

Frei: CU Buffs shining this season in women's basketball too

By Terry Frei The Denver Post The Denver Post

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BOULDER — The upswing in men's college basketball fortunes within the state has captured the attention of Coloradans, and generated party atmospheres among the students in the stands in Boulder and Fort Collins.

Another hoops renaissance in the state has been lesser noticed.

Under third-year coach Linda Lappe, the University of Colorado women's team is 20-5 and ranked 20th in the country heading into its Pac-12 Conference home games Friday against Washington State and Sunday against Washington.

This is beginning to have the aura of the Buffs' glory years under Ceal Barry, who recruited and then coached Lappe from 1998-2003, and now is CU's associate athletic director. In Barry's 22 seasons, the Buffs earned 12 NCAA Tournament berths and three times reached the Elite Eight.

Because CU is playing host to first- and second-round games March 23 and 25, Lappe's Buffs automatically will have one and possibly two appearances at home if they make the NCAA Tournament. The use of "if" is only a formality. Realistically, the Buffs are in. Most important, it won't be host-team charity. They've earned it. With four league games and the Pac-12 Tournament remaining, four of the Buffs' five losses have come to national and Pac-12 powerhouses Stanford and California.

"You look at Colorado women's basketball, and we probably have the most tradition of any team," Lappe said after practice Wednesday. "That's what our team is challenged to do. We're challenged to bring that back. We haven't done that yet. But we're getting there. The respect for our program goes back a lot of years, and it starts with Ceal Barry."

Lappe, 32, smiled and added of the state's college basketball renaissance: "So, heck yes, we feel we're a huge part of that, no matter if anybody else thinks we are or not."

Absolutely, they're part of it.

"At CSU, our boys, and us, I think basketball in this state is doing a great job of bringing recognition back to Colorado," CU senior point guard Chucky Jeffery said. "I think it's been great for both of our programs. Our boys have had big wins, and so have we. I think we're bringing people back, making people realize they should come watch us again."

The Lady Buffs aren't filling the Coors Events Center, but the crowds again are respectable.

In fact, their home average of 3,107 is second in the Pac-12 — behind only Stanford — and they drew 6,688 for the most recent Coors Events Center appearance, a victory over Oregon on Feb. 10.

Jeffery, from Colorado Springs, started in 2009-10 as a much-touted recruit and freshman in the final year of Kathy McConnell-Miller's five-season tenure as Barry's successor.

After taking over for the fired McConnell-Miller, Lappe said one of her goals was to change the culture of the

program. Jeffery bought in early.

"When you have a coaching change, you have to be ready to adjust," Jeffery said. "At that point, all of us were freshmen all over again and everybody had to prove what kind of players they were.

"I think she noticed I could take on the point guard role and she believed in me."

Lappe said she always will be grateful to Jeffery for her role in the transition.

"She is a really talented player, and it could be argued that she's our best player," Lappe said. "You want your best player to be the hardest worker, and you want her to be totally on board with what you're doing as a coach. And you also need that from your point guard. She happens to do and be all of those things."

Now, as a senior, Jeffery is leading the Buffs in scoring at 13.4 points, just ahead of freshman Arielle Roberson (12.0). Surprisingly, the 5-foot-10 guard also leads the Buffs in rebounding, in part because she charges to the boards as her bigger teammates concentrate on boxing out at the defensive end.

Now about the name ...

Jeffery has told the story many times, but she cheerfully went through it again Wednesday. Her official first name is Janeesa, but her parents had planned to name a boy after her great-grandfather Charles. "So they made Chucky my nickname and it's grown with me, stuck with me this whole way," she said.

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