



Forward Meagan Malcolm-Peck (14) believes the Big 12 sharpened the Buffs for the Pac-12.

Photo Courtesy: CUBuffs.com



Brooks: Wearing Bullseye, Unbeaten Buffs Head For Utah

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BOULDER - Women's basketball in the Pac-12 Conference is not exactly Stanford and The 11 Dwarfs . . . but it's close. Any preview of the league's debut season begins with The Cardinal - that is, any preview that begins at the top and works its way down.

Start from the other direction and the picture gets a bit fuzzy, at least from second-year Colorado coach Linda Lappe's perspective.

"I told our team the other day I think we could finish anywhere from two to twelve - it's that wide open," Lappe said. "In years past in the Big 12, we were trying to be six to eight. We felt like that was a pretty good goal. Now, we're hitting the Pac-12 with only one ranked team (Stanford is No. 4)."

The conference conglomeration below The Cardinal, continued Lappe, features "some very competitive teams, some very good teams. We can't take anyone lightly, we have to be ready for everybody. That's the exciting part about it - we're going to have to be ready to play every single night. We can win every single night, which is good for our fans and good for our team to know that."

BUFFALO EXTRAS

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Through non-conference play, the Buffs did exactly as Lappe suggested - they won "every single night." At 11-0, they enter Pac-12 play on Saturday at Utah as the conference's only undefeated team. The Buffs haven't played a killer schedule - by contrast, Stanford's 10-1 record is marred only by a 10-point loss at No. 2 Connecticut - but they've jelled into a team that believes in itself and is thinking 'W' every time the shoes hit the court.

That brand of confidence isn't available on eBay, or as Lappe puts it, "Stepping on the floor with confidence doesn't just happen on game day. It happens in June, July, August, September, October, November . . . you're confident when you know you've put in the hard work. Our kids know they've put in the hard work. They've been in the weight room, gotten better there. We ran in the summer and are in good shape. We know we've gotten better skill-wise. The confidence is there because of all the things that have taken place up to this point.

"Last year was part of the process . . . this year, it's been an every-game thing. We knew we were going to win in Game 1, Game 5, Game 7 . . . it's been good to see that transformation for them. I'm not sure last year we would have that same level of confidence, especially on the road. And it's not false confidence, that's the important part of it. You can see in our players that it's not false confidence. They're stepping on the floor like winners, like competitors, like a team that is determined to do something special."

And that's what will be required for CU to continue its unbeaten streak through the early portion of Pac-12 play. The Buffs' first three conference games are on the road (at Utah, Washington and Washington State) and their first two conference home contests are against California and Stanford.

"It's not the best first five games you could ask for, definitely not," Lappe said. "So we're going to have to be good right out of the gates. But we've been preparing for this since August; we'll be ready. And our team is fired up to start conference. They've been ready for the last month and a half."

Added junior forward Meagan Malcolm-Peck: "We finally get to test ourselves and play against some tougher competition. We're really excited."

In its preseason forecast, media covering Pac-12 women's basketball didn't expect much from the Buffs. In fact, very little was expected. The media forecast pegged CU as No. 12. The Buffs flared.

"As soon as that came out, it obviously upset everybody and made us want to prove those people wrong and get some respect," Malcolm-Peck said. "Maybe they were unaware, maybe the couple of years when we didn't do well (before Lappe's arrival) had something to do with it."

"The only reason I can think of is that (the media voters) don't know who we are yet," added freshman post Jen Reese, who along with freshman guard Lexy Kresl has played a vital role in CU's early resurgence.

If the Buffs began the non-conference season as a relative unknown in the conference sisterhood, that's not the case now. Their 11-0 record - the second-best start in school history - has done more than turn heads; it has affixed a bullseye to their backsides.

"It's a little different going into games and having a record that has that big zero at the end of it," Lappe said. "When you don't have a loss everybody wants to give you that first one."

That's what Lappe has been preaching to her team about the Utes, who are 7-4 and in a dead heat with the Buffs as the Pac-12's top defensive teams (Utah allows 51.5 points a game, CU 51.7). The Utes, said Lappe, are strong in the post and have been successful by controlling the game's tempo: "They'll want to dictate what they get offensively . . . they'll play to their strengths and try and make you play to your weaknesses."

Lappe's top comparison to a previous CU opponent was to methodical Creighton, nipped by the Buffs (52-49) on a three-pointer at the buzzer by Kresl. The Utes' top scorer is 6-4 sophomore Michelle Plouffe, a Canadian (Edmonton, Alberta) who averages 15.9 points and was the Mountain West Conference freshman-of-the-year last season.

"Their post players are the keys; we have to make sure we box out," said the 6-2 Reese, who is averaging 8.5 points and 5.6 rebounds. "We also need to run on them a lot . . . transition points are big for us."

The steady Malcolm-Peck, who averages 5.2 points and the same number of boards, believes the Buffs "match up very well" with the Utes. But, she added, "We don't want to play into their hands; we want to play our style of basketball."

If that happens, CU can successfully debut in its new conference. Malcolm-Peck called the opportunity to play in two leagues - the Buffs left the Big 12 after a being members since 1996 - "a really good experience . . . not many people get to do that. Coming from the Big 12 to the Pac-12, I think we're a more physical team and really understand how tough the competition was in the Big 12. We feel like we can do very well in the Pac-12; we feel like we can make an impact."

That's not a roundly shared opinion, but to the Buffs it doesn't matter. From a national perspective, there's Stanford and the rest. For now, being the best of the rest is a pretty good goal.

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SHOW MENU



Lappe's Buffs want to surprise new league

Pac-12 coaches pick Colorado -- off to 11-0 start -- to finish 11th

By Brian Howell Buffzone.com
Boulder Daily Camera

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Colorado is well aware of how it is perceived around the Pac-12.

The Buffs were picked by coaches to finish 11th in the conference. The media picked them to finish 12th.

"We came in one day and coach had it taped on the door," junior guard Chucky Jeffery said. "We've got a lot to prove and I think we're going to do that.

"It just fires us up."

CU (11-0) is one of just six undefeated women's basketball teams in the country (out of 342 Division I teams), and this is the third-best start in team history.

With no wins against top-25 competition, however, and only one win against a school from a major conference, Colorado realizes its real season begins today. The Buffs open their inaugural Pac-12 schedule this afternoon when it visits another Pac-12 newcomer, Utah (7-4).

"The preseason, it matters, but it doesn't really right now," Jeffery said.

An undefeated non-conference record -- the only Pac-12 team to do so -- may have turned some heads around the league. More importantly, it gave the Buffs what they needed: confidence and the opportunity to improve.

"I knew we were going to get better going through it," Jeffery said. "I think we played hard every game, so I think we deserved it."

Head coach Linda Lappe is thrilled to have an 11-0 team, but told her players, "we're essentially 0-0 and ready to go again."

After getting through the non-conference, there is no question CU is ready to take on this new challenge. After 15 years in the bruising Big 12, CU will square off against a whole new set of teams.

"We're ready for the Pac-12," Lappe said. "I think we've been ready for a couple of weeks now to really get into Pac-12 basketball."

"Our players are ready to actually get going and play for something that really, really counts. (Today) is when it all starts counting."

The competition is almost all new. In the past five seasons, the Buffs have just four games against current conference foes, with three of those against Southern Cal. Last season, they beat California and lost to Southern Cal in the WNIT.

A new set of opponents means the Buffs are new to everybody else, too. That may be part of why CU was picked so low in preseason polls.

"We feel like teams are sleeping on us because we're the newcomers in the conference," Jeffery said. "We know we weren't ranked that high and we're just ready to come out and shock a lot of people."

Colorado may not be as battle-tested as others may be, but Lappe said the non-conference slate got the Buffs ready.

"We've had a lot of different tests," she said. "We haven't played a top-25 ranked team yet, but at the same time, we've gotten to see a lot of different styles of play."

Lappe compared Utah to CU's most recent opponent, Creighton, because the Utes run a motion offense, play hard and like to keep the score low.

This season, a popular phrase thrown out by Buffs players and coaches is "throw the first punch." They did that in building big leads against a lot of teams. Now, they'll look to throw the first punch against Utah, not only early in the game, but also to kick-start the conference schedule.

"It's going to set the tone a lot for conference play," Jeffery said. "It's going to be a good game for us to start off this conference."

"We're all ready to go. We're just happy that it's here now."

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Pac-12 firepower pales to Big 12 in women's basketball

By Brian Howell Buffzone.com
Boulder Daily Camera

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In the Big 12 Conference, Colorado knew exactly what to expect.

There was never a night off in the Big 12, which may be the premier conference in women's basketball.

The Big 12 features the current No. 1 team in the country (Baylor) and the defending national champion (Texas A&M).

Including those two teams, five current and/or former Big 12 members are in the Top 25 rankings.

Now entering the Pac-12, the Buffs aren't sure what to expect.

"It's a conference of unknowns and anytime you have a lot of unknowns, it's going to be really, really interesting," CU head coach Linda Lappe.

It appears that, in terms of national firepower, the Pac-12 pales in comparison to the Big 12.

Powerhouse Stanford is ranked No. 4, but the Cardinal are the only team in the conference among the top 25. California is the only other team even receiving votes at this point, and the Bears are playing well enough that they could wind up in the rankings soon.

Still, on paper, the 18-game conference schedule looks to be an easier task than the Big 12 gauntlet the Buffs have gone through the past 15 years.

"On paper it does (seem that way), but you can't overlook the conference at all," CU guard Chucky Jeffery said. "We can't overlook any teams. Every team has great players and a different system that we haven't seen yet. We have to come out ready, knowing that any given game, anybody can get beat."

In general, Pac-12 coaches are excited to begin a new era, with CU and Utah joining in.

"I like the new look we have," said Tara VanDerveer, in her 26th season as Stanford head coach. "Adding Utah and Colorado, I think, makes it more exciting."

Stanford, Cal, Southern Cal and UCLA appear to be the best teams in the conference. Arizona State and Utah could be in the mix, as well.

Where does Colorado fit in? Well, that's anybody's guess.

"For Stanford to win the conference, I think most people are going to bet on that," Lappe said. "After that, I really think it's wide open. We could finish anywhere, I think, from second to 12th. It's going to be an interesting conference."

Here's a look at each team, in order of predicted finish by media covering the conference:

No. 4 Stanford Cardinal

Head coach: Tara VanDerveer (684-148, 26th season).

Non-conference record: 9-1.

Best win: Dec. 20 vs. No. 8 Tennessee (97-80).

Worst loss: Nov. 21 at No. 2 Connecticut (68-58).

Who to watch: Forward Nnemkadi Ogumike was a first-team All-American last year and figures to be there this year, too. She currently leads the Pac-12 in scoring (23.5) and rebounding (11.4). Her sister, sophomore forward Chiney Ogumike, is also a prolific scorer (14.6) and rebounder (9.5), and sophomore Toni Kokenis is one of the league's top point guards.

Pac-12 opener: Defeated USC 61-53 on Thursday.

USC Trojans

Head coach: Michael Cooper (48-31, 3rd season).

Non-conference record: 5-5.

Best win: Dec. 4 at Gonzaga (58-51).

Worst loss: Dec. 15 at Arkansas State (58-56).

Who to watch: The Trojans, who have five losses against top-25 teams, are led by senior guard Briana Gilbreath (12.2 points, 2.27 blocks). Senior Jacki Gemelos was recently lost for the season with an injury.

Pac-12 opener: Lost to Stanford 61-53 on Thursday.

Cal Golden Bears

Head coach: Lindsay Gottlieb (9-4, first season).

Non-conference record: 9-3.

Best win: Nov. 27 vs. Virginia (59-50).

Worst loss: Thursday at UCLA (60-55).

Who to watch: The Bears, who lead the conference in rebounding, have had great balance on offense. They are led by junior guard Layshia Clarendon (10.5 points) and freshman Reshanda Gray (10.3). Cal's four losses -- including three to top-25 teams -- have come by a total of 11 points.

Pac-12 opener: Lost at UCLA 60-55 on Thursday.

UCLA Bruins

Head coach: Cori Close (6-6, first season).

Non-conference record: 5-6.

Best win: Thursday vs. Cal (60-55).

Worst loss: Dec. 22 at St. Joseph's (64-60).

Who to watch: With leading scorer and rebounder Atonye Nyingifa out for the year after tearing her ACL three games ago, the Bruins will rely on several players, including senior guard Rebekah Gardner (14.6 points, 2.0 steals) and sophomore Thea Lemberger (11.7 points, 3.3 assists).

Pac-12 opener: Defeated Cal 60-55 on Thursday.

ASU Sun Devils

Head coach: Joseph Anders (9-2, first season).

Non-conference record: 9-2.

Best win: Dec. 28 vs. UTEP (47-45).

Worst loss: Dec. 16 at No. 21 DePaul (73-55).

Who to watch: Senior guard Kimberly Brandon (10.2 points, 7.1 rebounds) and junior guard Deja Mann (4.1 assists) lead the defensive-minded Sun Devils.

Pac-12 opener: Today vs. Arizona.

Utah Utes

Head coach: Anthony Levrets (25-21, second season).

Non-conference record: 7-4.

Best win: Dec. 6 vs. Idaho State (56-31).

Worst loss: Nov. 26 vs. South Alabama (61-53).

Who to watch: The Utes, who have the top scoring defense in the conference, are led by 6-foot-4 forward Michelle Plouffe (15.9 points, 9.0 rebounds) and 6-foot-3 Taryn Wicijowski (13.0 points, 7.6 rebounds). Guards Iwalani Rodrigues (10.9 points) and Janita Badon (9.9 points, 6.1 rebounds) are also having solid seasons. Badon lead the Pac-12 with 5.6 assists per game.

Pac-12 opener: Today vs. Colorado.

Oregon Ducks

Head coach: Paul Westhead (39-38, third season).

Non-conference record: 8-4.

Best win: Nov. 18 vs. Illinois (78-74).

Worst loss: Thursday vs. Washington State (75-47).

Who to watch: The Ducks don't play a lot of defense (allowing a conference-worst 77.7 points per game), yet their offense can rack up points. Senior wing Jasmin Holliday (16.4 points, 8.4 rebounds) and senior point guard Nia Jackson (9.7 points, 4.2 assists) are having good seasons.

Pac-12 opener: Lost to Washington State 75-47 on Thursday.

Arizona Wildcats

Head coach: Niya Butts (58-49, fourth season).

Non-conference record: 11-1.

Best win: Dec. 28 vs. UNLV (62-58).

Worst loss: Dec. 1 vs. BYU (82-73).

Who to watch: Junior guard Davellyn Whyte is second in the conference in scoring (18.9) and sophomore forward Erica Barnes (12.1 points, 8.8 rebounds) is enjoying a breakout season.

Pac-12 opener: Today at Arizona State.

Wash. St. Cougars

Head coach: June Daugherty (32-72, fifth season).

Non-conference record: 6-6.

Best win: Nov. 24 vs. Marquette (65-52).

Worst loss: Nov. 25 vs. Michigan (69-39).

Who to watch: The Cougars don't have a standout player, but senior Jazmine Perkins has posted double-doubles in her last two games. She leads the team in scoring (9.3) and rebounding (7.5).

Pac-12 opener: Defeated Oregon 75-47 on Thursday.

Washington Huskies

Head coach: Kevin McGuff (8-3, first season).

Non-conference record: 8-2.

Best win: Dec. 4 vs. Long Beach State (80-46).

Worst loss: Nov. 11 vs. UC-Davis (69-68).

Who to watch: Senior Regina Rogers, a 6-foot-3 center, is third in the conference in scoring (17.8) and ninth in rebounds (8.2). Jazmine Davis (11.4 points) is also a scoring threat.

Pac-12 opener: Lost to Oregon State 60-55 on Thursday.

Oregon St. Beavers

Head coach: Scott Rueck (19-23, second season).

Non-conference record: 9-2.

Best win: Dec. 10 at Pepperdine (63-52).

Worst loss: Dec. 2 vs. North Texas (60-53).

Who to watch: Senior Earlysia Marchbanks (13.8 points) and freshman Ali Gibson (12.3 points) lead a balanced scoring attack. Marchbanks is also a solid rebounder (7.0 per game) and Gibson is second in the conference in steals (2.8).

Pac-12 opener: Defeated Washington 60-55 on Thursday.

Colorado Buffaloes

Head coach: Linda Lappe (29-16, second season).

Non-conference record: 11-0.

Best win: Dec. 21 vs. Creighton (52-49).

Worst loss: None.

Who to watch: Junior guard Chucky Jeffery is the only player in the conference that ranks in the top 10 in scoring (fourth, 17.5), rebounding (seventh, 8.5) and assists (fourth, 4.6). Freshman Lexy Kresl (12.3 points) is a top 3-point threat.

Pac-12 opener: Today at Utah.

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