

Colorado basketball: Spencer Dinwiddie sees Buffs as best in Pac-12

By Brian Howell Buffzone.com Boulder Daily Camera

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SAN FRANCISCO -- Members of the media who cover the Pac-12 Conference tabbed Arizona as the clear favorite to win the title in men's basketball this year.

As far as Colorado junior Spencer Dinwiddie is concerned, it'll be the Buffaloes sitting on top by season's end.

"We don't view Arizona as the top, the cream," Dinwiddie said during Pac-12 media day on Thursday at the Pac-12 Studios. "We view ourselves as the cream and everybody else can fight for the rest of the spots. That's how we're going to approach the season and we're going to try to win all of our games."

The annual media poll was released on Thursday with Arizona getting 21 of the 23 first-place votes and 273 points overall. UCLA (212 points) edged Colorado (211) for second place, with both teams receiving one first-place vote.

Oregon, California and Stanford round out the top half of the poll. Arizona State came in at No. 7, followed by Washington, Utah, Oregon State, Southern Cal and Washington State.

A Sweet 16 team a year ago, Arizona lost several key players from last year. However, the Wildcats are viewed as an elite team with the return of junior guard Nick Johnson and the addition of outstanding freshman forward Aaron Gordon.

Arizona head coach Sean Miller likes his team's chances, but said the Wildcats have a ways to go.

"We're not experienced enough to be head and shoulders above the field," Miller said. "We have a lot of parts, and I think that if we have some health on our side and some good fortune, we might be able to get there and be a special team down the road."

As always, Colorado coach Tad Boyle said he doesn't worry about preseason polls.

"We're excited to be in the hunt, we're excited to be in the conversation of one of the better teams in this league," Boyle said. "Now we've got to go out and prove it."

One of the best

CBSSports.com revealed its list of the top 100 players for the 2013-14 season, and Dinwiddie is among the elite. Dinwiddie is listed at No. 21 overall and No. 1 among juniors.

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Pac-12 media poll

Team (1st Place Votes) Pts.

1. Arizona (21) 273
2. UCLA (1) 212
3. Colorado (1) 211
4. Oregon 196
5. California 194
6. Stanford 166
7. Arizona State 159
8. Washington 121
9. Utah 68
10. Oregon State 67
11. USC 63
12. Washington State 39

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Tad Boyle made history at Colorado the past three years, winning at least 21 games in each of those

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Colorado Facts & Figures

Last season: 21-12 (10-8 Pac-12)

Postseason: NCAA Round of 64

Coach: Tad Boyle (69-38 at Colorado)

Pac-12 projection: Third

Postseason projection: NCAA Round of 64

think our coaches do, and I know our fans are enjoying getting used to it as well.”

Had forward Andre Roberson returned for his senior season instead of jumping to the NBA, the 2013-14 Buffaloes would have been, arguably, the most talented team in school history. Losing Roberson scales back those grand proclamations just a bit, but with another projected NBA first-rounder at point guard in junior Spencer Dinwiddie, a solid nucleus of returning players and another talented recruiting class, this still looks like one of the best CU teams in recent memory.

The Buffs will have an opportunity to prove themselves against a very difficult non-conference schedule. CU will play three top teams from the Big 12 (Kansas at home and Oklahoma State and Baylor in neutral court games) as well as Harvard, Colorado State, Georgia, Wyoming, Air Force and UCSB.

“I love our team coming back,” Boyle says. “We basically have four starters coming back. We lose a pretty key component with Andre, the rebounding and the experience factor, but we have a lot of capable young guys coming in and a couple that were sitting out.”

Frontcourt

Roberson’s 11 points per game won’t be hard to replace, but rebounding is expected to be much more of a collective effort now. Boyle will lean on four players in the paint, with sophomores Josh Scott and Xavier Johnson carrying the biggest expectations into the season.

They might be the second and third best players on the roster behind Dinwiddie. Both enjoyed success as true freshmen and should be able to build on it. Johnson is versatile and will sometimes play more like a guard offensively. Scott has a nice game in the paint and runs the floor well for a big.

Wesley Gordon, a 6-8 redshirt freshman, practiced against Roberson every day last season, and Boyle hopes he learned from the experience. Gordon might be the wild card on the roster because he’s being asked to fill Roberson’s shoes. Freshman Dustin Thomas, a 6-7 forward, will also get minutes.

Backcourt

Dinwiddie is the backbone of this team, and he affects the game in many ways. He led the Buffs in scoring last season at 15.3 points a game and assists with 3.0. He shot 240 free throws and is probably the team’s best defender. Dinwiddie, however, must become a more consistent outside shooter.

“I think he can have a breakout year for us,” Boyle says. “I think he can be one of the premier players in our conference and one of the best guards in the country.”

Fellow junior Askia Booker is fearless. He can get hot and score in bunches, but when his shots aren't falling, he often becomes a liability. Boyle would like to see improved consistency, shot selection and defense from Booker.

Sophomores Xavier Talton and Eli Stalzer each played a little less than 10 minutes per game last season and will have to fight off freshmen to remain in the rotation.

Redshirt freshman Chris Jenkins, a 6-7 product of the Detroit area, brings length and athleticism off the bench and has a nice shooter's touch. He could be a starter at some point in the season and send Booker back to the sixth man role in which he excelled two years ago. True freshman Jaron Hopkins will likely serve as Dinwiddie's backup.

Newcomers

Colorado needs Dustin Thomas to contribute in the frontcourt. Small forward Tre'Shaun Fletcher might have the most scoring ability of the group. Jaron Hopkins will play minutes off the bench at the point. George King was a late addition to the recruiting class in the spring following Andre Roberson's departure and is probably the most likely to redshirt.

Final analysis

Factoid: 3. Colorado has had three straight non-losing conference records (one in Big 12, two in Pac-12), its longest such streak since the early 1960s.

The Buffs have the talent, experience and depth — as well as the coaching — to compete with Arizona, UCLA and Oregon for the conference title. Anything short of another NCAA Tournament appearance would be a disappointment at a school that is finally falling in love with its basketball program.

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