

Squad sweeps conference foe for first time since 2009

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It's only one match, so the Colorado volleyball team isn't going to get too excited just yet.

If Wednesday was an indication, however, the Buffaloes are drastically improved from a year ago.

Dominating Utah at the net, CU rolled to a 25-21, 25-20, 25-21 win on Wednesday in the Pac-12 Conference opener at Coors Events Center.

"It is a start, but it's a very good start and I think it's very important for these young players," head coach Liz Kritza said. "The fashion in which we won is important because it shows that we're taking another step, which is huge for these young players."

CU (11-2, 1-0 Pac-12) is enjoying its best start since 1998 and has won seven straight matches for the first time since a similar streak in 2005.

Most importantly, the Buffs are 1-0 in conference play for the first time in Kritza's four years as head coach. CU went 1-21 in Pac-12 play last year and didn't pick up that win until the 20th conference match of the season.

"It means a lot," said sophomore Neira Ortiz Ruiz, who tied her career high with 14 kills. "It means that our hard work has been paying off and we're showing that we're working hard and we really want to win and we are going to win."

Wednesday, the Buffs shined from start to finish and did it in their Pac-12 Network debut.

"I couldn't think of a better way for this young team to announce that they are excited and ready and enthusiastic about playing in this league," Kritza said.

Facing a Utah (9-5, 0-1) squad that returned six of seven starters (including libero Nikki Sim) from a year ago, CU opened with three true freshmen in the starting lineup. The Buffs also put Ortiz Ruiz, a reserve all of last year, on display.

A much more confident and dominating player than she was even two weeks ago, let alone a year ago, Ortiz Ruiz posted her fourth consecutive double-digit kill night. She also set a career high with a .565 attack percentage, making just one error in 23 attempts.

She said her confidence is growing, but said, "It also lets me know I need to keep on working hard because I know if I can play like this, I know I can play better."

Ortiz Ruiz had six of her kills in the clinching set and gave Utah fits all night.

"There will be a target on her back and now she gets to improve and actually pick her game up another level because she'll likely have a double block on her every time," Kritza said. "She's going to definitely attract some attention from the other teams."

She won't be the only one. True freshman Alexis Austin had 12 kills and sophomores Kelsey English and Emily

Alexis had six each. Another true freshman, setter Nicole Edelman was brilliant with 36 assists, four kills, four block assists and seven digs. Chelsey Keoho, CU's other true freshman, was solid as the team's defensive specialist.

What impressed the Buffs, though, were not the individual performances but how they put all of those performances together into a singular effort.

"I think it's really important how good we played before conference because it gave us so much confidence and it showed us our potential as a team," Edelman said. "The best way we play is as a team and that's the way we're going to win. Tonight, everyone just played super well together and that was the most important part."

Up and down throughout non-conference play, CU was dominant from the start against the Utes (9-5, 0-1). Early in the first set, the Buffs took a 5-4 lead and didn't trail again until early in the third set. Utah had brief 1-0 and 2-1 leads in the third set before CU controlled play and closed the match.

The win, and how they got it, left all the Buffs smiling Wednesday.

"Yes, we love the winning part, but the level of play we exhibited tonight and the fact that it was a complete team effort

This is CU's first sweep of a conference opponent since Nov. 7, 2009, at Texas Tech. ...CU tied its all-time series with Utah at 4-4. ... Coming in, CU had lost four matches in a row the Utes, dating back to Aug. 30, 1997. CU had lost nine consecutive sets to the Utes dating back to Sept. 8, 2001. ... CU had an attack percentage of .299, its best in 23 Pac-12 Conference matches. ... Nikki Lindow had a bit of an off night, but still had two kills and five blocks.