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Senior Kerra Schroeder says the Buffs have learned how to win.

## Brooks: Schroeder, Buffs On Way To Making Their Point

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**BOULDER** – In the midst of what would be the Colorado volleyball program's most successful home stretch in a long, long time, Liz Kritza posed a couple of questions last weekend to her players: "Do you want to be Colorado? Or, Colorado!"

If you need a translation/clarification, allow outside hitter Kerra Schroeder: "Do you want to be Colorado with a question mark, or Colorado with an exclamation point?"

Good questions; very, very pertinent questions. Schroeder, a fifth-year senior, has been around long enough to vividly recall CU not even belonging in high-profile volleyball conversations, much less debating the appropriate punctuation.

As she told me Monday before going to practice at the Coors Events Center, "We've been waiting for this moment to shock everyone . . . and to tell you the truth, I've been waiting for four years. Yeah, it's been a long time."

Kritza posed the CU? or CU! questions to Schroeder and her teammates before they went on the CEC court Sunday afternoon against Pac-12 Conference foe Washington State – and here's the relevance: The Buffs had won two of their last three matches, defeating No. 11 UCLA on Friday, Sept. 27, then handing No. 1 Washington its first loss of the season on Friday, Oct. 4.

But sandwiched between those monstrous 'W's was a hideous five-set 'L' just up the road at Wyoming. As jarring as it was after bringing down the Bruins, it thoroughly refocused the Buffs. "We weren't mentally prepared, tired . . . whatever excuse you could pull out, we should have beaten (Wyoming)," Schroeder said. "It was almost a blessing to have that bad game. It completely refocused us. We didn't want anyone to think UCLA was a fluke."

Less than a week later, a nearly identical scenario awaited them. Not more than 48 hours after the win against U-Dub, unranked Washington State would visit the CEC. That's when Kritza popped her questions; her team responded by popping Wazzu in four sets.

"Should have been three," Schroeder said, which is exactly what Kritza and her staff had hoped to hear. "Beating Washington was the best feeling in the world, but before the next game coach was constantly reminding us that Washington State is the most important game thus far."

Had the Buffs stumbled against WSU after stunning Washington, it would have been Wyoming-after-UCLA déjà vu. The exclamation point following Colorado wouldn't have fit; that nagging question mark would have fit perfectly.

Outsiders would have seen CU as a vastly improved but terribly erratic outfit and asked, according to Kritza, "Are we so young and undisciplined that we're still celebrating a match from 48 hours ago and not prepared for this one?"

Schroeder saw it like this: "We needed to separate ourselves from the bottom of the pack. Always we've been at the bottom of the pack. We've been going against Washington State, Oregon State constantly. Who's better at the bottom? Who's the best worst team?"

A quick look at the Pac-12 standings now shows the Buffs at the other end of the spectrum. CU sits at 3-1 (11-3 overall) and tied for second with UW and Stanford. Southern California is unbeaten in league play (4-0, 14-1 overall). But a long and challenging road stretch awaits the Buffs. Their next four matches are at Cal Wednesday, at Stanford Saturday, at Oregon Oct. 18, at Oregon State Oct. 20. The Coors Events Center will never look so good by the time they return on Oct. 25 to face Arizona.

Still, Kritza's fifth Buffs team is far removed from her first and built better for heavy road work in the Pac-12. For starters, it's more talented, more balanced and features more solid leadership from seniors such as Schroeder and Nikki Lindow and junior Taylor Simpson. Not many of those intangibles were present five years ago when Schroeder, who had been recruited by former coach Pi'i Aiu, arrived on campus and almost immediately became a load-bearing freshman for a coach she had to get to know.

That happened quickly, Schroeder said, and now their relationship is among the highlights of her college career. "We both came in at the same time and our goal was the same – to build up this program and become a very well-known program," Schroeder said. "It's kind of special that coach Kritza has come in and completely turned this program around. The small part of that was practicing in Carlson Gym then moving to Coors, her standing up for our program and saying we are Division I and an up-and-coming program. Hello. Let's show them. But it took five years to do it."

That Schroeder came back for a fifth year and is sharing in Kritza's success happened by accident. Literally. Since shortly after her first kill as a kid, Schroeder has wanted to play professionally. But a season-ending knee injury in last season's second match extended her college career for a fifth year. She never doubted that she would come back.

In most instances, she loathes the phrase "everything happens for a reason," but since her 2012 season was scratched she finds herself thinking, well, maybe there's something to it. Schroeder, of San Diego (Torre Pines), had never suffered more than "a rolled ankle here or there . . . I've never been the one to be rehabbing before or after practice, as much as I was the workhorse and took the heavy load. I was just never injured. But after I did get injured, I had to look at it like everything happens for a reason.

"I was kind of in a funk even before I got injured, for whatever reason, and I was frustrated even before we got started. I just wasn't connecting . . . then I got injured and I remember thinking, well, it just wasn't my time. For whatever reason, I was supposed to be here for another year. There was no doubt in my mind about playing another season, especially when I knew we would have a better team."

Kritza is no stranger to a rebuild. She did it at Tulane before coming to CU, and appears on track to make this her "turn the corner" season. The Buffs' three conference wins are just one off last season's total (4-16) and already equal the most in league play under Kritza in CU's final two seasons in the Big 12 (3-17, 2-18). Kritza's first four seasons in Boulder produced overall records of 7-22, 6-20, 6-24 and 14-18.

So this season's start, featuring the wins against a pair of highly ranked Pac-12 opponents, offers a brightness that neither she nor her team has experienced. "For all the times when you're out on the road for 20 days, going through tough seasons and grabbing at whatever (positive) we could, these are the times that I keep in my mind," she said.

Kritza was certain success would come at CU, "The only question was when," she said. "I got a sense that this group could be the one because of the combination of talent and personalities and motivation . . . it was easy to get excited about the possibility of what we could do. I'm always the most realistic about what we have and if somebody is more realistic then we have an issue.

"I have to be the one who says we need more, we need better. I'm the one who has to be the least satisfied with what we're doing because it's my responsibility to keep driving this program and keep ahead of things. Even if we're having success my job is to ground them, to find the things that we need to do to improve. These are big moments for us, but they're moments. We need a collection of moments to have long-standing success.

"People will take us more seriously in conference, but now we have something to prove. This will be a season of constantly proving ourselves. This group of players, what they're made of and how they look at life in general, we're going to have to be the team that constantly proves themselves. We're not going to surprise many more people . . . they're taking us more seriously now."

Veteran Buffs like Kerra Schroeder say it's about time – and they want to be taken seriously a lot longer than the season's first month and a half. "I pictured my teammates and myself in my last year here

winning – just winning,” she said. “We’ve never been used to winning. We weren’t used to losing; it still stung and we weren’t OK with it. But now, we have that sense of getting used to winning. (Sunday) we were happy we won, but we knew we should have beaten them in three (sets). The most important difference between last year and this year is that we expect to win. And that’s exactly what we’re going to do.”

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