

Spears, Buffs getting defensive

Lappe pushing CU women to maximize potential

By Ryan Thorburn Camera Sports Writer
Boulder Daily Camera

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KANSAS CITY, Mo. -- How have things changed on the court since Linda Lappe took control of the women's basketball program at Colorado?

"We play defense now," senior Brittany Spears said during the Buffs' final Big 12 media day appearance at the Sprint Center. "Before, we didn't really do defense stuff. Now we do all kinds of drills."

Spears was a statistical superstar under former CU head coach Kathy McConnell-Miller. The 6-1 forward from Pasadena, Calif., will challenge Lisa Van Goor's 25-year-old program scoring record this season.

It is clear, however, that if Spears wants to win -- something the Buffs only experienced three times in conference play last season, which led to the coaching change -- Lappe needs her to be one of the best defenders in the Big 12.

"She could be one of the best players in the Big 12. 'Could be' are the two words we're trying to help her get past," Lappe said. "I don't want to be talking in March about how she could have been a great player. I want to realize her talent now."

During her career, Spears has averaged 16.6 points and 7.7 rebounds per game. And despite an apparent lack of focus at times on the other end, she is seventh on CU's all-time blocks list (116) and ninth in steals (176).

When athletic director Mike Bohn decided to fire McConnell-Miller, who had a 65-88 re-cord in five seasons, Spears was understandably upset. After staying in Boulder over the summer to work on her conditioning, she turned the page and showed up at practices ready to do whatever the new staff asks her to do.

Spears simply wants to end her collegiate career on a winning note.

"At first it was really tough. I know it's in the best interest of the school, but those coaches brought me in and it was hard to see them go," Spears said. "Now I feel better because I feel like we're working harder and these coaches expect more out of you and push it out of you. I think it's a good thing for us, even though I miss the old coaches."

Lappe's peers aren't sold just yet. They voted the Buffs last in the preseason coaches poll.

And, as usual, CU's coach and star player didn't receive the rock star attention here that some other coaches (Oklahoma's Sherri Coale) and players (Baylor's Brittney Griner) draw.

At least the Buffs are finally defensive about being at the bottom.

"They know some things have to change. We're really challenging them to change some things in their games and with their mentalities, and I think they've done a really good job at that," Lappe said. "We think we can surprise some people this season. In order to do that some things have to happen and we have to maximize our potential."

There are some other solid pieces in place for Lappe to work with, including dynamic point guard Chucky Jeffery, versatile 6-2 forward Meagan Malcolm-Peck, improving 6-3 post Julie Seabrook, and impact freshmen Brittany Wilson and Shae Kelley.

Look out if Spears is as focused on getting stops as she will be on chasing down CU's all-time scoring record.

"I just want to do whatever it takes to finish in the top half of the Big 12 and go to the NCAA Tournament," Spears said. "That would be a good senior season."

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CU women's basketball schedule set up for home success early

By Ryan Thorburn Camera Sports Writer
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KANSAS CITY, Mo. -- The previous coaching staff baked Linda Lappe a nice batch of cupcakes on the way out of Boulder.

Colorado's 2010-11 non-conference schedule, which Lappe inherited, has 10 home games and only two true road games. The Buffs will play eight of their first nine games at the Coors Events Center, and the other game will be against Denver at Magness Arena.

"I'm not sure what the rationale was behind it," Lappe said during Wednesday's Big 12 women's basketball media day at the Sprint Center. "But with how it's set up we feel like we can have a really good preseason non-conference."

CU will not leave the state until competing in USC's tournament Dec. 18-19 in Los Angeles. Dayton and San Diego State are also in the field.

The non-conference home slate begins with Regis on Nov. 12 and concludes with games against Colgate (Dec. 30) and North Dakota (Jan. 4) before the program's final season in the Big 12.

"We know if we prepare to do well in the Big 12 that we will be just fine in the Pac-10," Lappe said. "We just have to continue to get better every single day."

Back to basics

Nebraska, the other program preparing for its final Big 12 run, is coming off a 32-2 season that included an appearance in the Sweet 16.

But the Cornhuskers, who are headed to the Big Ten next season, have lost standouts Kelsey Griffin, Cory Montgomery and Yvonne Turner to graduation.

"To give you an analogy, last year at this time we were practicing at a level that I would compare to doing calculus. Pretty advanced," Nebraska coach Connie Yori said. "Right now we are practicing more at a level of learning our ABCs. We are very young and very different."

Nebraska was picked to finish seventh after winning the Big 12 regular-season title with a perfect 16-0 run.

Bears title contenders

Baylor, led by super sophomore Brittney Griner (18.4 ppg., 8.5 rpg. as a freshman) is the favorite to win the Big 12. The Bears, who lost to UConn in the Final Four, will get a rematch with the Huskies on Nov. 16 in Hartford, Conn.

"Last year I said it was UConn and everybody else, and that proved to be true," Baylor coach Kim Mulkey said. "This year there is not the dominant team, in my opinion, that we had last year. I think there are many teams that can vie for a national championship and UConn is certainly one of them."

Baylor is also on that list. The Bears will visit Boulder on March 5 in the regular-season finale.

Sleeper in Lawrence?

Texas A&M, Oklahoma, Texas and Iowa State rounded out the top five in the coaches poll behind Baylor. There is some talk here that Kansas, coming off a 17-16 season, could be a surprise contender.

"I think Kansas is a team that will be really good. They're deep, they're strong," Iowa State coach Bill Fennelly said. "I can see them being like Nebraska (last season). ... When I did my poll, I did Baylor, A&M and Kansas."

Notable

Griner, Danielle Robinson (Oklahoma) and Danielle Adams (Texas A&M) were named to the preseason Wooden Award watch list. ... Over the last 14 seasons, Big 12 women's basketball is 1,656-583 (.740) against non-conference competition. ... Baylor guard Melissa Jones, a senior from Thornton, is healthy after struggling with injuries last season and still finishing second in scoring (10.4 ppg.) for the Bears.

Quotable

"Bob Stoops for president," Oklahoma coach Sherri Coale when asked about the Sooners' football showdown in the Show-Me State against Missouri on Saturday night.

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