

Volleyball: CU Buffs' Taylor Simpson happy to be back home

By Brian Howell Buffzone.com Boulder Daily Camera

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Two years ago, Doherty High School's Taylor Simpson was one of the top volleyball recruits in the country.

Colorado missed out on landing her, though, as she accepted a scholarship offer from Nebraska. A year ago, she left the Cornhuskers and joined the team at Missouri.

Two long years later, Simpson is finally where she feels she belongs. She and the rest of the CU Buffaloes will open the season on Friday night by hosting St. Mary's at Coors Events Center.

"I am so excited. I couldn't be more thrilled," the 6-foot-3 junior outside hitter said.

Different circumstances led to Simpson leaving her previous schools. While an athlete transferring twice often throws up a red flag, that's not the case with Simpson.

CU head coach Liz Kritza said she has known the Simpson family well for a few years and believes that Simpson truly just needed to be close to home. Kritza had long discussions with the Simpsons before Taylor decided to transfer to Boulder.

"When we both realized this is the place where she can be successful and happy and have a great college athletics experience, there was absolutely no doubt in my mind that she is where she belongs and we're happy to have her," Kritza said.

Not only is Simpson close to her Colorado Springs home, she has familiar faces around her. Junior middle blocker Kelsey English is a former high school teammate and Simpson's best friend. In addition, her sister, Cierra, is a freshman for the Buffs.

"It's easier to go in and play with people you know," Simpson said.

"It was hard (to leave Nebraska and Missouri) because I made some really good friendships at both places and the coaches, they are great people. But, it's led me to better things and I'm really excited to be here."

Simpson's arrival adds to what has already been a rising program at CU. A year ago, the Buffs finished 14-18, which was a giant leap from the previous three seasons, when they never won more than seven matches in a year.

The Buffs are expecting better things this year, because most of the key players from last year are back, including standout setter Nicole Edelman.

Edelman's toughest task might be figuring out where to set the ball. Sophomore Alexis Austin had a great freshman year, and senior Nikki Lindow is looking as good as ever. English, Neira Ortiz Ruiz, Ana Pantovic and Emily Alexis also had great moments at the net last year.

Adding Simpson to the mix makes the Buffs even better. And on top of all of that, CU gets senior

Kerra Schroeder back. She was CU's leading hitter in 2010 and 2011, but tore her left ACL five sets into last season.

"Anyone can play on a given night," Edelman said. "It's only going to be an advantage for us because we have such a deep bench now. It'll be a fight every single match to get playing time."

Drawing up a lineup will be more of a challenge than ever for Kritza, because of all the talent on her roster. She's not complaining about that challenge, though.

"It will be harder, but these are good challenges," she said. "This is a sign that the program has progressed and we're moving in the right direction. We want to have more good players than spots, because that drives the progress and success of your team."

It has certainly driven Simpson. Healthier and happier than she's been in two years, she's excited to be a part of what could be a very good CU team.

"They're pushing me to play my best, because obviously if I don't play my best, they're going to take my spot," she said of CU's other hitters. "Everybody has to be performing at their best. It's really helpful to have other hitters who are just as good as you pushing you every day."

"I'm beyond excited. I think if things work out as they're supposed to this year, every one on the team can really get some great accolades and show what we're made of."

Contact staff writer Brian Howell at howellb@dailycamera.com or twitter.com/BrianHowell33.

Colorado Buffaloes volleyball at a glance

Head coach: Liz Kritza, 5th season (33-84 at CU; 109-123 career)

2012 record: 14-18, 4-16 in Pac-12 (tied for 10th)

Returning starters (7): RS/OH Emily Alexis, 5-11, Sr. (1.48 kills, 1.25 digs, 0.35 blocks per set); OH Alexis Austin, 6-2, So. (3.14 kills, 1.21 digs, 0.38 blocks per set); S Nicole Edelman, 6-0, So. (0.86 kills, 9.22 assists, 1.77 digs, 0.64 blocks per set); MB Kelsey English, 6-2, Jr. (1.88 kills, 0.41 digs, 0.79 blocks per set); L/DS Chelsey Keoho, 5-3, So. (2.87 digs per set); MB Nikki Lindow, 6-2, Sr. (1.91 kills, 0.39 digs, 1.22 blocks per set); RS/OH Neira Ortiz Ruiz, 6-5, Jr. (2.24 kills, 0.44 digs, 0.34 blocks per set).

Other returning letter winners (5): OH Jessica Aschenbrenner, 5-11, Sr.; (0.99 digs per set); RS Ana Pantovic, 6-5, Sr. (1.40 kills, 0.71 blocks per set); DS/L Elysse Richardson, 5-3, Sr. (2.10 digs per set); OH Kerra Schroeder, 6-0, Sr. (3.95 kills per set in 2011; missed 2012 with knee injury); DS Erin Taylor, 5-10, So.

Key newcomers: MS/RS Joslyn Hayes, 6-3, Fr.; S Makayala Lundin, 5-11, Fr.; DS/S Cierra Simpson, 6-0, Fr.; OH Taylor Simpson, 6-3, Jr. (transfer from Missouri).

Notes: CU is seeking its first winning season since going 17-12 in 2006. ... The Buffs are 5-37 in Pac-12 play since joining the conference in 2011; They are 0-21 in Pac-12 road matches. ...

Last year, the Buffs had their highest win total since 2006. ...Austin and Edelman both received honorable mention for the 2012 Pac-12 all-freshman team. ... Schroeder and Edelman have been named team captains. ... Pac-12 coaches picked the Buffs to finish 10th in a preseason poll.