew I could play at this level; it was just a matter of patience."

Said Boyle: "We're going to be telling the Levi Knutson story for years to come, as long as this coaching staff is at Colorado. He's a tremendous role model for our younger players to emulate in terms of his off-season work ethic, his preparation, his confidence, has patience, his persistence . . . I could go on and on about Levi."

When he took the CU job, Boyle needed a leadership link with his team and asked Higgins to provide it. "He was a guy I really leaned on," Boyle said. "I challenged him to keep the group together . . . and he really responded to that."

Watching his teammates interact with Knutson also has been special for Boyle. As this season has progressed, Knutson "really gained the respect of his teammates - which is the ultimate respect you can have as a player," Boyle said. "If you come to practice every day, work hard and are a good citizen, you usually earn the respect of your coaches that way. But to earn the respect of your teammates the way Levi has done this year has been pretty special. You can see the way they respond to him on the floor."

Over the last four years, Higgins and Knutson have formed relationships they envision as lasting. "Teammates, especially," Knutson said, "but also with coaches, managers, people working in the facility . . . a lot of people I hope I have great relationships with for the rest of my life."

Added Higgins: "I made friendships for a lifetime here. I'll probably keep in contact with (teammates) throughout most of my life."

Both players have experienced Senior Nights from an underclassman's perspective. Neither said he could imagine Saturday night's emotion from a senior's perspective.

"It'll probably be pretty emotional to leave this place, and hopefully we can end it right and leave in the way I want to leave it," Knutson said. "This place has been special to me and I always will look forward to coming back. It's been awesome here."

"I really don't know what my emotions are going to be like," Higgins noted. "Knowing it could be my last game here, I'm just going to try to enjoy it."

He'll have a sellout crowd - a school-record fifth this season - there to share the experience. Saturday's game will be the last Big 12 contest played in the Events Center, but the venue could get another game or two if the Buffs' postseason turns toward the NIT rather than the NCAA Tournament.

For the latter scenario to play out, a win against Nebraska and a split in the series (the Cornhuskers won 79-67 in Lincoln in January) is mandatory. Two wins in next week's Big 12 tournament might be, too.

"Going to the (NCAA) tournament, that would be the biggest thing, the biggest gratification for me," Higgins said. "But at the same time, we've still got a lot of work to do."

"Our ultimate goal," added Knutson, "is still reachable."

Until told otherwise, the "Big Dance" remains their objective. Unless they win on Senior Night, otherwise is upon them.

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SHOW MENU



CU Buffs' Knutson flourishes under Boyle

CU senior has endured two surgeries, coaching changes

By Ryan Thorburn Camera Sports Writer
Boulder Daily Camera

Posted: 03/04/2011 06:40:34 PM MST

What will Levi Knutson's legacy at Colorado be?

Even though the Buffs are hosting their final Big 12 game against Nebraska Saturday at the Coors Events Center (7 p.m., no television), the senior from Littleton said that has yet to be determined.

"I hope it's how we respond to that (Iowa State) game," Knutson said.

CU's costly 95-90 loss to the last-place Cyclones means the Buffs will have to take the road less traveled to the NCAA Tournament, perhaps winning their first Big 12 Tournament in the program's final appearance before moving to the Pac-12.

"Yet to be determined," Knutson said of the final chapter of the 2010-11 Buffs.

It's hard to count this team out as long as Knutson is still making 3-pointers and taking charges.

This is a kid who played through excruciating pain for two years without whispering a word about it. Knutson underwent surgery to repair torn cartilage in his left hip after his freshman season and then had an almost identical procedure on his right hip after his sophomore season.

"Levi has really gained the respect of his teammates, which is the ultimate respect you can have as a player," first-year CU head coach Tad Boyle said. "We're going to be telling the Levi Knutson story for years to come as long as this coaching staff is at Colorado, because he's a tremendous role model for our younger players to emulate."

In addition to the on-the-court pain, Knutson also had to deal with the headache of coaching instability throughout a difficult rebuilding process at CU.

The former Arapahoe High School star was recruited by Ricardo Patton, searched for a consistent role on the team for three years under Jeff Bzdelik, and finally thrived this season in Boyle's system.

"I always took a positive attitude no matter what was going on," Knutson said. "I think I always had confidence in myself as a player, and also my teammates were supporting me and everyone knew I could play at this level.

"It was just a matter of patience."

Knutson averaged 4.6 points as a freshman, 3.8 points as a sophomore and 3.5 points as a junior. This season he is averaging 12.1 points and shooting a Big 12-best 48.4 percent from 3-point distance.

The Academic All-American's fingerprints are all over CU's headline-grabbing wins. Knutson made five 3-pointers and finished with 20 points at Kansas State and finished with 21 points on 8-for-14 shooting against Texas.

"Levi has had as good a senior year as any young man I've ever been around, especially given his previous three years of production and playing time," Boyle said. "It's been a heartwarming story for us and great to see him go out with a bang."

Knutson was even spectacular in his final road game, knocking down all four 3-pointers he took and finishing with 16 points in 29 minutes against Iowa State.

After following the incredible high of upsetting the then-No. 5 Longhorns with the loss to the lowly Cyclones, Knutson will have to pick himself and the Buffs up for one more run together.

Knutson and fellow seniors Cory Higgins, Marcus Relphorde, Javon Coney and Trent Beckley will be honored before Saturday 's game at a sold out Coors Events Center.

"Hopefully I can keep it in check," Knutson said of his emotions. "I've had a lot of ups and downs over the years and hopefully we can end on a high note. ... It will probably be pretty emotional to leave this place. This place has always been special to me."

Boyle will be looking for new leadership on the court after saying goodbye to the five seniors who helped get a beaten up program off the mat and back into postseason play.

"From a coaching standpoint, I look at how much am I going to miss coaching guys. That's how I kind of determine how close I am to them," Boyle said. "I'm going to miss coaching those guys. They're all great kids and great young men."

TODAY: The Colorado Buffs (18-12, 7-8) play their final Big 12 regular-season game Saturday against the Nebraska Cornhuskers (19-10, 7-8) at 7 p.m. at the Coors Events Center.

BROADCAST: No television. Radio on KOA (850 AM) with Mark Johnson (play-by-play) and Chris Lewis (analyst).

STORY LINES: The Buffs followed up last Saturday's upset of then-No. 5 Texas with a costly 95-90 loss at last-place Iowa State on Wednesday in Ames. ... Alec Burks led four Buffs in double figures with 24 points, but the Cyclones shot 70.4 percent in the second half and out-rebounded CU 40-32. ... CU will honor seniors Cory Higgins, Levi Knutson, Marcus Relphorde, Javon Coney and Trent Beckley before Saturday 's game. ... The Huskers are coming off a 69-58 victory over Missouri. ... Nebraska, CU and Baylor are tied for sixth in the Big 12 standings entering the final day of the regular season. ... The Buffs are headed to the Pac-12 next season and the Huskers are also leaving the Big 12 for the Big Ten.

COACHES: Tad Boyle is 18-12 in his first season at CU. Doc Sadler is 89-68 in his fifth season at Nebraska.

PROBABLE STARTERS: **Colorado** -- G Nate Tomlinson, 6-3, Jr., 3.2 ppg, 1.7 rpg; G Marcus Relphorde, 6-7, Sr., 11.5 ppg, 4.3 rpg; G Alec Burks, 6-6, So., 19.8 ppg, 6.3 rpg; G Cory Higgins, 6-5, Sr., 15.8 ppg, 3.5 rpg; F Austin Dufault, 6-9, Jr., 7.4 ppg, 4.2 rpg. **Nebraska** -- C Jorge Brian Diaz, 6-11, So., 10.6 ppg, 4.3 rpg; G Toney McCray, 6-6, Jr., 8.6 ppg, 4.2 rpg; G Brandon Richardson, 6-0, Jr., 6.6 ppg, 2.1 rpg; G Caleb Walker, 6-4, Jr., 6.3 ppg, 4.8 rpg; G Lance Jeter, 6-3, Sr., 11.5 ppg, 4.3 rpg.

KEY STAT: CU is 14-2 at home this season and has never won 15 times at the Coors Events Center in one season. ... This is the fifth sellout of the season at the Coors Events Center, a record for the venue.

SERIES: Nebraska leads 76-71. CU has a 42-23 edge in Boulder.

UP NEXT: The Buffs will begin play at the Big 12 Tournament on Wednesday at the Sprint Center in Kansas City, Mo.

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cu men's basketball

Time for CU to salute seniors' legacy

By Tom Kensler
The Denver Post

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BOULDER — With Colorado's chances of reaching the NCAA Tournament having taken a big hit, attention turns to the "senior night" battle tonight with Nebraska and what those CU upperclassmen have meant to the program.

Starters Cory Higgins and Marcus Relporhe, super sixth man Levi Knutson and walk-ons Javon Coney and Trent Beckley will make their final regular-season appearances before the home crowd.

"The seniors showed me everything about college basketball," said Alec Burks, CU's standout sophomore guard. "We have to get them a win on senior night."

The final Big 12 Conference game at the Coors Events Center could be the last game in this building for the senior class — depending on a possible home

National Invitation Tournament (NIT) game here.

Burks also could be taking his final regular-season bows if he chooses to declare for the 2011 NBA draft. The Big 12's top scorer (19.8) has said he will make that decision after the season.

It's widely believed the Buffaloes (18-12, 7-8 Big 12) had to win Wednesday night at Iowa State and then tonight to remain in the conversation as a bubble team for an at-large invitation to the NCAA Tournament. But the euphoria over defeating then-No. 5 Texas here a week ago was extinguished in Ames, Iowa, when Colorado's defense let down. The 95-90 victory by the last-place Cyclones ruined what might have set the stage for an epic party in Boulder tonight.

"I still can't believe it," CU coach Tad Boyle said, shaking his head. "Toughest loss of my career. We knew what was at stake."

It's Boyle's challenge to convince his team there is still much to play for tonight, including a school record 15th home victory this season, earning a higher seed in next week's Big 12 Tournament in Kansas City, Mo., and completing a 15-year run in the Big 12 with the Buffs' first 500 regular-season conference record since 9-7 in 2006.

No matter what happens against Nebraska (19-10, 7-8), the CU seniors have clinched their first winning season.

"I really look up to those guys," CU junior guard

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Nate Tomlinson said. "They've been through it all. They have seen this program when it's been near its worst, and they have seen it when it's been at its best, beating Texas."

The seniors believe they have helped build a foundation at Colorado for future success. Although Higgins has set school records for games played, starts, free-throws made and career minutes, "the best memory I have is when I got here we'd have it seemed like only 500 people in here to watch us and now we have sellouts (tonight will be the fifth).

"That's a big deal here in Colorado. That's the biggest gratification I have, that I was part of that."

Knutson, who starred at Arapahoe High, said there is no doubt in his mind that the program is on the upswing.

"It's fun to see all the students excited about basketball," Knutson said. "Everybody is on the same page now and wants the same thing."

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The Buffs who built a foundation

The seniors playing in their final regular-season game for the Buffs tonight:

Cory Higgins 6-foot-5 guard, Danville, Calif.

He has 1,866 career points and needs 11 to pass

Shaun Vandiver and move into fourth place on the all-time school list. Four-year starter. Team's glue guy.

Levi Knutson 6-4 guard, Littleton (Arapahoe High)

Having breakthrough season as perhaps Big 12's top sixth man (12.1 points per game). Leads conference in 3-point shooting (.484) for all games. Scrappy, not afraid to rebound.

Marcus Relphorde 6-7 swingman, Chicago

Double-figure scorer during his two seasons at CU. A junior-college transfer, Relphorde is playing for his fourth coach in four years.

Javon Coney 6-3 guard, Chicago

Accepted walk-on offer from then-CU coach Jeff Bzdelik. Valuable in practices for four years and has given team solid minutes in games when given the chance.

Trent Beckley 6-10 forward, Vail (Battle Mountain High)

Fifth-year player originally walked on under coach Ricardo Patton. Worked last fall at a Dallas health club, returned to team in January to finish degree. Has played in just two games this season but has no regrets.

Notebook

Nebraska: The Huskers lead the all-time series

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76-71, but CU holds a 42-23 advantage in Boulder. . . . Tuesday night's home victory over Missouri was the third by the Huskers over a ranked team. Others were against Texas A&M and Texas, also in Lincoln. . . . Nebraska already has recorded 19 victories for the first time since the 1997-98 season. . . . As usual, Nebraska relies on defense. Eight Nebraska opponents have been held to their season low in points, including Missouri this week.

Colorado: There will be no TV coverage. Radio broadcast will be on 850 AM for the first time since the 1982-83 season. . . . To commemorate the final Big 12 game at the Coors Events Center, Colorado is distributing 14,000 free T-shirts between this game and the 2 p.m. CU women's matchup with No. 3 Baylor for a spectator "white out." This is not a doubleheader; the arena will be cleared following the women's game. . . . Tonight's game is officially a sellout, the fifth of the season. . . . The Buffs fell 79-67 at Nebraska on Jan. 18.

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