



After a five-game road swing, CU women's coach Linda Lappe is ready to bring her team home.
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Brooks: Home Has A Strong Appeal For Lappe, Buffs

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BOULDER - There still is no place like home, but five consecutive games away from the Coors Events Center didn't exactly turn Linda Lappe's Colorado women's basketball team into road kill.

Didn't come close . . . in fact, the Buffaloes return to the CEC this week alive, well and quite a bit more in touch with their competitive spirits. And with 15 Pac-12 games remaining, it's best to stay very much in touch with that intangible.

The Buffs haven't played on their home court since Dec. 17, having traveled to a San Antonio for a pair of games in a pre-Christmas tournament, then launching into Pac-12 Conference play with a trio of road games.

Returning to Boulder with another five wins would have been optimal, but coming back across the state line with four was the next best thing. And that's what the Buffs did, winning everywhere they unpacked their bags except in Seattle last Thursday night.

Washington dealt CU its first loss of the season (75-67), leaving Lappe and her staff to wonder how their players would respond less than 48 hours later when they played at Washington State. Wonder no more; CU won 57-56 at Wazzu, giving Lappe a solid indication of her team's resiliency and resolve.

"It was the first time we had to bounce back all year," Lappe said of UW ending CU's winning streak at 12. "We learned about our mental toughness and competitive spirit . . . and, in terms of travel, it came on the toughest trip we'll make.

"Friday was a longer day than anyone anticipated, in watching part of the previous game's film and getting ready for the next team. But we tried to keep the Washington film very concise and to the point - there were some things we had to fix or we would have been looking at the same outcome. But when it came down to it on Saturday, I thought our players showed the toughness and the will to win."

Sophomore guard Brittany Wilson said she and her teammates "knew we had to turn it around and win that second game. Of course, you want to go 2-0 on that road trip, but we had to see where our team was in terms of toughness. We had to see how it feels to be defeated, then come back and win in someone else's place.

"It says a lot about us. We're clicking in a really good way. We've been able to win on the road (before conference play). We all knew we had it, but just to see and be able to do it. I mean with 50 seconds left and being down one, then sticking through it (at WSU) . . . we're a tough team and we're not going to go away. It just shows this team is ready to bear down when we need to."

The Buffs will need to this week. Their two "homecoming" opponents are California on Thursday night (7 p.m.) and No. 4 Stanford on Saturday afternoon (4 p.m., ROOT Sports). Cal is 11-5 overall, 2-2 in the league, while The Cardinal is 13-1 and atop the Pac-12 at 4-0.

Don't even mention the possibility of Lappe's players gazing past Thursday night's opponent at Saturday's. "There's no use in that," she said. "We have to be focused on Cal. That's a good team with great athletes. They'll come in here and try to be very physical with us, and we have to be prepared for that. Right now, it's all about focusing on Cal."

If it's anywhere else, the Buffs are looking at trouble. First-year coach Lindsay Gottlieb, hired after former coach Joann Boyle bolted for Virginia last spring, inherited a youthful roster (no seniors) that includes seven former McDonalds High School All-Americans, four WBCA prep All-America selections and five players with National Team experience on their resumes.

Forward Reshanda Gray, a 6-3 freshman, and junior guard Layshia Clarendon average 10.6 and 10.4 points, respectively, for a team that is third in the Pac-12 in scoring (71.6) and first in rebounding (48.8). The Bears will be the best overall team that's paid a visit this season to the Events Center, where the Buffs are 22-6 under Lappe - including 7-0 in her second year.

"We haven't played in almost a month," Lappe said. "I'm excited to get back in our building and in front of our fans - and I know our players feel the same way."

"B-Wil", for one, agrees with her coach: "We haven't been (home) in a while, so the excitement of coming back and taking care of our home floor, it feels good to finally be back after a five-game road trip."

The last stop on CU's five-game road swing was a good one for freshman Jen Reese, who put together her first career double-double (a dozen points and a dozen rebounds) in Pullman, Wash. Lappe said the play of the 6-2 Reese, who had a mere six points combined in her first two Pac-12 games, mirrored the rest of the team - a commendable bounce-back after a sub-par Thursday performance at UW.

"Jen hit some tough shots in tough situations, and we really needed them," Lappe said. "She scored a little more and was really a presence on the offensive end and there's no reason she can't have that same mentality every time out.

"Sometimes when players come from high school to college, they're not sure they have to get mentally prepared for every game. That's something I think Jen is learning. We need her to step up. Chucky (Jeffery, junior guard) and Julie (Seabrook, senior forward) have learned that. We need that next round of players - and that includes

Jen - to step up."

The Buffs, picked to finish at or near the bottom of the Pac-12 in preseason polls, have flipped those predictions and at 13-1, 2-1 might be the conference's surprise team at this early stage. But if outsiders are scratching their heads, insiders like Lappe and Wilson aren't.

"We knew we had it, but I don't think they did," Wilson said. "We were able to go out there and prove it and tell everybody, 'We're here, whether you want to pay attention to it or not, we're here.' To be able to win at Utah and Washington State and be close at Washington at the end, it does say a lot about us.

"We knew we had to make a statement. Those preseason rankings came in and coach laughed about it. She said there were a million reasons why she could say we shouldn't be (projected low), but we're not going to talk it, we're just going to come out and play. Everybody else is talking, but look who's showing up. We just have to stay tough, play as a team and try to win this thing."

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