

Kiszla: For CU Buffs to join elite, Boyle it down to this

By Mark Kiszla *The Denver Post The Denver Post*

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LOS ANGELES — The Colorado Buffaloes can win a national championship in basketball.

This is not March Madness. It's the truth.

While watching Ohio State beat Arizona 73-70 on Thursday on a 3-point jump shot by LaQuinton Ross with two seconds remaining on the clock, it struck me: The Buffs are very close to being the equal of almost any elite team the country.

Longtime friends Thad Matta of Ohio State and Sean Miller of Arizona stand firmly in the upper echelon of the college basketball coaches.

But Tad Boyle is a stronger coach than either Miller or Matta.

So long as Boyle remains happily employed at CU, the Buffs have a chance to win against Kansas, Indiana or any traditional power on the national stage.

"We've shown the world we can turn around the basketball program at Colorado," sophomore guard Askia Booker told me this month, after the Buffs were eliminated from the NCAA Tournament.

But isn't getting an invitation to the Big Dance about as good as anybody can expect from CU hoops?

"No," Booker said.

You mean to tell me life on a basketball court can get sweeter for the Buffs?

"Without a doubt," Booker said. "CU basketball can be better. A whole lot better."

What was eye-opening during the matchup between Ohio State and Arizona: In a Sweet 16 game, it was hard, if not impossible, to say with any certainty that either team has a bona fide NBA player.

With the Arizona defense obsessed on Ohio State guard Aaron Craft during the final seconds, Ross was left wide on the left wing, and nailed the game-winning shot. But that might have qualified as no better than his second-most exciting moment of the evening.

What was No. 1? Dressing in a room usually reserved for the Los Angeles Lakers, and getting to use Kobe Bryant's locker. "I called dibs on that early," Ross said. "That's one of my favorite players growing up and somebody I model my game after."

But there was nobody with anywhere near Bryant's talent on the floor during this game. Buckeyes junior Deshaun Thomas owns a sweet jumper and the athleticism of Arizona senior Solomon Hill would make him competitive in an NBA training camp, but neither player is more skilled than Colorado junior Andre Roberson.

CU is a basketball school.

The Rose Bowl is so far out of reach, it's folly to even dream about the Buffs competing for a top-10 ranking in football.

The smart move for CU athletic director Mike Bohn would be to go back to work on increasing Boyle's base salary of \$800,000. Through an incentive plan that could easily provide Boyle with a \$1 million bonus next season and a \$750,000 buyout clause that runs through April 2014, the school administration has increased its commitment to basketball. But it is time for the Buffs to take it to another level.

Please remember: Colorado beat Arizona twice this season, although only one victory counted in the standings, thanks to an atrocious call by the refs.

Miller said his goal for the Cats is to knock down the door to the Final Four next season. So there's the Pac-12 Conference rival for the Buffs to beat.

"For Coach Boyle and me, one of our goals has been to get the CU program nationally recognized," Roberson said the afternoon his team was beaten by Illinois.

Roberson will consider turning pro this spring. He is projected to be a second-round pick in the draft, which would provide him little guarantee of making an NBA team.

"We're going to have a great shot to be very good next year," Roberson told me. "We're going to have a great team."

We?

When looking for clues as to Roberson's decision to stay at Colorado or enter the NBA draft, the fact that the 6-foot-7 junior forward still considers himself a member of the Buffs doesn't mean fans can stop wishing and hoping for one more year.

If Roberson wears a CU uniform next season, look out.

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