

Men's basketball: CU Buffs' Spencer Dinwiddie has another tough defensive assignment

By Ryan Thorburn Buffzone.com Boulder Daily Camera

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Spencer Dinwiddie won't give an inch.

In fact, the sophomore point guard still gets two.

After Colorado's first practice for Friday's NCAA Tournament game against Illinois in the East Region at Austin, Texas, Dinwiddie was asked about facing tall and talented Illini guard Brandon Paul.

"They say he's 6-4, so he's still smaller than me. I still have the advantage in that aspect," Dinwiddie, 6-6, noted. "If he's 6-4, I doubt he's as long as me. So I'll still be a bigger opponent."

Paul is averaging 16.6 points, 4.4 rebounds, 2.8 assists and 1.2 steals. The senior shot only 40.5 percent from the field (33.2 percent behind the arc) while leading the Illini (22-12 overall, 8-10 Big Ten) in scoring and back into the Big Dance.

During Illinois' impressive 85-74 victory at Gonzaga, Paul finished with 35 points while conducting a personal shooting clinic (10-for-16 from the field, 10-for-11 from the free throw line).

Last week at the Big Ten Tournament, Paul hit the game-winning shot in a 51-49 win over Minnesota and was 2-for-13 shooting during an 80-64 loss to Indiana.

"(Paul) is a big guard who can put it on the floor, shoot the three, comes off ball screens, a very explosive type player," CU head coach Tad Boyle said. "He reminds me of Spencer probably more than anybody we've played against."

Illinois was third in the country in 3-point attempts (815) and tied for 242nd in 3-point field goal percentage (.325). CU was fifth in the Pac-12 in defending the arc (.347).

"We always talk defensively about not giving up layups and that's going to be critically important," Boyle said. "In addition to that we have to guard them at the three-point line because they're very capable. And if they get hot they remind me a lot of UNLV."

The Buffs held the Rebels to 25 percent (9-for-36) on 3-pointers during their 68-64 victory in last year's NCAA Tournament.

Pac-12 disrespect?

Boyle was pleased that five Pac-12 teams made the NCAA Tournament field. Some of the other coaches from the conference have complained about regular-season champion UCLA being a No. 6 seed and conference tournament champion Oregon assigned a No. 12 seed.

"I think in the seedings we've still got room for growth and improvement," Boyle said. "It's one step at a time. Having five teams in is big."

No. 10 CU and No. 7 Illinois were both rewarded for notable non-conference work.

The Buffs won the Charleston Classic, soundly defeated Colorado State and lost at Kansas. In addition to the win over current No. 1 Gonzaga, the Illini won the Maui Invitational.

"I think that's what got us in is our non-conference schedule," Boyle said. "We were 10-8 in our league, which is not overly impressive, but our strength of schedule and going on the road meant something. Oregon had a lot of home games. Maybe that worked against them. It's the only thing I can surmise, I don't know."

Anyone but Arizona

CU is coming off a 79-69 loss to Arizona at the Pac-12 Tournament in Las Vegas. It was the third intense meeting between two teams that can basically call out the other's plays at this point.

Facing their first Big Ten opponent of the season, or any opponent on a neutral court for that matter, is something the Buffs are excited about.

"It's kind of annoying playing teams three times in a year because they know exactly what you're going to do, you know exactly what they're going to do," Sabatino Chen said. "It comes down to making plays or loose balls or calls."

Or video replays.

Harris-Tunks update

Boyle said Ben Mills, who performed well during spot duty against the Wildcats, might have to be ready for the spotlight of the NCAA Tournament.

Shane Harris-Tunks, who suffered a concussion against Arizona, still has some medical "hurdles" to jump through with the doctors before Friday's game.

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CU facing Illinois team with eye on the (NCAA) prize

By Tom Kensler The Denver Post The Denver Post

Posted:

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Not only did Illinois players continue to wear motivational bracelets that were handed out during preseason workouts, they might have had a little talk with their orange wrist bands while going 2-7 to begin the Big Ten Conference schedule.

Whatever works.

Illinois (22-12, 8-10 Big Ten) dug itself out of a huge hole to land a spot in the NCAA Tournament's East Regional as a No. 7 seed and play No. 10 Colorado (21-11, 10-8 Pac-12) in Austin, Texas, on Friday.

"Teams go through rough stretches," said Brandon Paul, Illinois' standout senior guard. "We didn't doubt each other. The good thing was, we were practicing well. We just weren't finishing games."

For a first-year coach to distribute motivational bracelets might have been viewed by some veteran teams as a bit presumptuous, even cheesy. But the Illini, regarded in recent years as chronic underachievers under Bruce Weber, bought into what John Groce was preaching.

Each bracelet is inscribed on one side with "TNT" as an abbreviation for "toughness and togetherness."

The other side has "3/19/13" — the date of the first NCAA Tournament games.

"Making the tournament was our goal," Paul said during Selection Sunday interviews on the Illinois campus. "But we also wanted to get better every day. I don't think Coach Groce has ever taken his bracelet off."

Groce, who guided Ohio University to the Sweet 16 last year, went back to basics with the Illini after their 2-7 spiral, preaching the fundamentals of passing, dribbling and shooting. Illinois still does a lot more shooting than making, ranking 260th among 345 Division I teams in field-goal percentage (.416). But at least the Illini began taking care of the ball better and moving it with more efficiency.

"I think it's a good matchup," CU coach Tad Boyle said Monday after his team's practice in Boulder. "It's two teams that have shown some flashes of brilliance this year, and also may have some inconsistencies."

Like Boyle did with Colorado, Groce also turned up the tempo. Under Weber, who landed on his feet at NCAA Tournament-bound Kansas State, the Illini had become progressively more deliberate. A longtime assistant to Thad Matta (at Butler, Xavier and Ohio State), Groce believes in giving his players freedom to make plays. There are far more green lights than caution signs in Illinois' offense, and Groce doesn't lose his cool when somebody forces a bad shot.

Illinois attempted the third-most 3-pointers of any team in the nation — despite making 32.5 percent, which ranks 227th nationally.

But when the guard-oriented Illini are hot, they can beat the best. Gonzaga, the No. 1 seed in the West Regional, lost one home game all season — to Illinois, 85-74 on Dec. 8. Illinois also knocked off then-No. 1 Indiana, Butler and Ohio State. Groce doesn't even know which Illini team will show up.

"We have a team that has the capability of being explosive offensively with our shot-making," Groce said. "The biggest thing is, we have to put two halves together. (In the NCAA Tournament) we're not going to get a plethora of easy baskets. We have to be adaptable, be able to make adjustments and we have to be tough."

Groce said toughness is a trait that he noticed about the Buffaloes after watching parts of a few CU games on TV this season.

"They're known for rebounding," Groce said. "They're great at getting to the foul line, so we have to play hard without fouling."

"It will be a great challenge. When I think of their teams, I think of discipline. I think of rebounding. I think of them defending."

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Buffaloes vs. Illini

A statistical breakdown of Colorado and Illinois heading into their NCAA Tournament second-round game Friday in Austin, Texas:

Category CU Illinois

Points/game 68.2 69.1

Points allow/game 63.8 65.3

Field-goal pct. .436 .416

Opponent FG pct. .404 .427

3-point FG pct. .347 .325

Opp. 3-pt FG pct. .323 .343

Free-throw pct. .684 .725

Rebounds/game 37.2 33.5

Rebound margin +3.4 -1.3

Assist/game 10.0 10.2

Turnovers/game 13.3 11.5

Opp. TO/game 12.9 14.4

Steals/game 7.0 6.9

Blocks/game 3.1 4.0

Illini look

A look at the Illinois starters and what they bring to the floor:

Tyler Griffey, F, 6-9, Sr., Highly intelligent, makes good decisions, doesn't take bad shots.

Nnanna Ekwu, C, 6-11, So High-energy player who plays hard, loves competition and won't get out-worked.

Tracy Abrams, G, 6-1, So., Has that South Chicago moxie and plays with an edge. High-energy, glue player.

D.J. Richardson, G, 6-3, Sr., Spot-up shooter who ranks among the school's all-time best in 3-pointers.

Brandon Paul, G, 6-4, Sr., Sometimes wild with ball but can get as hot as anybody in the country.