



Brittney Spears has scored 20 or more points 42 times in her illustrious CU career.  
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03/04/2011 B.G. Brooks, Contributing Editor

## Brooks: Spears' Growth Measured By More Than Career Stats

**BOULDER** - From childhood to early adulthood, not much has come easy for Brittney Spears - and that includes basketball, despite what seems to be an effortless, natural athleticism. But Spears, once shy and soft-spoken when speaking at all, and her game have blossomed at Colorado.

It hasn't happened overnight or by accident; the process has taken four full years on a campus that has rewarded her, and her it.

"The first time I met her, she hardly talked; she was all to herself and all about basketball. That just was kind of her deal. She never really hung out with any of us. That was just it," said Chelsea Dale, one of three CU seniors - Britney Blythe and Spears are the other two - who will play their final regular-season game Saturday (2 p.m.) at the Coors Events Center against third-ranked Baylor.

But Spears, by her teammates' account as well as her own, isn't the same introverted freshman who arrived in Boulder in 2007. She's still not a woman of

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**SENIOR SPEAK**

many words, but her social skills have become recognizable, her demeanor with her teammates and coaches has changed.

"She's stepped into a leadership role," first-year CU Coach Linda Lappe said. "I see her talking in huddles, telling teammates what to do, what we need to happen. Everybody listens . . . her teammates and the coaching staff respect her because we know how hard she's worked. It's not about her - she wants to win. She's said that from Day One."

Added Dale: "Through the years she's gotten great with being around people and socializing and really stepping up into a leadership role. She mostly helps me in giving me the confidence that I can shoot the shot, that I don't hesitate. When you hear someone like Brittany Spears say that to you, that's a great compliment. She believes in me, and whenever Spears believes, our whole team believes. She's really and truly our leader."

At CU, Spears has been forced to reassess her priorities. In high school, academics always were of secondary value - behind hoops, of course. "I was like, 'I play basketball so I'll be fine,' she said. "As you get older, you realize you need the grades to get in school - and you need to go to school. School's more important than basketball."

Before coming to CU, Spears made an intermediate stop at Notre Dame Prep School in Fitchburg, Mass. That was across the country from her home in Pasadena, Calif., and the distance and the change in environment nearly defeated her. Reinforcement to stick it out came from various cousins, the former CU staff that recruited her, and Katherine Johnson, the aunt who took her in when she was eight years old. Johnson will attend Saturday's Senior Day ceremony.

Spears "hated" the first month at the Eastern prep school. "I asked myself, 'Why am I even here?' It was my first time away from home and I wasn't prepared for it. I was ready to give up, but no one would let me go home. But I think it prepared me for college. (CU) was nothing like being over there; I've gotten a lot more support here."

Academics have become important enough that Spears is on track to graduate with a degree in sociology. "Being eligible every semester, being able to graduate, her perseverance is amazing, awesome and very admirable," Lappe said.

Although she's crept to within 37 points of CU's career scoring leader, Lisa Van Goor (2,068 from 1980-85), Spears' greatest accomplishment will be "getting my degree here . . . basketball is not going to

Seniors Britney Blythe, a 5-9 guard from San Mateo, Calif., and Chelsea Dale, a 6-1 swing player from Palos Verdes Estates, Calif., will play their final regular-season home game Saturday at the Coors Events Center against third-ranked Baylor. CU Coach Linda Lappe reflects on each player:



**Lappe on Blythe:** "She's done a great job of knowing, accepting and thriving in her role as our defensive stopper . . . She takes on some of the best guards in the nation and makes them work

for everything they get . . . she's kind of a little pest, following them, going through screens and always has her hands active . . .

"The last few games she's known her scoring role, stepping in and hitting threes . . . she takes care of the ball; she's our steady one . . . we always know what to expect when she takes the floor, and as a coach that's a huge blessing, a huge positive.

"She's also become kind of our vocal leader . . . she has a level of intensity (and) she gives our team intensity. She's been fun to coach - all of them have at different points in the season for different reasons. But I think what I like most about her is that she doesn't have the most glamorous position on the team, but she's very essential to what we do.

"She plays 30 minutes a game because she can defend. She realizes that's important to our team and she's been unselfish enough to do that - even though she's dog tired at the end of games because she's been running around chasing the other team's best player she knows that's what our team needs and she'll do whatever it takes."

**Blythe's take on her CU career:** "The best things in life don't come easy . . . I think if these four years would have come easy for me I wouldn't appreciate it now. That's what people appreciate in life - when you overcome things. You can look back at all of them and know you haven't quit . . .

"This (season) is what you live for, this is fun. We're doing well as a team. Everybody thought we wouldn't make it this far as a team because of our roster, or because of who's left, or the coaching change. It's easy to do that, especially because of the new staff, the new environment. But I feel like we've definitely made it a positive situation."

**Lappe on Dale:** "She showed a lot of perseverance in missing the first semester and came back and helped

always be here. It could be done tomorrow, you never know.

"No, things haven't been easy, especially academically. That's where you've got to work hard for everything . . . but I'm proud of what I've done. Yeah, I'm happy."

It's been a season headed toward an apparent happy ending for Lappe's team - and Spears has been an integral reason. She's scored in double figures in 26 of 28 games this season and has reached 20 or more points 42 times in her career. She's worked her way into prominent positions on several of CU's career statistical lists, but the numbers aren't of concern to her now.

"A long, long time from now, maybe they will be," she said. "I know it's a good thing, but I don't give much thought to it now."

Since she was a freshman, Spears has been counted on for points. "She was an instant starter - and that's a lot of pressure," Dale said. "But she's really grown into that and grown to love it. She's someone now we can look to to hit big shots. It's great stuff."

Lappe depends on Spears' scoring proficiency as much as ever, noting, "She shoots a lot right now because we need her to shoot a lot - if we didn't, she wouldn't. It shows you how unselfish she is."

But Spears' offense is not what Lappe likes most about Spears and her development; Spears rarely is MIA anymore.

Said Lappe: "At the beginning of the year, teams could take her out of the game. If she got two early fouls, an early travel call, an early charge, she would kind of disappear for the rest of the game, or at least a large portion of it. Now, you can't even see that stuff affect her.

"That's huge as she moves forward in her career - controlling what she can control and clearing negative thoughts out of her mind. I think that's probably the biggest thing; she can start off slow but that doesn't mean she's going to have a bad game."

Spears showed up at CU as a scorer, but not a very polished one and a fairly one-dimensional threat. Now, said Lappe, "She's scoring in a lot of different ways . . . attacking the rim, getting some post-ups on the block, hitting the three - which she's always done - and getting to the free throw line."

Plus, she can defend almost any player she's assigned to: "When she wants to, she can really shut other teams down," Lappe said.

When Lappe was hired last April, she didn't know what to expect from Spears. She had seen the 6-foot-1 forward play on numerous occasions, but didn't know her temperament or her work ethic. She quickly found out that Spears never shied away from work.



us. She gives us a calm demeanor on the floor. She's a smart player, she gets defensive assignments, and knows what we need on the floor.

"She does a great job of having a positive attitude, just making it through the first semester where she was just practicing as a senior - a lot of players might not have even tried to do it. This was important to her and I'm happy she's had some success her senior year and gotten some minutes. She's been coming off the bench and doing what we need at any particular time."

**Dale's take on her CU career:** "This last season just makes everything better. It makes up for the not-so-good times. That's all I'm really happy with. I prayed that I would have a season that I could leave and still have a great mindset of playing and about Colorado. There's no that if this were my last game ever with Colorado, then I would be completely fine with that.

"It's an accomplishment . . . I looked at my last three years as a really long preseason. Being able to get the payoff like I have is something I'm just grateful to be a part of. This change, I mean, it's amazing what's happened and what's going around now. To be the seniors on the first team that Coach Lappe has taken is a great feeling. I can walk with that and be like, 'all right.' I started that with whatever future she might have.

"These coaches really prepared us well. They never lied to us and you can tell they've believed in us 100 percent, whether we've played the No. 1 team or an unranked team they believe in us. And that's the best thing you can give a bunch of girls - a bunch of young women - that belief. We might not have had that before."

"She was in the best shape of anybody on the team," Lappe said, recalling that Spears ran a sub-6-minute mile in CU's first conditioning test and "blew everybody out of the water. She doesn't miss any workouts, she's there every single day when she doesn't have to be."

If Spears lacked anything, it was the confidence to know she could "longer and further than maybe she thought," Lappe said. "We had to push her and prod her at times, and she still gets in the mindset sometimes of 'I can't move another muscle.'"

Good coaches cope with that by resting their players, however briefly, and that's what Lappe does. As a result, Spears is pushing through that "I'm gassed" mindset and not losing focus as quickly as she once did. On an uncharacteristically thin roster (nine players normally suit up), Lappe leans heavily on Spears.

"She gets tired because we have her do so much," Lappe said. "We run lots of screens for her and lot of times she's guarding a very good player."

Spears wants to continue her basketball career in the WNBA (summer) and overseas (off-season). But her immediate focus is on a strong finish to the current season and coping with what will be an emotional Saturday on her home court.

"I've been thinking about that," she said. "It won't hit you until you're out there, knowing it's your last game here. Right now, it doesn't feel like the last game - just another home game. But I know when it hits me, it'll hit."

It will hit Lappe, too.

"I'm very proud to have been able to coach her for a year," Lappe said. "As you look back, to be able to coach one of the greatest players who ever wore the Colorado uniform is kind of neat."

**Contact: BG.Brooks@Colorado.EDU**

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# It's brain over brawn for CU Buffs' Spears

## CU star's crowning achievement won't come on basketball court

**By Joshua Linden**stein Camera Sports Writer  
Boulder Daily Camera

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Brittany Spears has always known she could play basketball.

If there's one place the Colorado women's basketball team's leading scorer feels comfortable, it's on the court.

So when Spears thinks about the things of which she's most proud heading into today's 2 p.m. Senior Day game against third-ranked Baylor at the Coors Events Center, it's not hoops but her upcoming graduation that stands out most in her mind.

"I'm really proud," says Spears, who is on pace to earn her sociology degree in August. "College is hard. For me, being a senior now and to be almost graduating, I think it's a major accomplishment. School was something where I was always second-guessing myself."

As good a player as she was as a freshman, the Pasadena, Calif., product's transformation both on and off the court during her four years in Boulder might be the most striking of any of the three seniors who will play their final regular season home game today.

Spears enters the contest just 37 points shy of becoming the school's all-time leading scorer. She is fourth in rebounding, seventh in steals and fourth in blocked shots. And she is third in games started, having never missed one in her career.

But her path to college graduate and basketball star has been filled with plenty of twists and turns.

Spears' mother, Michelle Henly, died of breast cancer when Spears was just 4. Without her father in the picture, Spears and her three older brothers moved in with their grandmother for four years until she passed away. Their aunt, Katherine Johnson, took over their care from there, even though Johnson had three young children of her own who Spears now considers siblings.

"At times it was difficult," Spears says of dealing with loss and changing homes. "But I was still young, and I was used to growing up with different people. It was just something I was used to."

Johnson will watch Spears play at the Coors Events Center for the first time today. The woman who has been like a mother to Spears has seen her niece play for the Buffaloes, just never in Boulder. Both occasions came when CU played at Southern California.

But Johnson's been with Spears in spirit every step of the way as she has transitioned from shy, promising freshman to team leader and soon-to-be college graduate.

"It will be real special for her to see me play at the University of Colorado, not at a different school but where I'm at every day," Spears says. "I talk to her every day. All she talks about is, 'Make sure you go to class. Education is what's important, and basketball could be here today and gone tomorrow.' She doesn't ask about the games really. All she cares about is me going to class and being on time and stuff like that."

It was while living with Johnson that Spears began playing hoops, though she recalls no one person or moment influencing her initial interest in the game.

"I just grew up down the street from a park, so I was always playing with the boys and playing basketball," she says.

Spears became a star at Pasadena High, averaging 23 points, 10 rebounds and eight assists as a senior to lead the school to a league title. She committed to play for Colorado as a part of former coach Kathy McConnell-Miller's first official

recruiting class.

But Spears' grades and test scores weren't up to NCAA standards. So rather than enrolling at CU, she spent a year at Notre Dame Prep School in Massachusetts improving her academic record.

"It was tough because I was planning on coming right out here," Spears says.

While the prep school detour allowed other colleges to recruit Spears, she felt comfortable with the staff at CU and signed her letter of intent. She found success with the Buffs right away, averaging 13.9 points per game her freshman year as CU made a run to the WNIT semifinals. She has led the team in scoring every year since, though she hasn't always been the vocal leader she's grown into this season.

"When we got here as freshmen she didn't say much," CU senior guard Britney Blythe says. "She's now giving speeches to the team and giving us quotes and just really important feedback on the court, too. She's not afraid to say what she has to say. When you have a leader who can show us on the court and also tell us it really elevates everybody else's game."

Spears' game has continued to develop, too.

Coach Linda Lappe, who replaced McConnell-Miller in April, knew Spears was a great shooter and noticed right away that she was the hardest worker on the team. But she challenged the player this season to score in a variety of ways and become a better defender. The coach also pushed Spears to increase her mental toughness if a couple of plays or foul calls went against her.

All are areas in which Lappe says Spears has shined as the season has progressed.

"As you look back as a coach, to be able to coach one of the greatest players that has ever worn a Colorado uniform is kind of neat," Lappe says. "I think just the fact that nothing has come easy for her ... Her perseverance is amazing."

Spears has insisted all season that the scoring record is something she'll reflect on when she's done playing. The Buffs struggled to losing seasons the last two years, and getting back to the postseason -- a WNIT berth is likely -- has been her main focus this winter.

Lisa Van Goor (1980-85), who holds the record with 2,067 points, has gotten to know Spears the last three years while her significant other, Bob Bowers, has served as Spears' scholarship donor.

"She is one of the most talented players we've seen come through this program," Van Goor says. "I think the coaching staff and the University of Colorado took a chance on her, and I'm so proud of what she's been able to accomplish. She's going to (graduate) in four years. I think she's lived up to everything that was expected of her."

Spears credits a host of people within the school and athletic department whose support was integral to her success both on and off the court at CU, including both coaching staffs she's played for.

Many of those folks will be in their usual seats today cheering her on. It's a new face in the crowd, though, that will likely mean the most to Spears.

"Just, when she calls me and tells me she's proud of me for being at school and doing the right things, it makes me want to cry," Spears says of her Aunt Katherine. "It's like, 'Wow, I'm doing something that makes my aunt happy.'"

**TODAY:** The Colorado Buffaloes (15-13, 6-9 Big 12 Conference) host the third-ranked Baylor Bears (27-2, 14-1) in a 2 p.m. game at the Coors Events Center.

**BROADCAST:** No television. Radio on KKZN (760 AM) with Mike Rice (play-by-play).

**STORY LINES:** Colorado has won three straight, including a 64-61 victory at Nebraska on Wednesday that clinched postseason eligibility. ... Today is Senior Day for the Buffs, who look to send forward Brittany Spears, guard Britney Blythe and guard Chelsea Dale off with a victory in their final regular season home game. ... Baylor clinched the Big 12 regular season title with a victory over Missouri on Wednesday. ... The Bears are led by 6-foot-8 national player of the year candidate Brittney Griner. ... Former Legacy High School star Melissa Jones, a starter for BU, missed Wednesday's game with swelling in her right eye after hitting the floor against Oklahoma last weekend.

**KEY STAT:** Colorado is 2-0 at home against ranked teams this season.

**COACHES:** Linda Lappe is 15-13 in her first season at CU and 65-49 overall. Kim Mulkey is 291-78 in her 11th season at BU and overall.

**PROBABLE STARTERS: Colorado --** G Brittany Wilson, 5-8, Fr., 7.5 ppg, 3.5 rpg, 1.8 apg; G Britney Blythe, 5-9, Sr., 4.1 ppg, 1.5 rpg, 1.2 apg; F Brittany Spears, 6-1, Sr., 17.8 ppg, 8.0 rpg, 1.9 apg; F Meagan Malcolm-Peck, 6-2, So., 6.8 ppg, 4.4 rpg, 1.3 apg; F Julie Seabrook, 6-3, Jr., 5.8 ppg, 5.3 rpg. **Baylor --** G Odyssey Sims, 5-9, Fr., 13.8 ppg, 2.8 rpg, 3.0 apg; G Jordan Madden, 6-0, So., 4.5 ppg, 2.6 rpg, 1.5 apg; F Destiny Williams, 6-1, So., 8.0 ppg, 6.6 rpg; Whitney Zachariason, 6-2, Sr., 1.7 ppg, 2.2 rpg, 0.4 spg; C Brittney Griner, 6-8, So., 22.3 ppg, 7.7 rpg.

**SERIES:** Baylor leads 11-8 overall but trails 5-4 in Boulder. The Bears have won seven straight overall.

**UP NEXT:** The Buffs begin Big 12 tournament play with a 10 a.m. game Tuesday against Kansas.

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