

Volleyball: CU Buffs ready to turn the corner

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With a 19-66 record over the past three years, it seemed natural to ask Colorado volleyball players if they were ready to turn the corner.

"Uh yeah," senior Michelle Miller said. "That's not even a question."

"We've been ready since we first got here," said Kerra Schroeder, another senior.

It's safe to say the Buffs are tired of losing. They've had five losing seasons in a row, which is remarkable considering that before this streak, from 1986 (CU's first season) to 2006, CU had just two losing seasons -- and those came in 1986 and 1987.

Yet, following a 6-24 mark last year, including 1-21 in their first trip through the Pac-12 Conference, the Buffs are convinced this season will produce dramatically different results. CU opens the season this afternoon against Texas Southern at the Sam Houston State Invitational in Huntsville, Texas.

"Everybody is in the right mindset," Miller said. "We're really competitive this year, and I think we're going to be a lot better."

"I think everyone is kind of amped just to get out there and prove to everyone that we can do this."

In some ways, the Buffs have little choice. Head coach Liz Kritza is entering her fourth season and she knows there is a sense of urgency in the athletic department to start producing wins. That 19-66 mark doesn't look good, and neither does 38-104 over the past five years.

Perhaps adding to the pressure is the fact that for several years Kritza and the Buffs have pointed to this season as being a turning point.

"I'm excited because it's been by design somewhat and it's been a long time coming," she said. "We've had to be very patient with making the changes I felt were necessary to create a really solid base to build a program on. This year, I've got a different sense and a different feel at this point in the season because we have so much room to grow right now."

There are three major reasons for CU's optimism.

1. They have great returning talent. Miller, Schroeder, Nikki Lindow, Kelsey English, Emily Alexis and others had several great moments last year and figure to be better this season.

"I think everyone that's in the program that's returning from last year has taken a step up," Kritza said. "We had a pretty good spring season and they did a great job this summer, as far as training on their own and working out. Everybody is excited."

2. CU's freshman class was ranked among the top 20 recruiting classes in the country. Alexis Austin, Nicole Edelman and Chelsey Keoho have given the Buffs a major boost in talent and they will be relied on early and often.

"I like the high expectations, because it's only going to make us better," Keoho said. "It's only going to make us improve and hopefully get up to that level that we need to be in the Pac-12."

3. Ana Pantovic. The Serbian native is already a redshirt sophomore, but health issues have prevented her from playing to this point. The 6-foot-5 hitter should be ready to go at some point this season.

"I think a lot of people have been waiting for the debut of Ana Pantovic," Kritza said.

The mix of veterans and freshmen has already produced positive results for CU.

"It's making for a very competitive environment in our practice gym and that's what the big difference is," Kritza said. "I can already see things that I haven't seen in this gym since I've been here."

Of course, now it's time for the Buffs to see results they haven't seen much of in the past few years. It's clear that losing will not be tolerated this season.

"We have a lot of girls that are in it to win it, and some girls that weren't in it aren't here anymore," Schroeder said. "That's the mindset everyone has right now."

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