

Colorado soccer: Buffs' Annie Brunner having her best season

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A good defense can make a goalkeeper look a little better.

Colorado's Annie Brunner is well aware of that, and she gives her defensive teammates a lot of credit for her own success. But, there's no question that Brunner being on top of her game is a big reason the Buffaloes are off to a 6-1 start as they head into the Omni Hotels Women's Soccer Classic this weekend in Boulder.

"We definitely feel really confident with Annie back there," senior defender Lizzy Herzl said. "It's just really nice knowing that she's back there and that she's going to make saves for us."

Now in her fourth year as CU's starting goalkeeper, Brunner is playing better than ever. She has stopped 22 of the 26 shots she has faced (84.6 percent) and has posted a 0.57 goals-against average with five shutouts.

"I think she's grown and grown more comfortable in her role within the program and within the team," CU head coach Danny Sanchez said. "We have utmost confidence (in her). We feel she's one of the top goalkeepers in the league."

A four-time state champion with the Colorado Storm Soccer Club, Brunner played defense at Arvada West High School for two years. Several schools around the country, including Boston College, California, Notre Dame and "a few SEC schools" wanted her. At first, getting the attention was fun. Ultimately, Brunner figured out what was most important to her.

"I just wanted to stay home and play for my family's team," she said.

CU has been the Brunnerfamily team for years. Her grandparents, parents and other members of the family were all Buffs. With her entire family living in Colorado, Brunner said it was an easy choice to follow in their footsteps.

"We were Buffs through and through," she said. "I grew up in it and it's comforting."

It's also been rewarding for her to have worn a CU uniform for the past four years.

"They come to every game and they love it and I love it," she said. "I love being somebody they can come watch and support their school still - and it's their granddaughter or daughter in goal."

Brunner has done a solid job in goal for the Buffs since she secured the job as a freshman in 2010.

Her 26 losses are, unfortunately, a program record, but she also ranks third in wins (25), second in ties (eight) and second in shutouts (19.1). Her 1.18 career goals-against average is the fifth-best in program history.

With the Buffaloes looking to take a step up in the Pac-12 Conference, Brunner knew she needed to be better than ever this fall. So far, she's done that.

"At the beginning of the season, I sat down with the coaches and they said, 'We want two more shutouts than we had last year and we want a better goals against average,'" said Brunner, who had a career-high 7.1 shutouts in 2012. "So far, we're on our way to both of those."

Part of that success can be attributed to CU's defenders. Herzl, who was Brunner's teammate with the Storm throughout high school, leads a talented group that has allowed just 26 shots to get back to Brunner (eight of those in Sunday's 3-0 loss to Denver).

Herzl, however, said while Brunner hasn't had to make a lot of saves, she's been impressive when she has taken shots.

"She has obviously improved," Herzl said. "You can't go 1-on-1 with that girl. She's going to save the one you never expect her to save. She's definitely become so solid in the back in that way. She's just really composed and she'll get the tough ones."

A year ago, CU lost a lot of close games, as the offense struggled. This year, the Buffs are showing more firepower on offense, which should make Brunner's job more important as they look to turn those close games into wins.

"I think last year she kept us in a couple of games," Sanchez said. "I think this year, she's going to have to win us a couple, and she's up for the challenge, I think."

Sanchez added that Brunner worked hard in the offseason to improve technique and fitness, and it has showed.

"She's doing all she can to have the best season she can, which is really helping the team," he said.

For Brunner, team success has really been her only goal. She's one of several seniors that have never tasted the postseason, and she'd like to change that.

To see personal and team success thus far has been "energizing," Brunner said.

"It's really fun to be like, 'Hey this is senior year and this is arguably the best start we've had,'" she said. "It feels like the hard work has all been worth it."

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