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Tuesday, March 8, 2011

Spears leaves mark at Colorado

By Mechelle Voepel
ESPN.com

KANSAS CITY, Mo. -- When you hear about some of the tough times Colorado's Brittany Spears experienced as a kid, the last thing you might expect is that everyone who knows her raves about what fun she is to be around. But that's exactly what they do.

"When I've been down, the only person who can always make me laugh is Spears," teammate and good friend Britney Blythe said. "She doesn't even have to say anything; her demeanor and personality does it. She can give you such a funny look. She's a very upbeat person, and you can't help but be happy when you're around her."



Brittany Spears, a 6-foot-1 senior, and Colorado (15-15) hope to play in the WNIT.

Tuesday at the Big 12 tournament, Spears became Colorado's all-time scoring leader, finishing with 21 points for 2,075. She surpassed Lisa Van Goor, whose name had been atop the Buffs' points list since 1985.

"That record has been standing a very, very long time," said Linda Lappe, who played for Colorado and is now in her first season as the Buffs' coach. "I think it's a huge accomplishment. [Brittany] had to do a lot for us this year in every different way."

Spears, a 6-foot-1 senior, has had to carry a pretty big load for Colorado her entire career, which might extend past the Buffaloes' 71-45 loss to Kansas in the Big 12 tournament first round.

Colorado (15-15) hopes to get a berth into the WNIT, which would be a definite step in the right direction for Lappe in her effort to rebuild at her alma mater. It would also give Spears more time to work with a staff that has helped her expand her game.

"I've always been a huge fan of hers and her ability one-on-one offensively," Kansas coach Bonnie Henrickson said of Spears. "I have been more impressed with her on the defensive end [this season]. I think her effort has been much better."

"She has those 'go-go gadget' arms; she goes and gets balls in the passing lanes that nobody thinks she can get. But she's been more aggressive in the passing lanes. She doesn't just sit there and gamble for steals and be undisciplined."

Henrickson, aside from displaying an impressive knowledge of "Inspector Gadget" cartoons, nails the traits that coaches across the Big 12 have noticed in Spears. And they're what Spears herself feels are the most improved parts of her game.

"Playing defense, not taking plays off, being a better leader," she said. "Doing the little things."

Spears was recruited from her hometown of Pasadena, Calif., to Colorado by coach Kathy McConnell-Miller, and after a year at prep school in Massachusetts, came to Boulder. Spears averaged 13.9 points as a freshman, then 18.3 her sophomore season and 17.7 as a junior. McConnell-Miller was let go last spring, and Lappe -- who finished her Colorado playing career in 2003 -- took over.

Spears can be slow to warm to people, and Lappe understood that. When Spears was 4 years old, her mother died of breast cancer. She then went to live with her grandmother, who died of heart failure when Spears was 8.

"I still have memories," Spears said of her mother. "I remember her taking me to preschool and picking me up, and her being at home making dinner. And I have pictures of her. My grandma -- she was really strict, she wanted to make sure we always did our chores.

"At first when I was younger, I was angry. I would say to myself, 'Everyone is going to die, you can't get close to anybody.' I just didn't really care about anything at that time."

Spears then moved in with her aunt, Katherine Johnson, and found basketball as an outlet.

"When I was little, I didn't realize that," Spears said. "But now I think so, because when you're playing basketball you don't have to have anything else on your mind."

She'd play at a park down the street, and pretty soon the boys there were telling her how good she was. By high school, she felt she had let go of a lot of the bad feelings she'd had about the personal losses she'd been through.

"I think playing sports and being in school helped me," said Spears, who would like to go into social work after she's finished with basketball. "If I was talking to a young kid who'd been through the same things, I'd tell them, 'Live your life, because you can't bring back someone who's gone.'"

"You can't keep dwelling on your loss. It's not like you ever 'get over' it, but learn to live with your losses. I could have been just negative about the whole situation and used that excuse my whole life. But I didn't. I did what I needed to do, and got into college."

Blythe, who is from San Mateo, Calif., said Spears' ability to stay upbeat has helped the entire team as the Buffs have been through their own difficulties.

"Spears is resilient. I feel like she's taken every type of adversity and somehow made it into a positive," Blythe said. "How she's done that, I don't know.

"When we talk about tough situations, she doesn't harp on them in a negative way. She says, 'Things could be worse. I can get through this; I've been through other things.' I feel like that's why she's gotten so far. She hasn't quit on anyone. She hasn't quit on this team."

Lappe thinks that Spears has the talent to play professionally, and definitely the mindset.

"As she moves forward, her ballhandling skills and her footwork are what she'll need to concentrate on," Lappe said. "She's gotten much better at her footwork. Her possibilities are endless. She will work hard on whatever you tell her to work on. She could have a lot of years left to play basketball."



Though they lost in the Big 12's first round Tuesday, Brittany Spears became the Buffs' all-time scoring leader, finishing with 21 points for 2,075.

Her time at Colorado is near an end, though. Last Saturday, as the Buffs honored their seniors, Johnson was able to come to Boulder for the first time. She was overwhelmed by the support her niece received and all that Spears had accomplished with the Buffs.

Spears, the kid who can crack up everybody on the team without a word, found herself getting choked up at her aunt's reaction.

"I've seen some emotions from Spears, but not in the open like that," Blythe said. "So I was a little surprised, but I understood how she felt. Her auntie was there, and that's her heart.

"She's had a remarkable career at Colorado. A lot of people don't know all she's been through, but when you find out, it really makes you respect her. She gives very valuable advice. She's been through so much, but she's a fighter. When I look at her, I know I have a reason to keep pushing."

Mechelle Voepel, a regular contributor to ESPN.com, can be reached at mvoepel123@yahoo.com. Read her blog at <http://voepel.wordpress.com>.



Chuckie Jeffery (23) returns for CU's first-round Big 12 tournament game Tuesday against Kansas.
Photo Courtesy: CUBuffs.com



03/07/2011 B.G. Brooks, Contributing Editor

Brooks: Jeffery Eager For Return Against Kansas

KANSAS CITY, Mo. - Given Baylor's overall talent level, the absence of Colorado's Chuckie Jeffery might or might not have been a factor in the Buffaloes' 81-59 weekend loss to the third-ranked Lady Bears. As for her absence from an 81-53 loss at Kansas on Feb. 2, don't try telling the Buffs it wasn't a big deal.

CU is certain that Jeffery's return - in conjunction with several intangibles - will make a big difference here Tuesday morning (10 a.m. MST, FSN Rocky Mountain) against Kansas in the opening game of the Big 12 Conference's postseason women's tournament.

"It'll help a lot," said Buffs senior Brittany Spears, who is closing in on a CU career milestone. "She brings energy, defense and scoring - everything you need in a teammate."

Added first-year CU Coach Linda Lappe: "It's going to be nice to have her back. Just going back and watching film, knowing what she brings to our team offensively, defensively and rebounding, she's going to add another dimension to what we're doing."

Jeffery missed her team's final regular-season game to attend the funeral of her great grandmother in Hempstead, N.Y. An academic suspension kept her at home in early February when the Buffs visited Lawrence, Kan., for the final time.

Jeffery, a sophomore guard who leads the team in rebounding (8.1) and is the second-leading scorer (13.7), is trying

make up for being MIA in CU's second game this season against KU. The Jayhawks won the Boulder meeting, 68-58, despite Jeffery's game-high 23 points and 10 rebounds.

Now, she's ready to rejoin her teammates after that absence and missing the Baylor loss - a more trying weekend than the other.

"There were a lot of things on my mind last Saturday," she said Monday after the Buffs' early afternoon practice at Rockhurst University. I was trying to watch the game and thinking I wanted to be there. It was just hard.

"I've been anxious, after missing the (second) Kansas game. I'm excited to get back on the floor and play with my team and get another shot at them. It's pretty exciting right now; it's like a little makeup game for me. Hopefully, we can go and get them."

Lappe believes that can happen if her team plays with the same confidence it found in the season's final two weeks. Of the Buffs' six league wins, half came during that span. The loss to Baylor might have snapped a three-game CU winning streak, but Lappe believes preparing for 6-foot-8 Brittney Griner and Baylor's inside game gave the ninth-seeded Buffs (15-14) a leg up in their preparation for the eighth-seeded Jayhawks (19-11).

"Baylor was good in that it was a kind of warm up for Kansas; they both really use their inside players," Lappe said, referring mainly to 6-3 sophomore Carolyn Davis, who totaled 32 points in the two wins against CU. Another factor: The Buffs didn't shoot well from the field in either contest - 36.8 percent in Boulder, 35.0 percent in Lawrence.

Jeffery called Davis "their key player, and we've made her our focal point. Coach wants to play her much like they did against Baylor (Griner). But we have to do other things well, too."

To Lappe, one of those things is being more judicious in shot selection. With Griner, the nation's second-leading shot blocker (4.5 a game) towering inside, most teams' perimeter attempts go up against Baylor. CU's went way up, with 37 three-point tries.

Understandable, but don't let it become a pattern, said Lappe, who noted the Baylor game aside, her team's "overall confidence has gotten a lot better. We're knowing we can compete and believing we have every right to win games - just as much as everybody else. And we're making big plays, allowing us to win games down the stretch . . . I just feel like we're more in synch at both ends."

In mid-October, not many predicted the Buffs would be in synch period. A preseason media poll had CU finishing last in its final Big 12 season - a forecast Lappe disputed then and grins at now.

"When we came in as a staff, I could almost guarantee you that we weren't going to be last when those rankings came out," she said. "But it was something we could look at and say we're the underdog, we have no pressure on us. We're going out and be the spoilers. For our team, that's kind of been the way to go."

"When the pressure is off, when we're playing together and having fun, we're a really good team. When we get all uptight and tense, we start turning the ball over, second-guessing ourselves on offense and defense . . . but to have that (loose) mindset is a huge plus for our team."

"Yeah, I think we have surprised a lot of people; I don't think anybody gave us credit coming into the season - and that's partly because of where we finished last year, partly because of a new coaching staff, partly because I'm a young coach and don't have a ton of experience. But at the same time, I knew myself and our staff and our players. I knew our administration and all the people that were going to be around our program. I had confidence . . . I knew we weren't going to finish in the top four probably, but I knew we could win some games."

The Buffs' late-season improvement, said Jeffery, has come from better ball movement, attacking the rim more aggressively, pushing the ball up court more effectively and communicating better on defense.

"And we're playing better together . . . we can put anybody on the floor and the job will get done. I think that's good for us," she said.

Plus, Spears, who on Monday was honored as a first-team all-league selection, has averaged 23.3 points, 8.3 rebounds and three steals during the past three games. Spears called her selection "a great accomplishment, because this is a great league with a lot of great players."

Spears needs 14 points to become CU's career scoring leader, supplanting Lisa Van Goor (2,067 from 1980-85). "People have been telling me about (the record)," Spears said. "I knew I was close, but I just want to win the game (Tuesday)."

A victory would earn CU a second shot at top-seeded Baylor on 10 a.m. in Wednesday's quarterfinals - this time, with Jeffery. At one game above .500 entering the tournament, the Buffs already have a record that makes them WNIT eligible - and school officials already have put that postseason process in motion.

"It feels good to be in the position we're in; it feel good to be WNIT eligible," Lappe said. "The postseason is very exciting; you strive for the NCAA Tournament and that's what we were striving for. But at some point, you've got to realize, hey, the WNIT looks pretty dang good."

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SHOW MENU



CU out to give Kansas payback

By Joshua Linden Camera Sports Writer
Boulder Daily Camera

Posted: 03/07/2011 06:17:16 PM MST

Colorado senior wing Chelsea Dale didn't hesitate when asked about today's matchup with Kansas in the first round of the Big 12 Conference tournament.

The memories of two ugly losses to the Jayhawks this season still sting.

"Third time," Dale said in the post-game press conference after Saturday's loss to Baylor. "We want to give them one. We owe them one."

The ninth-seeded Buffaloes (15-14, 6-10 Big 12) and No. 8 Jayhawks (19-11, 6-10) square off today (10 a.m., FSN Rocky Mountain) in the opening game of the Big 12 tourney at Municipal Auditorium in Kansas City. The winner gets a rematch with top-seeded Baylor on Wednesday in the quarterfinals.

For the Buffaloes, today's game is a prime opportunity to prove how far they've come over recent weeks.

Kansas beat the Buffs 68-58 in Boulder on Jan. 12 and then stomped CU 81-53 in Lawrence on Feb. 2. But the Buffs carry into today's game a different mindset after winning three of their final four games of the season, including two on the road.

"I feel like with the mark that we've left with the wins that we've gotten that people aren't just going to roll over us," CU senior guard Britney Blythe said. "They're afraid to play us a little bit, and they have to worry that we'll come out and play our hardest and that we're not gonna give up. That's the exciting part. A lot of us are real excited because we know anything can happen."

First-year CU coach Linda Lappe said she believes her team has improved in several areas in the five weeks since the Buffs last met KU -- notably post play, transition defense and on offense.

The troubles inside and an overall lack of offense stand out most from the first two meetings with Kansas.

KU's post trio of Carolyn Davis, Aishah Sutherland and Krysten Boogaard combined to average 33.5 points in those two games, and shot a combined 65 percent (26 for 40) from the field. Davis went 8 for 10 and scored 20 points in the second meeting. The Jayhawks also out-rebounded the Buffs in both games.

The Buffs have been a strong rebounding team all season. But their inside game has been on a gradual climb as CU's lone post players -- junior Julie Seabrook and freshman Rachel Hargis -- have continued to develop. Hargis, especially, has given the Buffs a defensive presence inside in recent games that wasn't there earlier in the season.

Offensively, meanwhile, the Buffs have picked up the pace, averaging 64.5 points over the last four games after sputtering through most of league play.

"And our confidence has gotten better," Lappe said. "That's the biggest thing when you go into the tournament. You've got to have a swagger and you've got to have a certain level of confidence, and I think we have that."

The Jayhawks, of course, won't be an easy out. They're still on the bubble for an NCAA tournament berth. A couple of wins in the Big 12 tourney, especially an upset of Baylor, would give them a good shot at getting into the dance.

KU played well down the stretch, too, going 5-2 in February before stumbling against Iowa State and Kansas State to close the regular season. Davis leads the way, but guards Monica Engelman and Angel Goodrich give the Jayhawks a nice inside-out balance.

Colorado played KU close in the first meeting before faltering late in the game. In the second, the Jayhawks cruised from the start, shooting 62 percent from the field against the Buffs, who were without guard Chucky Jeffery.

"We feel like we know them fairly well," Lappe said. "We know what they do. They played tremendous the last time they played us, and we didn't play very well. I like it because we've gotten so much better since the last time we played them."

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Colorado's Spears named to All-Big 12 first team

Senior joins Bjorklund, McFarland as only Buffs to earn honor

By Joshua Lindenstein Camera Sports Writer
Boulder Daily Camera

Posted: 03/07/2011 01:57:55 PM MST

Colorado senior forward Brittany Spears was named to the All-Big 12 first team in league awards announced Monday.

The honor is the first for Spears, who is just 14 points shy of breaking the Buffs' all-time scoring record. Spears was a second team honoree as a sophomore and honorable mention as both a freshman and junior.

Spears joins Tera Bjorklund and Jackie McFarland as CU's only other players to be named to the Big 12 first team. Bjorklund took the honor in 2003 and 2004, while McFarland was a two-time member in 2007 and 2008.

The 6-1 Pasadena, Calif., product has averaged 18.5 points and 8.2 rebounds in conference play this season, both good for fourth-best in the Big 12.

Third-ranked and conference champion Baylor dominated the Big 12 awards Monday, placing three players on the first team and sweeping all but one of the individual awards.

All-Big 12 women's basketball

FIRST TEAM

C -- Brittney Griner, 6-8, So., Baylor

G -- Melissa Jones, 5-10, Sr., Baylor

G -- Odyssey Sims, 5-8, Fr., Baylor

F -- Brittany Spears, 6-1, Sr., Colorado

G -- Kelsey Bolte, 6-1, Sr., Iowa State

F -- Carolyn Davis, 6-3, So., Kansas

G -- Brittany Chambers, 5-8, So., Kansas State

G -- Danielle Robinson, 5-9, Sr., Oklahoma

F/C -- Danielle Adams, 6-1, Sr., Texas A&M

G -- Tyra White, 6-0, Jr., Texas A&M

SECOND TEAM

F -- Jalana Childs, 6-2, Jr., Kansas State

G -- RaeShara Brown, 5-8, Sr., Missouri

G/F -- Toni Young, 6-2, So., Oklahoma State

G -- Chassidy Fussell, 5-10, Fr., Texas

C -- Kierra Mallard, 6-3, Jr., Texas Tech

HONORABLE MENTION

Lindsey Moore, Nebraska; Aaryn Ellenberg, Oklahoma; Ashleigh Fontenette and Kathleen Nash, Texas; Sydney Carter and Sydney Colson, Texas A&M; Casey Morris and Teena Wickett, Texas Tech.

ALL-DEFENSIVE TEAM

C -- Brittney Griner, 6-8, So., Baylor

F -- Chelsea Poppens, 6-2, So., Iowa State

G -- Danielle Robinson, 5-9, Sr., Oklahoma

G -- Sydney Carter, 5-6, Jr., Texas A&M

G -- Monique Smalls, 5-6, So., Texas Tech

ALL-FRESHMAN TEAM

G -- Odyssey Sims, 5-8, Fr., Baylor

F -- Hallie Christofferson, 6-3, Fr., Iowa State

F -- Jordan Hooper, 6-2, Fr., Nebraska

G -- Aaryn Ellenberg, 5-7, Fr., Oklahoma

G -- Chassidy Fussell, 5-10, Fr., Texas

COACH OF THE YEAR

Kim Mulkey, Baylor

PLAYER OF THE YEAR

Brittney Griner, Baylor

NEWCOMER OF THE YEAR

Destiny Williams, Baylor

FRESHMAN OF THE YEAR

Odyssey Sims, Baylor

DEFENSIVE PLAYER OF THE YEAR

Brittney Griner, Baylor

SIXTH MAN AWARD

Maryann Baker, Texas A&M and Chynna Brown, Texas Tech

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THE DENVER POST

sports

CU women's basketball player Spears nears end of stellar career

By Tom Kensler
The Denver Post

Posted: 03/08/2011 01:00:00 AM MST

KANSAS CITY, Mo. — Brittany Spears arrived here thinking about the remarkable journey of twists and turns leading to her final Big 12 Tournament. For the Colorado senior forward, the significance goes far beyond college basketball and becoming only the second women's player in school history to reach 2,000 career points.

Back home in Pasadena, Calif., Spears calls it simply "the park." In effect, the basketball court became her safe harbor, her refuge, her second home.

"When I'd go to the park to play basketball, it was kind of a release," said Spears, who Monday was named first-team all-Big 12. "I didn't have to think about all that was going on at home."

Spears' mother died of breast cancer when

Brittany was 4. Her father wasn't in the picture, so Brittany and her brothers were taken in by their grandmother, who resided nearby. But just four years later, Spears' grandmother died of a heart attack.

If it wasn't for a loving aunt having some extra space (despite having three children of her own), Spears doesn't know what she would have done or where she would have lived. Fortunately, she was always within walking distance of the park.

Spears would head there almost every day, making sure to not break her aunt's rule of returning home before dusk, before the street lights came on. She learned basketball the hard way. Against boys.

"You don't see many girls playing basketball at the park," Spears said. "But there would be one random girl there, and a lot of times it would be me.

"I had to get good because boys are ball hogs. They won't pass you the ball. But if they see you have skill, they'll pass the ball to you because they want to win."

Spears, 6-foot-1 and nimble enough to play anywhere on the court, will lead the charge for No. 9 seed Colorado (15-14, 6-10 Big 12) in today's 10 a.m. Big 12 Tournament opener against No. 8 seed Kansas (19-11, 6-10) at Municipal Auditorium.

Colorado has a good chance of being invited to the Women's NIT next week. In the meantime,

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THE DENVER POST

Spears hopes the Buffaloes can make some noise in the Big 12 Tournament. She finished the regular season ranked fifth among Big 12 players in scoring (18.0) and fourth in rebounding (8.0), parlaying a bruising style of ball she learned in the park into a stellar collegiate career.

"I have so much respect for 'Spearsy' because of what she has gone through," first-year Colorado coach Linda Lappe said. "She has had a tough life. She has had a lot of people come in and out of her life. She has had to really, really persevere."

"Everything that she's gotten, she's had to work hard for. That jump shot just didn't come. She spent so many hours working on it. And school is not easy for her."

Now more vocal leader

Spears initially signed with then CU coach Kathy McConnell-Miller for the 2006-07 season. But Spears fell shy of qualifying academically and needed a year at a prep school in New England before arriving in Boulder.

She is on track to earn a degree in sociology in August. Hearing of her story almost brought tears to Baylor coach Kim Mulkey, who took time to talk with Spears after the No. 3-ranked Bears defeated Colorado 81-59 on Saturday despite Spears' 23 points, nine rebounds, two steals and two blocks.

"The most impressive things about Brittany Spears have nothing to do with basketball,"

Mulkey said. "The kid's graduating. The tragedies in her life ... knowing how she fought against adversity ... I told her: 'I don't know you. But I respect you.'"

Shy by nature, Spears hardly said a word to teammates during her first three years at Colorado, except, perhaps, to tell an almost daily joke that she thought up. This season, Spears knew she had to be a leader, as a senior and as the team's best player. It didn't come easy.

"But I have a good support group on the team," Spears said. "They told me if I said something, they'd listen."

Name issue "really old"

While Brittany will likely never become chatty on or off the court, the fact that she has started to open up is viewed as a remarkable transformation among those who know her best.

"She tells us what to do on the court. She has even given us speeches," said Britney Blythe, a senior guard. "It's good to see."

Finally, after four years, Brittany Spears is known around campus for something other than sharing a similar name to that of the recording artist.

Most of the time, anyway.

"Some people will still come up and tell me they like one of my songs," Spears said. "I usually play along with it, but it's not funny anymore because she (Britney Spears) has no new songs."

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"So I tell them, 'That's old, that's really old.' "

Tom Kensler: 303-954-1280 or
tkensler@denverpost.com

First-rate stats

Colorado forward Brittany Spears goes into today's Big 12 Tournament with a career resume built on toughness. A look at the senior's numbers through the years:

- Her 2,054 career points are second all time on CU's scoring list. She trails only Lisa Van Goor (2,067 points from 1980-85).
- She has scored in double digits in 27-of-29 games this season.
- Her 148 career blocks are third all time on CU's list.
- She ranks fifth in the Big 12 in scoring this season with 18 points per game.
- She is the active leading career scorer in the Big 12 and is ninth on the all-time list.

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THE DENVER POST

college basketball

Colorado's Brittany Spears tabbed All-Big 12 Conference

By The Denver Post

Posted: 03/07/2011 02:40:42 PM MST

Updated: 03/07/2011 02:53:43 PM MST

Colorado senior Brittany Spears, who ranks second on the Buffaloes' all-time scoring list, on Monday was named to the All-Big 12 Conference first team after a vote of the league's coaches.

Spears' 2,054 career points trails only Lisa Van Goor (2,068 points from 1980-85) on CU's scoring list.

The 6-foot-1 guard from Pasadena, Calif., ranked fifth in the conference in scoring this season with 18 points per game. She is the active leading scorer in the conference and ninth on the all-time list.

Baylor center Brittney Griner, who scored 26 points and grabbed 13 rebounds in an 81-59 victory over CU on Saturday, was named Big 12 player of the year. Bears coach Kim Mulkey was

tabbed coach of the year.

Baylor guard Melissa Jones, a 5-foot-10 senior guard originally from Legacy High in Thornton, was also named to the first team.

The Big 12 team is voted on by the league's head coaches, who cannot vote for their own players.

ALL-BIG 12 FIRST TEAMBrittney Griner, Baylor, C, 6-8, So.

Melissa Jones, Baylor, G, 5-10, Sr.

Odyssey Sims, Baylor, G, 5-8, Fr.

Brittany Spears, Colorado, F, 6-1, Sr.

Kelsey Bolte, Iowa State, G, 6-1, Sr.

Carolyn Davis, Kansas, F, 6-3, So.

Brittany Chambers, Kansas State, G, 5-8, So.

Danielle Robinson, Oklahoma, G, 5-9, Sr.

Danielle Adams, Texas A&M, F-C, 6-1, Sr.

Tyra White, Texas A&M, G, 6-0, Jr.

Player of the year — Brittney Griner, Baylor

Coach — Kim Mulkey, Baylor

Freshman — Odyssey Sims, Baylor

Defensive player — Brittney Griner, Baylor

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Sixth Man Award — Maryann Baker, Texas A&M
and Chynna Brown, Texas Tech

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