

Volleyball: Liz Kritza believes her CU Buffs ready to elevate Pac-12 effort

By Brian Howell Buffzone.com Boulder Daily Camera

Posted:

Buffzone.com

The easy part is over for the Colorado volleyball team.

The Buffs waltzed through nonconference play with a sparkling 10-2 record. They've already flown by any of their win totals of the previous three years -- seven in 2009, six in 2010 and six in 2011.

Wednesday night, however, begins the real work for CU. The Buffs open Pac-12 Conference play with a home match against Utah. The match is set to start at 8 p.m. and it will be broadcast on the Pac-12 Mountain network.

The Pac-12 features defending national champion UCLA and seven NCAA Tournament teams from last year. This week, five Pac-12 teams are ranked in the AVCA National Coaches poll: No. 1 UCLA, No. 2 USC, No. 5 Washington, No. 6 Stanford and No. 8 Oregon. Oregon State received the most votes among non-ranked teams, while California also received votes.

"They really want to challenge everybody in this league," Buffs head coach Liz Kritza said of her team. "They want to see how far we can go with this."

As good as the Buffs have been in nonconference play, they are well aware of the challenge ahead. During Kritza's first two seasons at CU (2009 and 2010), the Buffs went 5-35 in Big 12 Conference play. Last season, the Buffs finished their inaugural run through the Pac-12 with a 1-21 mark. They started conference play with 19 consecutive losses before pulling out a five-set win over Washington State in Boulder.

Junior Nikki Lindow acknowledges that it's difficult to tell just how good the Buffs are after facing a nonconference schedule that included zero games against major conference foes. None of the 12 teams CU faced played in the postseason last year and only three posted winning records in 2011.

What Lindow does believe is that this year's CU squad is better prepared to tackle the Pac-12, which is arguably the best conference in the country.

"Better. A lot better," she said of the team's mindset going in. "Even though Kerra (Schroeder) is out ... I think we'll be just fine."

CU lost Schroeder, a senior leader and possibly the team's best player, to a season-ending knee injury in the second match of the year, on Aug. 25.

Even without Schroeder, the Buffs have more experience and skill on the roster than they did a year ago. Players such as Lindow, Kelsey English and Neira Ortiz Ruiz have raised their level of play this season, especially in Schroeder's absence.

True freshmen Nicole Edelman and Alexis Austin don't have the experience, of course, but they stepped into starting roles immediately and have been two of CU's best players. Austin is tied with Lindow for the team lead in kills (121), while Edelman has accounted for 421 of the team's 536 assists. Edelman has also taken a significant leadership role on the court.

Whether all of that translates into a better record in Pac-12 play remains to be seen. Kritza, however, believes her team is ready.

"I do because we have to schedule our practices to make sure we're preparing and training our team for a level sometimes higher than what we're playing on the weekends," she said. "That's by design. Our assistant coaches do a great job of making sure that we're pushing things at a high level.

"The entire time through nonconference play, we have one eye on the level we need to be training at and the other on making sure our team is prepared for every one of these nonconference matches to get the confidence and get the successes that we need to go into league play."

During nonconference play, CU experienced a level of success it hasn't achieved in several years. This is the first time CU has had 10 nonconference wins since 1994.

Now the Buffs hope to experience a new level of success in conference play. They haven't had a winning conference record since 2006.

"As a team, I feel like we're really excited because we have played teams that are not Pac-12 material," Lindow said. "We're about to go (against) Utah, which is obviously our big rival. They're big girls. Now, we're going to get back in our comfort zone, honestly, of playing big, being big, being fast. We have to beat them with speed. We're a young team and if we beat these Pac-12 teams with speed, we'll be just fine."

Notable

Utah went 9-4 in non-conference play. The Utes went 11-20 last year (6-16 in Pac-12). ... CU went 0-2 against the Utes last year, losing both matches in straight sets. However, all six sets were close, with CU losing by no more than four points in any of them. ... CU got better as Pac-12 play went along last year. During the first 11 matches, they had a 0-33 record in sets. During the last 11 matches, CU had an 11-32 record in sets. ... The Buffs host Cal (6-4) on Saturday at 7 p.m.

Follow Brian on Twitter: @BrianHowell33.