

Boyle beefed up non-conference schedule after snub two years ago

By Ryan Thorburn *Buffzone.com Boulder Daily Camera*

Posted:

DailyCamera.com

LAS VEGAS -- The selection committee will emerge from its annual conclave on Sunday to announce a new NCAA Tournament field.

Buffs fans are hoping smoke won't be coming out of Tad Boyle's ears this time.

The Colorado head coach and his players will watch together as the bracket is unveiled on live television (4 p.m., CBS).

Two years ago, the Buffs were not invited to the Big Dance after finishing fifth in the Big 12, finishing 3-0 against Kansas State and beating No. 5 Texas and No. 9 Missouri at home.

"We hope it's the NCAA Tournament," Boyle said after CU's loss to Kansas in the semifinals of the conference tournament in Kansas City, Mo. "And if it's not, we'll be extremely disappointed."

Colorado never flashed on the screen.

Alec Burks, Cory Higgins and Levi Knutson had to settle for a run to the NIT semifinals as a weak non-conference schedule came back to haunt the program.

During Boyle's first season in Boulder, CU feasted on a large batch of cupcakes that included Idaho State, Alcorn State, Texas-Pan American, The Citadel, Longwood, Maryland Eastern Shore, Cal State Bakersfield and Western New Mexico.

The Buffs also suffered "bad" losses at San Francisco and Harvard.

Last season the non-conference schedule was upgraded, but CU went 1-2 at the Puerto Rico Tip-off and lost to Front Range foes Colorado State and Wyoming. Then the Buffs settled for the sixth seed at the Pac-12 Tournament after losing three of their final four regular-season games.

Boyle's team won four games in four nights at the Staples Center in Los Angeles to earn the Pac-12's automatic bid.

"We dedicated this game beforehand to Cory Higgins, Levi Knutson, Marcus Relphorde, Trent Beckley, Javon Coney, and Alec Burks," Boyle said after CU's 53-51 victory over Arizona in the conference title game. "Those six guys sat in my home last year on Selection Sunday for their last opportunity to go to the NCAA Tournament, and they were snubbed. That inspired us."

The 2012-13 Buffs aren't guaranteed one of the 37 at-large berths, but they believe the overall body of work will be enough to avoid another heartbreaking Sunday at Boyle's house.

CU won the Charleston Classic in November and finished 4-4 against teams ranked in the RPI top 50, including a win over Colorado State (22) and a sweep of Oregon (48).

The Buffs lost at Big 12 champion Kansas (9) and at home to Pac-12 champion UCLA (24).

Thursday's 79-69 loss to No. 18 Arizona in the Pac-12 Tournament quarterfinals dropped CU's record to 1-2 against the Wildcats.

But the selection committee will factor in the controversial nature of the defeat on Jan. 3 in Tucson. The visitors from Boulder appeared to have beaten the nation's No. 3 team until Sabatino Chen's game-winning 3-pointer was waved off.

"We've got some quality wins under our belt and our non-conference was definitely tougher," Andre Roberson said. "We'll just have to see what the selection committee says."

ESPN "Bracketologist" Joe Lunardi had CU (21-11) projected safely into the field on Saturday evening as a No. 10 seed.

Last March the Buffs, a No. 11 seed, upset UNLV before falling to Baylor to finish with a school record 24 wins for the second consecutive season.

"I think we're good enough for the dance," freshman Josh Scott said. "But I'm new to this process, so I don't know. I'm going to look forward to Selection Sunday, and if we're in the dance then that would be really cool as a freshman."

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