



Chuckie Jeffery (23) believes the Buffs can close the season out strong.
Photo Courtesy: Joel Broida



Brooks: Lappe, Buffs Like The Way Schedule Closes

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BOULDER - The schedule is what it is, but Linda Lappe wasn't too wild about debuting in the Pac-12 Conference by taking her Colorado women's basketball team on the road for five of its first seven league games.

But Lappe couldn't help taking a peek at the schedule's backend, which suddenly is bearing down on the Buffs. That first five-of-seven on the Pac-12 road has been replaced by the last five-of-seven at home. If the Buffs play this right, it could be a boon. They opened conference play 3-4 and now sit at 4-7 (15-7 overall), tied for sixth with Washington and Washington State.

Good things allegedly come to those who wait - and Lappe and her second CU team feel good about the homestretch that awaits them. To open the season's final month, the Buffs have three consecutive home games, beginning Thursday night against Arizona (7 p.m.). Arizona State visits on Saturday (7 p.m.), and following a bye a week from Thursday, Utah comes to the Coors Events Center on Saturday, February 18. The only road trip is set for Feb. 23-25 at Stanford and California, with Oregon and Oregon State visiting the Events Center on March 1-3 to close the regular season.

"It's always good to be home at the end of the season," Lappe said. "It usually happens (in scheduling) that you don't have a tough first part of the season and a tough last part. As long as you can keep your confidence during the first part of the season, you'd rather that the back half be a little bit easier because that's when a lot of things

are decided (about the postseason) and teams are starting to set themselves apart in the conference standings and position themselves for postseason play."

Of course, the favorable home schedule means nothing if the Buffs fail to address the shortcomings - they can start with frequently slipping into dead zones on offense - that have contributed to a current three-game losing streak. There's also this to consider before they get too giddy about closing out the season as homebodies: Their conference record in the Events Center is 1-3, in contrast to a 3-4 mark on the road.

But Lappe is buoyed by a resiliency she says her players have shown throughout the season and the fact that the Buffs now have gotten a first look at all their Pac-12 opponents.

"I think now we know styles a little better now," Lappe said. "You can only gain so much from watching film. Until you actually see that team on the floor, see those substitution patterns, see their attitude, their perseverance, what kind of offense they run . . . you can see the basic things on film, but you can't see demeanors, how players respond to their coach and any of those circumstances.

"Going into the second half of the season and knowing what we're going to see from every opponent is going to be a huge plus, considering we're the new kids in the conference (with Utah). We know Arizona (Thursday night's opponent) is not going to quit. It's going to be a tough physical and mental game. They're going to keep coming at us. Even knowing that helps us the second time around."

The Buffs defeated the Wildcats 56-54 last month in Tucson, earning the win on a short Chucky Jeffery jumper with 17.7 seconds to play. In the following game against Southern California, Jeffery hit a pair of free throws with 1.2 seconds to play, lifting CU to a 69-67 win.

But that was the Buffs' most recent 'W;' they've since lost a home game to UCLA (62-54, overtime) and road games at Oregon State (65-45) and Oregon (67-62). The common threads in the three losses have been frigid shooting - 31.0, 28.8 and 34.7 percent, respectively - and turnovers - 25, 22 and 13.

Lappe's team opened the season 12-0 and was close to unshakable in the latter stages of that run. The start of conference play brought an upgrade in the opposition and what appears to be gradual slippage in the confidence department - particularly shooting.

While Lappe concedes the Buffs' confidence has been "up and down," she adds that her players haven't lost their ability to bounce back. "We have a poor game against Oregon State (last Thursday), then we come back in Friday's practice and are ready to go," she said. "Our players have good attitudes. We're not feeling sorry for ourselves and we're getting prepared to play the next one. In most road swings, we've been better in the second game.

"You look at that and say we have some pretty resilient players, which is good. At times I've felt like our team has lost its confidence, but it hasn't been all the time. Our staff looked at last season and we kind of did the exact same thing during the season, then we started playing really well at the end of the year. It's one of those things where we have to make sure we're getting better every day. Our players need to get more confident in our offense and defense and go from there."

Last season, CU finished February and March with a 7-7 record - that's counting the Big 12 Tournament and the WNIT. The Buffs won three of their final four Big 12 regular-season games, including a 73-68 upset of No. 15 Oklahoma, then won three of four in the WNIT.

It offered an upbeat finish to Lappe's first season, and Jeffery believes the Buffs can close this season in that fashion. "I think we're going to have a pretty strong closing this year," she said. "But we can't give up any more games. Our backs are kind of getting against the wall a little bit. We have to come up off that wall and start getting some wins, knocking some teams down and moving up in the conference."

Jeffery, who leads CU in scoring (15.1, 12.8 conference), reached a milestone in the loss at Oregon by recording

her 1,000th career point. With 18 against the Ducks, she now has 1,010. But her first goal in Eugene was a win.

"It's a great milestone for anyone in their career, but I'd want the win over anything any day," she said. "So, yeah, it's bittersweet, but you've got to take it and roll with the punches."

That's what Lappe wants her junior point guard to do in the final seven regular-season games. She has spoken with Jeffery about "stopping herself" rather than being stopped by defenders.

"She has a tendency to do that, mostly on the offensive end," Lappe said. "In the next seven games or so, she has to mature knowing when she has to be the one that scores - or at least create for other people, be a facilitator at the point."

Jeffery is cast in a different point guard role in that CU counts on her for points as well as setting up the offense - a scoring facilitator, if that's possible.

"It's different for her . . . she's got a tough job," Lappe acknowledged. "To end the season, I'd like to see her gain some additional confidence - the confidence she had earlier in the season with her shot, the confidence she had in transition and getting to the rim. She's getting a lot of those same looks, but I think she's hesitant and she's stopping herself more than the other team is. That's the biggest things with her, having confidence in her skill set to play to her capabilities game in and game out. She's got to bring more consistent energy and confidence to our team in every game she plays."

Those marching orders don't surprise Jeffery. She's got a good feel for her game and her ability, and she's also aware of what the Buffs need from her.

"I definitely have to bring it every game and lead on the floor when things get tough," she said. "I have to be dynamic, play defense, rebound as best I can and most importantly, not take any possessions off. I think every possession is going to be important. Going back and watching film, you see one or two plays that could have won the game - and not even at the end necessarily. It's about playing every play like it was the last one."

"I think I came out aggressively in the USC game . . . when the Oregon (teams) kind of zoned us, I wasn't attacking as much. But I've definitely got to get back into that mentality. Me and coach have talked about it; I got to the free throw line ten times in the USC game. That's going to be very beneficial and essential for me to do. I'm going to be aggressive and trying to get to the cup as much as I can this week, next week and for however many games we've got left."

If she can do that, and if her teammates can take their games up a notch and capitalize on what should be an advantageous schedule, finishing strong and once again playing well into March are good possibilities.

"No matter if you're a freshman or a senior," said Lappe, "you want to be playing your best here shortly."

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