

College basketball countdown: No. 21 Colorado

Scott Gleeson, USA TODAY Sports 1:03 p.m. EDT October 11, 2013

USA TODAY Sports' Scott Gleeson counts down to the start of the season, breaking down the projected field of 68.



(Photo: Joshua S. Kelly, USA TODAY Sports)

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The first word: If three consecutive 20-win, postseason-ending campaigns wasn't enough evidence to signal the 180 turnaround the Colorado basketball program has experienced, perhaps the number of fans coming to see the Buffaloes speaks volume for just how far Tad Boyle's program has improved since he arrived in Boulder.

After setting multiple attendance records last season, the school announced it [sold out season tickets for the first time ever](http://sports.yahoo.com/blogs/ncaab-the-dagger/colorado-sells-season-tickets-another-milestone-tad-boyle-195418344--ncaab.html) (<http://sports.yahoo.com/blogs/ncaab-the-dagger/colorado-sells-season-tickets-another-milestone-tad-boyle-195418344--ncaab.html>) — a direct sign of the anticipation for a high-hopes season based on the returning nucleus that features one of the best backcourts in the Pac 12 in Spencer Dinwiddie and Askia Booker.

FULL COUNTDOWN: Projecting field of 68 (<http://www.usatoday.com/topic/b5c73a94-f623-494d-9d1d-4c64b409ba6d/college-basketball-countdown/>)

Colorado lost double-double machine forward Andre Roberson to the NBA, but he's the only starter gone from a team that figures to have a deep roster once again. While there's ample experience and depth figures to be a strength of the team, Boyle has been maintaining more of a "cautious" optimism for the Buffs because of his team's youth — 10 scholarship players are underclassmen — that presents serious challenges heading into a gauntlet conference schedule and a Pac-12 slate featuring six to seven NCAA tournament-caliber teams.

Last season, the Buffaloes lost a handful of close games, including overtime conference losses to Arizona and Arizona State as well as a season-ending eight-point loss to Illinois. Boyle is hoping there's a sense of urgency instilled in the returning players that will be contagious with a team with a tremendously high ceiling — potentially challenging the mighty Arizona for the Pac-12 title.

2012-13 in review: 21-12 overall (10-8 in the Pac-12), loser in NCAA tournament second round to Illinois.

Tournament projection: No. 6 seed, at-large bid.

Coach's corner: "Our goal is to win games in the postseason. The key is that our veterans show patience and understanding as our younger players develop. We can be deep if our freshmen grow up quickly. We have to get better throughout the course of the season — each practice, each game, week to week, month to month — so hopefully we'll be peaking in March. My hope is that the guys from last year understand how important defense and rebounding, those kind of things are when it comes to winning big, close games. Our team is very talented but unfortunately sometimes that talent allows guys to think they can turn it on whenever they need it. There's no on/off switch. You have to bring it every night." — Boyle, now entering his fourth season with Colorado. Boyle just earned a \$1.5 million contract that doubled his previous earnings with the program.

STARTING FIVE: [Top story lines in 2013-14](http://www.usatoday.com/topic/44e87ac2-7c36-4c33-ba7e-81020063c5eb/the-starting-five/) (<http://www.usatoday.com/topic/44e87ac2-7c36-4c33-ba7e-81020063c5eb/the-starting-five/>)

Star watch: Dinwiddie is an NBA-ready guard (15.3 ppg, 3.0 apg) and Booker complements him nicely to form one of the nation's most underrated backcourts. Dinwiddie played for the Team USA in the World University Games team and was the lone Pac-12 player on the roster. He started all eight games, averaging 7.9 points and leading the team in assists and steals. Booker keeps defenses on their heels, putting the team on his back when he needs to. He was the Charleston Classic MVP after scoring 58 points in three games to lead the Buffaloes to the tournament title.

Sophomore forwards Josh Scott and Xavier Johnson combined average for 19.1 points last season as freshmen and provide strength on the interior. Scott is a 6-10 smooth big man worth running an offense through, and he bulked up big-time in the weight room during the offseason. Johnson is a hybrid-type forward who can go inside and outside, plus he's a lockdown versatile defender.

X-Factor: The freshmen. Boyle thinks 3-4 first-year players will be inserted in the rotation, so their development will prove vital. Redshirt-freshman Wesley Gordon sat out last season is poised to contribute right away, potentially filling Roberson's spot in the starting lineup, while freshman combo guard Tre'Shaun Fletcher should add depth on the wing.

Team strength/weakness: This team will be gifted offensively, and the possesses length and athleticism that bodes well defensively. But rebounding could be a huge area of concern with Roberson departing for the NBA. He averaged 11.2 boards per game last season. Scott (5.7 rpg) and Johnson (4.8 rpg) will have to step up on the glass, and most importantly stay out of foul trouble. The Buffaloes like to dictate the tempo off turnovers, feeding off an aggressive man-to-man defense. But avoiding their own turnovers and coughing up second-chance opportunities for their opponents will be extremely crucial.

Conference outlook: The Pac-12 appears poised for a resurgence after a season in which five teams made the NCAA tournament, and three others reached the NIT. Though Arizona is the favorite, the league race will be intriguing with up to six NCAA contenders behind the Wildcats: Colorado, UCLA, Oregon, Stanford, Arizona State and California.

Tweet that speaks volume: The Buffaloes non-conference slate will be one of the toughest in the country with matchups against top 30 teams Baylor and Harvard and also against top 10 teams Kansas and Oklahoma State.



Highlight reel: Dinwiddie can score in a multitude of ways, but his off-the-dribble pull-ups will make him a hot commodity in 2014's NBA draft.

Basics: The University of Colorado is located in Boulder, Colo., and the Buffaloes (<http://www.CUBuffs.com>) play their home games in the Coors Events Center, which opened in 1979 and seats 11,112.

Trivia: Trey Parker and Matt Stone, creators of the popular animated show, *South Park*, attended Colorado.

About this post: Every weekday, one of the 68 teams in USA TODAY Sports' projected NCAA tournament field will be dissected. The final bracket will be revealed in November.

Glance at the dance: So far 48 teams have been selected to the USA TODAY Sports preseason NCAA tournament bracket. The seeding so far:

No. 16 seeds (Play-in games): No. 68 Robert Morris (<http://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/ncaab/2013/08/07/college-basketball-countdown-no-68-robert-morris/2627903/>), No. 67 Charleston Southern (<http://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/ncaab/bigsouth/2013/08/08/college-basketball-countdown-no-67-charleston-southern/2630727/>), No. 66 Northwestern State (<http://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/ncaab/2013/08/09/college-basketball-countdown-no-66-northwestern-state/2632843/>), No. 65 Norfolk State (<http://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/ncaab/2013/08/12/college-basketball-countdown-no-65-norfolk-state/2642111/>), No. 64 Georgia State (<http://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/ncaab/sunbelt/2013/08/13/college-basketball-countdown-no-64-georgia-state/2646977/>), No. 63 Boston U (<http://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/ncaab/patriot/2013/08/14/college-basketball-countdown-no-63-boston-u/2651497/>)

No. 15 seeds: No. 62 Vermont (<http://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/ncaab/ameast/2013/08/15/college-basketball-countdown-no-62-vermont/2658549/>), No. 61 Texas Southern (<http://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/ncaab/swac/2013/08/17/college-basketball-countdown-no-61-texas-southern/2664379/>), No. 60 Elon (<http://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/ncaab/southern/2013/08/19/college-basketball-countdown-no-60-elon/2670365/>), No. 59 Manhattan (<http://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/ncaab/2013/08/20/college-basketball-countdown-no-59-manhattan/2675575/>)

No. 14 seeds (Play-in games): No. 58 Toledo (<http://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/ncaab/mac/2013/08/21/college-basketball-countdown-no-58-toledo/2680235/>), No. 57 Towson (<http://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/ncaab/colonial/2013/08/22/college-basketball-countdown-no-57-towson/2684061/>), No. 56 Florida Gulf Coast (<http://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/ncaab/atlanticsun/2013/08/23/college-basketball-countdown-no-56-florida-gulf-coast/2690795/>), No. 55 Weber State (<http://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/ncaab/2013/08/26/college-basketball-countdown-no-55-weber-state/2698687/>), No. 54 Long Beach State (<http://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/ncaab/2013/08/27/college-basketball-countdown-no-54-long-beach-state/2705003/>)

No. 13 seeds: No. 53 Eastern Kentucky (<http://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/ncaab/2013/08/28/college-basketball-countdown-no-53-eastern-kentucky/2712221/>), No. 52 Wright State (<http://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/ncaab/2013/08/29/college-basketball-countdown-no-52-wright-state/2726091/>), No. 51 Denver (<http://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/ncaab/summit/2013/08/30/college-basketball-countdown-no-51-denver/2736965/>), No. 50 New Mexico State (<http://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/ncaab/wac/2013/09/02/college-basketball-countdown-no-50-new-mexico-state/2754805/>)

No. 12 seeds (Play-in games): No. 49 Louisiana Tech (<http://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/ncaab/2013/09/03/college-basketball-countdown-no-49-louisiana-tech/2756799/>), No. 48 Boise State (<http://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/ncaab/2013/09/04/college-basketball-countdown-no-48-boise-state/2761603/>), No. 47 Indiana State (<http://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/ncaab/2013/09/05/college-basketball-countdown-no-47-indiana-state/2769609/>), No. 46 Southern Methodist (<http://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/ncaab/2013/09/06/college-basketball-countdown-no-46-southern-methodist/2771681/>), No. 45 Arizona State (<http://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/ncaab/2013/09/09/college-basketball-countdown-no-45-arizona-state/2785163/>)

No. 11 seeds: No. 44 San Diego State (<http://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/ncaab/mwest/2013/09/10/college-basketball-countdown-no-44-san-diego-state/2791577/>), No. 43 Maryland (<http://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/ncaab/2013/09/11/college-basketball-countdown-no-43-maryland/2797229/>), No. 42 BYU (<http://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/ncaab/2013/09/12/college-basketball-countdown-no-42-brigham-young/2803577/>), No. 41 Cincinnati (<http://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/ncaab/2013/09/13/college-basketball-countdown-no-41-cincinnati/2808633/>)

No. 10 seeds: No. 40 LSU (<http://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/ncaab/2013/09/16/college-basketball-countdown-no-40-lsu/2819999/>), No. 39 Iowa State (<http://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/ncaab/big12/2013/09/17/college-basketball-countdown-no-39-iowa-state/2824567/>), No. 38 Stanford (<http://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/ncaab/pac12/2013/09/18/college-basketball-countdown-no-38-stanford/2830283/>), No. 37 UNLV (<http://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/ncaab/mwest/2013/09/19/college-basketball-countdown-no-37-unlv/2835467/>)

No. 9 seeds: No. 36 Oregon (<http://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/ncaab/2013/09/21/college-basketball-countdown-no-36-oregon/2840201/>), No. 35 La Salle (<http://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/ncaab/2013/09/23/college-basketball-countdown-no-35-la-salle/2853633/>), No. 34 Villanova (<http://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/ncaab/bigeast/2013/09/24/college-basketball-countdown-no-34-villanova/2859449/>), No. 33 Wisconsin (<http://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/ncaab/2013/09/25/college-basketball-countdown-no-33-wisconsin/2866213/>)

No. 8 seeds: No. 32 St. John's (<http://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/ncaab/2013/09/26/college-basketball-countdown-no-32-st-johns/2875431/>), No. 31 Harvard (<http://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/ncaab/2013/09/27/college-basketball-countdown-no-31-harvard/2881877/>), No. 30 Notre Dame (<http://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/ncaab/2013/09/30/naa-basketball-countdown-no-30-notre-dame/2894799/>), No. 29 Baylor (<http://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/ncaab/2013/10/01/college-basketball-countdown-no-29-baylor/2900613/>)

No. 7 seeds: No. 28 UCLA (<http://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/ncaab/2013/10/02/college-basketball-countdown-no-28-ucla/2904319/>), No. 27 Saint Louis (<http://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/ncaab/2013/10/03/college-basketball-countdown-no-27-saint-louis/2914537/>), No. 26 Indiana (<http://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/ncaab/2013/10/04/college-basketball-countdown-no-26-indiana/2921355/>), No. 25 Georgetown (<http://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/ncaab/2013/10/07/college-basketball-countdown-no-25-georgetown/2935281/>)

No. 6 seeds: No. 24 Virginia (<http://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/ncaab/2013/10/08/college-basketball-countdown-no-24-virginia/2941665/>), No. 23 Iowa (<http://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/ncaab/2013/10/09/college-basketball-countdown-no-23-iowa/2946933/>), No. 22 Gonzaga (<http://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/ncaab/2013/10/10/college-basketball-countdown-no-22-gonzaga/2955841/>), No. 21 Colorado.

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