

Kritza's squad earns two more wins to wrap up nonconference play

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When the Colorado volleyball team lost senior team leader Kerra Schroeder to a season-ending knee injury on Aug. 25, the Buffs knew they didn't have one player capable of filling those shoes.

"We had a very candid team meeting after the first weekend and we decided that this has to be a full team effort," CU head coach Liz Kritza said.

So far, the Buffs have managed to get that effort. On Saturday, the Buffs defeated Cal State-Bakersfield and Norfolk State in the Air Force/Colorado Invitational at Coors Events Center.

After a five-set battle with CSU-Bakersfield, the Buffs swept Norfolk State.

CU finished non-conference play with a 10-2 record, its best start since 1998 (17-2 start).

Nikki Lindow and Neira Ortiz Ruiz have been particularly important for CU. Lindow has become more of an on-court leader in Schroeder's absence, while Ortiz Ruiz is becoming quite a force on offense. On Saturday, that duo combined for 47 kills and 16 block assists.

Lindow played like a leader should, posting 25 kills and 13 block assists.

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"Nikki Lindow did step up (after Schroeder's injury)," Kritza said. "She's filling a natural leadership role and she should. She has the most playing experience of anybody on the floor. She's responding very well."

So is Ortiz Ruiz. Prior to this week, she had just two career games with at least 10 kills and a career-high of 11. She posted 14 kills in Thursday's win at Air Force, followed it up with 12 against CSU-Bakersfield and then 10 against Norfolk State. She's the only player on the team this year with three consecutive double-digit kill games.

"I'm not Kerra. Kerra is great," Ortiz Ruiz said. "But, yeah, the team needs players to work. I'm willing to do that and I'm willing to bust my guts in practice to help us win and look good."

Lindow has been quite impressed with the emergence of Ortiz Ruiz, saying the team has "full confidence in her."

Throw in the calming presence of reserves of Michelle Miller and Ana Pantovic off the bench, and the Buffs are doing what they can to replace everything Schroeder brought to the court. It has shown in the results, as CU has won six in a row while building team cohesiveness.

They needed that cohesiveness on Saturday to get past scrappy CSU-Bakersfield and Norfolk State.

"It's pretty nice," Ortiz Ruiz said of the two wins. "I think we did a really good job in getting into and being together. The two games (Saturday) were opportunities for us to see we can be together and be a team."

Against CSU-Bakersfield (2-9), the Buffs had to battle more than expected before taking out the Roadrunners 25-19, 23-25, 19-25, 25-13, 15-13.

After falling behind 2-1, the Buffs played their best in the final two sets to pull out the win. Lindow had 14 kills

and nine block assists to lead the Buffs. Ortiz Ruiz had 12 kills and Alexis Austin and Kelsey English added 11 each. Nicole Edelman had 41 assists for the Buffs.

"I think that for a team that's comprised of the youth that we have, being able to pull out five-set wins is really important," Kritza said. "It kind of shows what kind of character we have, what kind of leadership we have. When players struggle, they're going to have to be able to work out of those doldrums. They've got to be able to bring themselves back up. That's what that five-set match did; it allowed players to have some confidence."

CU carried that confidence into the second match, a 25-16, 25-22, 25-16 victory against Norfolk State. The Buffs held the lead the entire first and third sets against the Spartans (2-11). After falling behind 6-0 in the second set, the Buffs rolled in that one, too.

Lindow and Ortiz Ruiz dominated play against the Spartans, combined for 21 kills and only two errors in 35 attack chances (a remarkable .543 clip).

"Our goal was to stay consistent and not err a lot," Lindow after the Norfolk State match. "The passing was excellent, (Edelman's) sets were great and we were hitting high, hitting our spots. It was nice to see the efficiency go up a lot more. We definitely need to continue that in practice the rest of this week."

Next up for the Buffs is Pac-12 Conference play. CU will open the conference slate on Wednesday with a home match against Utah. The game is slated for 8 p.m. and will be televised on the Pac-12 Mountain regional network.

Notable

CU opened this tournament with a five-set win at Air Force on Thursday. ... CU has its first 10-win season since 2008 (13-16). ... CU's six-game win streak is its longest since a 6-0 start to the 2008 season. ... CSU-Bakersfield dropped to 1-13-1 all-time against the Pac-12, including 0-3 season. The Roadrunners were going for their first win against a Pac-12 team since beating Arizona in 1991. ... CU had never faced either team before Saturday.

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