

## Men's basketball: CU Buffs hold players only meeting to right ship

By Kyle Ringo Buffzone.com Boulder Daily Camera

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Something is missing from this Colorado basketball team. Players and coaches are trying to figure out what it is.

Coach Tad Boyle certainly has some ideas and he has been trying to work on them with players individually and as a team in practice.

But the players have recognized it, too, and it led to a players only 30-minute meeting Sunday.

Senior Sabatino Chen and junior Andre Roberson called the meeting a day after the Buffaloes fell to 1-3 in the Pac-12 Conference with a home loss to UCLA. Roberson described the meeting Monday as relaxed with no finger-pointing and everyone having an opportunity to speak. Roberson said he and Chen tried to encourage teammates to get back to what made last season's team so special.

One part of last year's team that this season's team can't replicate is former point guard Nate Tomlinson. Both Roberson and Boyle said after Monday's practice that the leadership quality Tomlinson brought to the program is missed.

"Nate was a special guy," Roberson said. "Every person is different. He carried special characteristics that helped this team out a lot. I feel like we don't have a guy like that this year. We've got to go about a different type of leadership."

Boyle said he knew at the outset this season that the program would miss Tomlinson. He hoped someone would eventually be able to fill his shoes and he continues to believe that can happen. He mentioned Roberson and Chen and other possibilities.

"Nate didn't care about scoring, he didn't care about shooting," Boyle said. "All Nate wanted to do was win. The thing about Nate is he had enough nastiness to him and competitiveness to him that he held his teammates accountable to what we wanted to get done. We miss Nate a lot."

Boyle said one of the reasons there isn't a player on this season's team who can lead as effectively as Tomlinson is no one this season has performed consistently enough that teammates will listen to them. Roberson and Chen are close, but both are generally quiet by nature.

The Buffs hit the road this week looking to get back on track at Washington and Washington State. CU is 1-4 in true road games this season but 4-4 in games played away from home. They went 3-0 in the Charleston Classic in November.

Roberson said one of the Buffs' problems is a tendency to allow the way the game is being officiated to affect the way they play.

"It's called mental toughness and that's one thing we're trying to get right," Roberson said. "The Navy Seals did help us a little bit at the beginning of the season, but I feel like we're kind of losing it a little bit and we need to try to get it refreshed back in our memories."

Boyle is constantly emphasizing mental toughness in practice and he said right now it's the area his team is lacking. Colorado's coach said the Buffs are not playing at the level they are capable of consistently on the defensive end and they are being out-rebounded too often. He said those two areas of the game are the two phases his program emphasizes most.

"With all that being said, it's a fine, fine line as to why we are where we are," Boyle said. "It's not like our offense is broken or our defense is not good enough. We're not doing the little things consistently enough to win close games or to put ourselves in position where we're up six or eight points coming down the stretch."

Boyle reacts to O'Neill firing

USC fired coach Kevin O'Neill on Monday. Boyle and the Buffs beat O'Neill last week at the Coors Events Center. It proved to be one of the final two games O'Neill spent leading the Trojans. He was in his fourth season.

"I'm obviously shocked and saddened and disappointed," Boyle said. "As a coach, you always hate to see other coaches lose their jobs, especially midway through the season, but there is probably more to it than I know. I respect Kevin O'Neill. I like him, I consider him a friend. So I was a little surprised by that."

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## Ringo: Boyle's young CU Buffs learning on the fly

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Tad Boyle warned Colorado basketball fans, but they didn't listen.

The Buffaloes' third-year coach tried to temper expectations for his team he believed were way out of whack in the fall when the season started. With six freshmen on the roster and needing to fill the roles of departed seniors, he knew his team would have a lot to learn before it could come close to meeting those expectations.

Then the Buffs shot out of the blocks with a stellar start to the season including winning the tournament championship at the Charleston Classic and rising to No. 19 in one national poll. It was understandable for CU faithful to think their coach might be sandbagging.

But after watching the Buffs through the first four games of Pac-12 Conference play, it's clear Boyle was spot on once again.

The Buffs are still learning to play defense for 40 minutes. They're still learning to rebound for 40 minutes and sometimes too reliant on old reliable Andre Roberson to get the rebound. They're still learning that the offense needs to be run with the same urgency and purpose in the 32nd minute or the 39th minute of the game that it does in the first. And they're still learning to play on the road.

Until these Buffs finally learn those lessons, they are destined to be a middle-of-the-Pac-12 team at best.

I asked Boyle after Saturday's home loss to UCLA what it's going to take for his players to learn from these tough times in early January and become a better team because of it in February and March?

"Our players have to take ownership in what we're talking about and what we're stressing in practice and what we're talking about with our game plans," Boyle said. "If they don't take ownership if they just role their eyes or feel like, 'Oh, it's OK. I can get away with this.' They're fooling themselves because the reality is we're 1-3. And the reality is our coaching staff knows what we're talking about."

These players deserve credit for a never-say-die attitude, They fell behind by double digits at two points in the second half against the Bruins and fought back to give themselves a chance at another game-winning shot at the buzzer. Askia Booker's attempt from the corner on the baseline hit off the back of the iron.

The Buffs have proven they can play with any team in the nation. They beat Baylor. They should have beaten Arizona. And they played UCLA to the final second and the last shot.

Heart and desire are not the problem here. Execution is.

Boyle said he believes the Buffs lost Saturday's game during several defensive and rebounding lulls in the first half and again in the second. Take away those lulls and CU might have won easily, at the very least it probably would have been the team trying to withstand a run at the end.

Boyle said he might have to consider giving bench players more minutes so that starters such as Roberson, Booker and Spencer Dinwiddie are stay fresh throughout the game and play at a higher level throughout the

game instead of being a part of those lulls.

The question is does Boyle have the bench to turn to?

He made the decision back in November to redshirt players like Wesley Gordon and Chris Jenkins. You know there have been moments this season -- and Saturday was probably one of them -- when Boyle has second-guessed that decision.

The players who are coming off the bench have been inconsistent at best this season with the exception of Xavier Johnson. None of them is scoring more than three points a game.

Boyle might think he has to get those guys more time in order to give his stars more rest, but it seems doubtful that strategy will work based on the results so far.

My guess is Boyle wanted his players to hear him say he's willing to limit their playing time. He's a savvy guy. He understands nothing motivates players like playing time and having playing time taken away.

The Buffs are 11-5 overall and 1-3 in the conference with a long way to go before the bags get packed for the Pac-12 tournament in Las Vegas in March. There is no reason to panic. Remember last season's team seemed to fall apart in the final two weeks of the regular season only to refocus and win the conference tournament. These Buffs can refocus, too.

This can still be another special season. Boyle says so and he hasn't been wrong very often since becoming Colorado's coach.