

Soccer: CU Buffs headed for tough conference play

By Brian Howell *Buffzone.com Boulder Daily Camera*

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After the disappointment of last year, the Colorado soccer team has enjoyed its newfound success this season.

Then again, the Buffaloes are realistic about what's in store.

"We're not going to get too far ahead of ourselves," junior forward Anne Stuller said. "Right now we're 0-0."

CU (6-1-2) has already topped its win total from last year (4-13-2), but the Buffs open Pac-12 Conference play Friday at Oregon, and that's when the real test begins.

"My opinion, it's the best soccer conference in the country," CU head coach Danny Sanchez said. "So now you're coaching against the best coaches and you're playing against the best players and you're coaching against the best players. We'll see what we're about."

The Buffs have shown increased firepower and overall improvement from last year. They have scored 16 goals through nine games after netting just 21 in 19 games a year ago. The defense has posted five shutouts already after just three in 2011.

"We know that we're a good team; we're not questioning ourselves like last year," junior forward Hayley Hughes said.

CU also takes a three-game win streak into Pac-12 play. The Buffs were 1-4-1 in their last six non-conference games a year ago.

"We have some momentum going in and we hope to carry that through Pac-12 play but we know playing against Oregon, that's the start of a new season, so we want to come out brand-new and fresh," Stuller said.

CU finished 1-9-1 in its inaugural Pac-12 season last year. The highlight was a 1-0 upset of 15th-ranked California. Other than that, it was a disappointing run.

The conference is no cakewalk this year, either. This week, UCLA is ranked No. 2 in the country; defending national champion Stanford is No. 3; and Oregon State sits at No. 24. Washington is the top vote getter outside the top 25 and Washington State has also received top-25 votes. Eleven of the 12 teams in the conference posted winning records in non-conference play.

"Big picture of it, our mentality is we're probably the underdog in every game and we have to play with that attitude of us against the world," Sanchez said. "We're going to have to play well game in and game out to get results. We know the challenge and I think they're up for it. If things don't go our way, we're just going to keep fighting."

With a good mix of veterans and youth, the Buffs feel better prepared to fight for wins in Pac-12 and they begin that quest today.

"We're excited to see what happens," Sanchez said. "We know this is going to be challenging. Now we're here. We've done the work; let's see how we do."

Notable

Friday's game kicks off at 5 p.m. and will be broadcast on the Pac-12 Network. ... CU is 0-2 against Oregon, having lost 3-1 a year ago and 2-1 in 2009. Both games were played in Boulder. ... Stuller leads the Buffs with seven goals. ... Annie Brunner has been in goal for all five shutouts. She has 12 for her career, tied for third-most in program history.

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