

CU Buff golf team rising to new heights

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As a sophomore, Emily Talley and her Colorado women's golf teammates stood near the 18th green at the 2010 Big 12 championships in Norman, Okla.

Talley watched as Texas A&M and Oklahoma State went down to the wire for the team title, taking it all the way to that final hole. A&M won by a stroke. CU, meanwhile, was 19 strokes back, in sixth place.

Two weeks ago in Maui, Talley got a different view of a dramatic finish. At the 2012 Anuenue Spring Break Challenge, the Buffs held on to defeat California and Tennessee -- with both teams within three shots of CU.

"It was fun to watch (in 2010)," Talley said, "but its way more fun to play in."

The CU program has reached new heights this year, led by a whole crew of talented players.

"They're all such good players and they work really hard," coach Anne Kelly said.

CU had its best season a year ago, reaching No. 31 in the national rankings. Talley, Jessica Wallace and twins Jenny and Kristin Coleman led the Buffs that season.

This year's team, however, is blowing last year out of the water. That same foursome, along with sophomore Alex Stewart (a transfer from Purdue), has CU knocking on the door of the top-10 rankings.

CU is currently 11th or 12th in the three major polls -- Golfstat, Golfweek and GolfWorld/NCGA.

It's the highest ranking in program history.

"We just have a really good group of hard workers," said Wallace, a senior in her second year as a Buff after transferring from Pepperdine. "Everyone wants to play their best. Everyone is really competitive on this team. We go out there every tournament and we want to one-up everyone on the field and we want to make sure we're the top team to beat. We're just really motivated."

They continue to prove that.

The Buffs are currently riding a two-match win streak, the first time in program history they've won two events in a row.

Including the fall season, CU has a program-record three tournament wins this school year. The program, which was founded in 1994, has just nine wins overall. Five of them have come in the past two seasons.

"It's great," said Kelly, in her 15th season as CU's head coach. "This is what I had hoped for for so long. It's taken longer than I wanted, of course, but that's the nature of golf and you just have to be patient."

What changed, Kelly said, was simply an infusion of great talent.

Talley, throughout her career, has been the best player in CU history. But, she didn't have a lot of help during her first two seasons.

Adding the Coleman twins and Wallace last year made a huge difference. Getting Stewart, who has the potential to break Talley's records, raised the bar even more this year.

"It does help to have a lot of help on the team now," Talley said.

With the talent, the Buffs needed some confidence. They have gained that throughout the year as they competed with, and defeated, several top programs.

"Playing with those teams, you see that we're really not that different," Talley said.

The Pac-12 may be the best golf conference in the country and Stewart believes that being a part of the conference has already benefited CU.

"Being in the Pac-12 has definitely helped, because we're competing with the best teams now," Stewart said.

None of this is much of a surprise to the Buffs. They've seen the talent they have on the team.

"You get to see your teammates in practice all the time and you know what they're capable of," Wallace said. "I think the rest of the country underestimates our team. I kind of thought this is where we should be from the start."

Where they go from here remains to be seen, but the Buffs don't believe they've peaked just yet.

"They're gaining confidence as we go," Kelly said. "My job as a coach is to keep them focused on the day. My theory has always been one shot at a time. It's really true.

"To see where we've been and now where we are is definitely a sense of accomplishment."

Talley, for one, doesn't have to look back too far to know CU has come a long way in a hurry.

"It's night and day for sure," she said. "When I came in, we were crossing fingers whether we were going to regionals or not. This year, there's no question. Now it's the question of are we going to nationals. It is different."