



COLORADO BUFFALOES

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CU coach Linda Lappe hasn't spent this season studying the conference standings.

Photo Courtesy: Denis Concordel / www.widgic.com



Brooks: Strong Finish Possible For Lappe's Buffs

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BOULDER - The way the Pac-12 Conference women's basketball schedule unfolded this season prompted Colorado coach Linda Lappe to do something she's rarely done in the past: ignore the standings.

That doesn't mean Lappe can't tell you her team's conference record and its next opponent. It does mean that she doesn't have much of a clue about her opponent's opponents two weekends from now, how those games might factor into the Pac-12 standings and how the Buffs might benefit.

"Probably more so this year than any other year, we haven't really paid attention to conference standings because they're so skewed in who plays who and when," Lappe told me the other day in her office. "The standings are going to be skewed until the very last weekend."

What she meant by that can be gleaned from contrasting CU's first four weeks of conference play and its last four weeks. The Buffs were granted the opportunity to open at home against the Pac-12's top two teams - now No. 4 Stanford and No. 6 California - then catch both again before the calendar was flipped to February. Then they played their lone contest against No. 15 UCLA on Feb. 1.

BUFFALO EXTRAS



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Game Notes

That means from the first day of this month until the final Sunday (March 3) of regular-season play, the No. 21 Buffs are matched - theoretically, at least - against teams they will be favored to beat. If that happens and CU takes care of business on a schedule that features four of the six remaining games on the road, a No. 4 seed for the Pac-12 tournament (March 7-10, Seattle) is very possible.

Lappe, of course, is focused on this weekend's trips to Arizona (Friday, 7 p.m.) and Arizona State (Sunday, 2 p.m.). But glancing four games past this weekend - which she obviously hadn't done when we talked - offers a preview of what might be awaiting the Buffs.

CU (7-5) trails Washington (9-3), UCLA (10-2) and Stanford (11-1) and Cal (11-1) in the conference standings. As front-loaded at their schedule was with the Pac-12's power teams, the Buffs' only remaining opponent situated higher in the standings is the Huskies. They visit the Coors Events Center on Sunday, Feb. 24.

That game will be vital for CU, but equally important is how U-Dub finishes: Stanford and Cal come to Seattle for the final regular-season weekend. If the Buffs beat the Huskies in Boulder and the Huskies don't fare so well at home against the Cardinal and Bears, CU and U-Dub will swap places in the standings.

That scenario, of course, is predicated on the Buffs staying focused on the here-and-now instead of the what-might-be. Still, Lappe has to feel good about her team's road play (14-10 on its last 24 trips) and its chances of finishing strong.

"We're just trying to take care of business," she said. "We feel like we can't really control the conference standings, so we don't worry about them. We worry about winning games and playing well and getting better. That's where our focus has been throughout the year.

"Every game from here on out is important. We're at that point in the season where people are starting to hopefully play their best. We have to expect our opponents' best and hopefully play our best. We're on a mission to keep getting better ourselves; that's something we've worked on all year long. We're not trying to look games and games in advance. We're taking it one at a time."

The Buffs are on a three-game winning streak and, said Lappe, "probably playing our most complete basketball of the season. And we're starting to understand what it is we're trying to do in every game and we're doing a pretty good job of executing."

Mid-February marks the point in a season where freshmen can smack headlong into "the wall." But Lappe says her team's depth has prevented such a collision: "I feel like we're fresh. Some of our players didn't necessarily like when we were playing them 18 to 20 minutes at the beginning of the year. But the reason why you want to do that is so in February you feel really good.

"I think that's really helped us being able to play a lot of players significant minutes throughout the year . . . that's helped us stay fresh in February and it will help us go a long way. Everybody feels better this year than any other. The season takes a toll if you let it. We've done a great job of staying strong and continuing to have people step up from the bench and provide significant minutes. That's really helped us."

The Buffs' balance shows itself almost every night, but senior Chucky Jeffery continues as Lappe's steadiest player. She's had double-doubles in the past three games (27 in her career) and leads the team in scoring (15.0) and rebounding (9.0) in conference play.

Jeffery's nightly consistency almost is taken for granted, but in the "others stepping up" category Lappe cited junior center Rachel Hargis, sophomore guard Lexy Kresl and junior guard Brittany Wilson.

The 6-4 Hargis, said Lappe, "brings a level of toughness we need . . . for whatever reason, she's the catalyst for that, how tough we're going to play. I told her she has a big responsibility, but it also has to be a fun responsibility because it's something she can control every single game."

At this point during her first CU season, Kresl "was done," Lappe said. "Her body was shot. She's just now hitting her stride, which is great. She's playing her best basketball of the season."

Brittany Wilson's quickness and athleticism are givens and have benefitted the Buffs. Now, said Lappe, Wilson

is answering the coaching staff's challenge to be more consistent and share her energy with teammates, "not just keep it within herself. Sometimes it's about celebrating little things and she's learning to do that."

The Buffs began the season with their eyes on a specific prize - reaching the NCAA Tournament and possibly playing first- and second-round games in their home arena (March 23-25). With six regular-season games remaining and the Pac-12 tournament, Lappe predictably isn't allowing herself that much of a look forward.

"It's something that will take care of itself; it will all work itself out," she said. "We haven't talked about it as a team, but obviously everybody knows we're hosting. But we've focused really hard on each day getting better, each game learning something and adding something to our team, and looking at every game, every day as an opportunity.

"There's a conference championship up for grabs, a conference tournament championship. Cutting down nets is also a very neat thing to have the opportunity to do. There's a lot of basketball before that point."

It's good to have a goal, it's not good to forget what's required to reach it.

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SHOW MENU



Women's basketball: CU Buffs not worried about NCAA Tournament

By Brian Howell Buffzone.com Boulder Daily Camera

Posted:

Buffzone.com

It has been nine years since the Colorado women's basketball team last played in the NCAA Tournament.

With an 18-5 record and No. 21 national ranking this season, the Buffaloes look like they've got the recipe to end that drought.

Yet, the Buffaloes (7-5 in Pac-12 play) still have six games to play in the regular season, plus the Pac-12 Tournament in early March, so they aren't quite ready to talk about the NCAA carrot dangling in front of them.

"That's just not in our mind," junior guard Brittany Wilson said. "The only thing that's in our mind is our next weekend and who we have to beat."

Head coach Linda Lappe was a part of three NCAA Tournament teams as a player at CU in the early 2000s, but she insisted this year's team isn't concerned with the big dance, even though the first round will take place on CU's home floor in Boulder.

"At no point have we ever focused on the NCAA Tournament, so we're not going to start now," she said.

The Buffaloes have earned their 18-5 record by not getting ahead of themselves. They have been much better than in past years at focusing on the task at hand.

"Every year we've had the experience where we played really well for a certain stretch and then it's fallen apart," senior captain Meagan Malcolm-Peck said. "I think this year there's a real focus on every day controlling what you can control and focusing on that specifically. I think (senior point guard Chucky Jeffery) and I do a really good job of communicating that to people."

"Everyone really understands that day to day you have to work hard to get better and everything is going to kind of come naturally if we do what we can control and we focus on getting better every day."

Of course, the Buffs are human so they know very well that the prospect of playing in the NCAA Tournament is a very real one at this point. This is the best team CU has had in nearly a decade and there's a very good chance that the Buffs will be on the Coors Events Center court for the first round of the tournament on March 23.

"Oh yeah, absolutely," Malcolm-Peck said. "It was the same thing in the beginning of the season with the potential to get ranked, since that's never happened before (during her career). It was so exciting for that to happen."

"Obviously that's a big dream of Chucky and I to get to the NCAA Tournament. Since that's there, it's hard not to focus on it."

At the same time, Malcolm-Peck and the Buffs have been "mature about it," she said, and realized that the best way to get to the NCAA Tournament is to take care of business every day.

The next step in that regard comes Friday night when the Buffs visit Arizona (11-12, 3-9). The Buffs thumped the Wildcats on Jan. 20 in Boulder, 79-36, but know they have to be prepared for a battle this time.

"We're going to have to be ready to play our best," Lappe said. "We don't take road games for granted. We know there's always adversity and challenges that we have to be ready for.

"We just have to stay focused, and we have to understand what it took to (beat Arizona) the first time. If we understand that and we're ready to put forth the work that it took the first time, then I feel good. We can't take games for granted at this point in the year."

CU has put a major emphasis on achieving success in February. That has been an unkind month to the Buffs in recent years. They went 1-6 in February last year and 6-22 over the last four years. They haven't had a winning record in February since going 5-2 in 2003.

So far this month, the Buffs are 3-1.

"It's the middle of February and we all know we've got to get these games in February," Wilson said. "That's been our weak point and this year we're looking to turn it around and get those important wins in February."

Malcolm-Peck on the mend

Malcolm-Peck has missed the last three games and four of the past six with an injury to her shoulder. She likely won't play this weekend against Arizona and Arizona State, either.

"It's getting better; just working through it," she said.

Malcolm-Peck is not practicing at full strength yet, but said "maybe next week."

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CU women's hoops preview

FRIDAY: The No. 21 Colorado Buffaloes (18-5, 7-5 Pac-12) visit the Arizona Wildcats (11-12, 3-9) in a 7 p.m. game at the McKale Center in Tucson.

BROADCAST: Radio -- KKZN (760 AM), with Mike Rice on play-by-play. Online -- Pac-12.com

STORYLINES: CU has won three in a row, sweeping Oregon and Oregon State last weekend.