

Women's basketball: CU Buffs have eyes on No. 4 spot in Pac-12

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Although the Colorado women's basketball team has another weekend ahead before completing the regular season, Sunday's home finale against Washington is as big of a game as the Buffaloes have played in a long time.

"It's very important," sophomore Jen Reese said.

When the No. 20 Buffs (21-5, 10-5 Pac-12) and Washington Huskies (19-7, 11-4) tip off on Sunday afternoon at Coors Events Center, there will be plenty at stake.

CU, at this point, has control over its path to a top-four finish in the Pac-12. Win their last three games -- including Sunday against the Huskies -- and the Buffs will clinch the No. 4 seed and a first-round bye for the conference tournament.

Washington has a much tougher schedule the rest of the way, with their final three games against CU, No. 4 Stanford and No. 6 California. Should Washington win Sunday, however, the Huskies would clinch a top-four spot. At that point, CU's hopes for a top-four finish would all but vanish. The Buffs would need No. 17 UCLA to go 0-3 down the stretch, which isn't likely.

"It would be very important," CU head coach Linda Lappe said of getting a first-round bye for the conference tournament in two weeks. "Having that first-round bye is huge. It's something that we thought we could do at the beginning of the year."

CU has not had a first-round bye for a conference tournament since taking the No. 3 seed into the 2004 Big 12 Tournament. The Buffs have been a higher seed -- which means wearing home jerseys -- just once since then, when they were the No. 8 seed in 2007.

With their best team since 2004, the Buffs know they've got a great opportunity in front of them. That makes Sunday a huge game.

"At this point, everything is a really big game," freshman Arielle Roberson said. "Knowing that they are just coming off of a loss (on Friday at Utah), they're going to try to bring it at us that much harder. We have to be prepared for that, and I think we will be. It is really important for us to be focused and come out strong and just stay strong throughout the game."

Washington hasn't played as difficult of a schedule as CU has, but the Huskies are still a dangerous squad. The Huskies have the second-highest scoring offense in Pac-12 play (69.5 points per game). Their 35-percent shooting from 3-point range leads the Pac-12.

"Washington has a lot of respect from people in the league and from a national level they've been getting (top-25) votes," Lappe said.

Washington's Jazmine Davis is the Pac-12's second-leading scorer (19.6 points per game), while Talia Walton (14.0) and Kristi Kingma (14.0) also rank in the top 10. They are the only team in the Pac-12 with three

players in the top 10.

That's where the CU defense becomes especially important. The Buffs have the Pac-12's No. 1 defense, allowing just 52.3 points per game in conference play. CU has held 11 opponents below 50 points.

"You can't let 3-point shooters become comfortable and they can't think they can score," Lappe said of the key to beating Washington. "You do that in a number of different ways. I feel like we've done a pretty good job all year of making teams uncomfortable offensively and it's going to be important we do the same (against Washington)."

Notable

Sunday's game will be the final regular season home game for three CU seniors: point guard Chucky Jeffery, and forwards Brenna and Meagan Malcolm-Peck. CU will honor those three players on Sunday. ... On Sunday, CU will celebrate National Girls and Women in Sports Day. There will be a free fitness and skills clinic for kids ages 13 and under from noon-1 p.m. at the Coors Events Center. Anyone who participates in the clinic, and adults who brings kids to the clinic, get free admission to the Buffs' game against Washington, which starts at 2 p.m.

CU women's hoops preview

SUNDAY: The No. 20 Colorado Buffaloes (21-5, 10-5 Pac-12) host the Washington Huskies (19-7, 11-4) in a 2 p.m. game at Coors Events Center in Boulder.

BROADCAST: Radio -- KKZN (760 AM), with Mike Rice on play-by-play and Carol Callan providing color commentary. Online -- Pac-12.com

STORYLINES: CU has won six in a row, its longest conference win streak since 2004. ... With a win, Washington would clinch a top-four finish in the Pac-12 and a first-round bye for the conference tournament. ... If the Buffs lose, they would need a UCLA loss against Southern Cal on Sunday to stay alive for a top-four spot. ... With a win, the Buffs would jump ahead of Washington in the standings and be in line for a top-four finish. ... Colorado is 20-0 against unranked opponents this season. ... Washington is 0-2 against ranked teams, with both losses coming against UCLA. ... During conference play, Washington has had the No. 2 scoring offense in the Pac-12 (69.4 points per game), while Colorado has the No. 1 scoring defense (allowing 52.3 per game). ... Washington's Kristi Kingma leads the Pac-12 in free throw percentage (.857) and 3-pointers made (3.4 per game). She was 11-for-17 from 3-point range against Oregon on Feb. 15. ... CU's Arielle Roberson recorded her first double-double (17 points, 13 rebounds) on Friday against Washington State.

KEY STAT: Washington can be deadly from beyond the arc. In conference play, the Huskies have attempted 25.9 3s per game, making 9.1. Their .350 shooting percentage from 3-point range leads the Pac-12.

COACHES: Linda Lappe is 60-35 in her third season at CU and 110-71 overall. Kevin McGuff is 37-22 in his second season at Washington and 251-95 in his career.

PROBABLE STARTERS: Colorado -- G Chucky Jeffery, 5-10, Sr. (13.3 ppg, 8.3 rpg, 4.1 apg, 2.4 spg); G Brittany Wilson, 5-7, Jr. (8.4 ppg, 2.5 rpg, 2.3 apg); G Jasmine Sborov, 6-0, So. (3.0 ppg, 3.2 rpg, 1.4 apg); F Arielle Roberson, 6-1, Fr. (12.2 ppg, 5.8 rpg); C Rachel Hargis, 6-4, Jr. (4.7 ppg, 3.3 rpg, 1.1 bpg).

Washington -- G Mercedes Wetmore, 5-8, Jr. (7.3 ppg, 3.2 rpg, 4.0 apg); G Jazmine Davis, 5-7, So. (19.6 ppg, 3.0 rpg, 3.3 apg); G Kristi Kingma, 5-11, Sr. (13.9 ppg, 4.8 rpg); F Aminah Williams, 6-0, So. (9.1 ppg, 11.1 rpg); F Talia Walton, 6-2, Fr. (14.0 ppg, 7.0 rpg, 1.8 bpg).

SERIES: CU leads 6-3, including 2-1 in Boulder. Washington won last year's matchup, 75-67, in Seattle.

UP NEXT: CU will visit Oregon on Friday at 8 p.m.