

2013 COLORADO VOLLEYBALL OUTLOOK

Preseason Q&A With Head Coach Liz Kritza

Question: Last year was a huge step for Colorado Volleyball with making the NCAA Tournament and moving up in the Pac-12. How do you plan to keep the momentum going into the 2014 season?

Answer: While we were pleased to see the significant improvement from one season to the next, the key to keeping it going is to remain focused on the right things. We return the driving force for that improvement last season and everyone was compelled to improve during the offseason and continue making strides in the Pac-12 and across the national landscape as well. Adding a strong recruiting class of players who can complement the returners, a focused effort in the training gym every day, and a team first approach to everything we do will play a big part in the overall success of this team this season.

Q: Part of last season's great successes came from the senior class, which consisted of six players. How do you plan on replacing those key players?

A: We anticipated graduating a large class last year and are excited to have some of the younger players fill some of those key roles as they have been training hard to develop to be ready. Additionally, we were able to bring in a strong freshman class that provides a nice boost of athleticism, size, and quickness to be able to continue advancing the level of volleyball being played in our gym. While it can be difficult to replace experience, our roster continues to improve every year as part of the strategic plan to build this program to new heights.

Q: The three wins against ranked opponents were obviously big for the program, as well as defending the Coors Events Center. Moving forward, how do you plan to keep these wins coming at home?

A: Defending your home floor is a pretty special endeavor that all great teams take on. We love playing in the friendly confines of Coors Events Center and love the Buff fans, so we take great pride in playing well at home and coming up with some of those big wins in front of our home crowd. Wins against opponents that are ranked higher are a function of being committed to preparation and having courage to make plays and decisions during match time to come away with the win. I encourage our team to continually challenge themselves to be better with each match and if we can play high level volleyball every day in our gym, then the likelihood of coming away with more of those wins goes up, but every match is huge for us this season, and fewer of those will be big upsets because the perspective is changing for our program.

Q: The Pac-12 advanced nine teams to the NCAA Tournament in 2013? How do you keep your team motivated to play in such a tough conference night in and night out?

A: Keeping the team motivated to play in the best conference in the country is not difficult if we keep bringing in the right players. Every great player wants to play with and against the best in the nation, and our league affords that opportunity every night. We have very competitive players on this team



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and if you want to be the best, you have to play the best, and beat the best. That is a huge part of why they chose to don a Buffs jersey and play for this program, and serves as the impetus for testing ourselves against the best teams in the nation and taking on the difficult challenge of preparing for competing in such a strong league.

Q: Let's break down the positions this season, starting at setter. Nicole Edelman returns and is joined by freshman Gabby Simpson. With the talent in that position, will you be tempted to run a 6-2?

A: The setting position is crucial for all high level teams and we are excited to have Nicole back and healthier than ever. She has worked incredibly hard during the offseason and we look forward to her advancement this season as she continues as a captain and an integral component of our team. True competition makes the best players better, and that is exactly what we have in our gym now with the addition of freshman Gabby Simpson. The two of them work together and challenge each other to raise the overall level of this team and really good things will come from that. As for which offensive system we will run, I like having the options that we have now, but it is too early to set something in stone.

Q: Kelsey English returns for her senior year and was a strong presence in the middle last year, but Nikki Lindow, who graduated, led the Buffs in blocks for the last four seasons. How do you replace her presence at the net?

A: While we are very proud to send Nikki Lindow off to play professionally in German, it definitely presents us with some holes to fill in our blocking and attacking through the middle. However, we are pleased to have Kelsey English back with another year of experience and I am certain that she will be primed for her most productive season yet. Sophomore Katelyn Cuff returns to the court after rehabbing during the offseason and we are excited to see what she will be able to add to the mix in the middle as well. The addition of fifth year senior, Rachel Hargis, and freshman, Anna Pfefferle, provide us with more size and athleticism in the middle, which is a necessity in the Pac-12 and the top level of NCAA Volleyball.

Q: Taylor Simpson transferred to CU and earned AVCA All-Pacific South Region honorable mention honors as well as All-Pac-12 honorable mention. She led the team in kills and points and was obviously one of the best players on the team. What does it mean to be able to have her on the team for another season?

A: Taylor's return is significant as she provides stability as an athlete and a competitor. She has an incredible focus about her in preparation for this season, likely something that was heightened and honed in her two training stints with the USA Volleyball Senior National Team in Anaheim, Calif. this offseason. She is an accomplished player by all measurements, but she has taken a much bigger leadership role on this team and it will be a big positive as our team chases down our goals for this season.



Q: Who else can we expect to see play on the outside position?

A: I am excited to have Alexis Austin returning as a junior this season. With the playing experience she has coupled with her athleticism and a strong offseason, things are looking good for Alexis this season. Senior Neira Ortiz Ruiz returns to compete for us on the pin as well and she is showing great maturity and focus which will bode well for her. She provides great size and offensive production for us in this position. Sophomore Joslyn Hayes will compete for a spot on the outside as well and she has done significant work to be competition ready, and I am sure she will contribute greatly to this team's success this season. Freshman Stephanie Shadley is a great addition on the pins because she brings a great mix of athleticism, speed, and is a feisty competitor that will be able to hold her own on the court this season.

Q: Cierra Simpson stepped into the libero position early in the season last year, and a couple other Buffs, Jessica Aschenbrenner and Elysse Richardson, spent a lot of time in the back row. With the departure of Aschenbrenner and Richardson, who will be looked at to step up and play more on defense?

A: As with any good program, the evolution of the team thrives on players developing from one season to the next and true competition in all positions, the libero and defensive specialist positions are no different. CeCe has continued to show her prowess through serve reception and has worked very hard throughout the offseason to elevate her skill levels in all her areas of responsibility. She is competing daily with

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sophomore Gwen Herring, who is making significant strides in her development as well, and brings a fiery approach to the court on defense. Junior Erin Taylor is competing hard for a defensive spot and is showing improvement, especially in serve reception. Sophomore Kat Hawkins brings just as much to the team with her athletic ability and skill as she does with her attitude and team first mentality, which can be rare in college athletics.

Q: Who will play the biggest role in getting the team back to the NCAA Tournament in 2014?

A: The success of this team is the team. While we have strong players, and some will carry bigger loads for the team on any given night, it really will be the team that will determine how high we can reach this year.

Q: Your coaching staff basically remained intact despite Kevin Campbell leaving since you elevated Ryal Jagd after he served two seasons as a volunteer. How important is it to have the same staff from such a successful 2013 campaign?

A: Continuity in coaching is very important for young players, especially for a program that is improving at a rapid rate, like ours. Retaining Ryal Jagd on staff as a full time coach is a key component in creating that continuity. His abilities clearly help players develop the skills and competitive edge necessary to be successful in the Pac-12 and in postseason play. Continuity is also a key element of a thorough recruiting strategy that ensures there is a complete roster from year to year comprised of highly talented and extremely competitive players. Ryal brings that to the table for this program and we are glad that he is part of this Buff family.

Q: Several Buffs had the chance to play for their national teams this past spring and summer. How will that experience help the team this season?

A: Playing for your respective country's national team is a remarkable experience and we have had multiple players on our team share in this experience. This past offseason, it was Taylor Simpson and Neira Ortiz-Ruiz's turn. Taylor was called to the USA Volleyball National Team twice, which is a not just a feather in her cap, but a visible sign that she is elevating her game to the level that will not only help her lead this team to a championship, but eventually to a world class playing career, once she is finished playing collegiately. Neira was called to compete for the

Puerto Rican National Team in the Pan-American Games held in Mexico this past June. Beyond being proud of both players for being selected, this type of competition adds a new dimension to their understanding of the game and I always encourage my players to play internationally, because it allows players to develop to the highest possible level. All players who are serious about their craft have international play as part of their overall development.

Q: Just like in the past, the schedule is loading with many ranked opponents. How will the nonconference schedule prepare the team for the tough challenge of the Pac-12 season?

A: The nonconference season has a strong balance of different types of teams to ensure that we are ready for the Pac-12 season as well as present a strong resume to the NCAA selection committee when it comes time to be discussing postseason play. Our nonconference slate is all about preparation and being able to have all facets of our team ready to go to make a run for a championship. Taking on two Big Ten opponents, Illinois (No. 11) and Northwestern, and well as Creighton (No. 23) are great opportunities to not only prepare the team for Pac-12 competition, but also to show our progress as a team in taking on top teams in conferences around the country. The four weeks of nonconference play are a very important phase for the overall season, because it will be where the team forms its identity and all our strengths and weaknesses are revealed. How we respond is probably the most important part of this segment of the season because that is the difference between teams that can win championships and other teams that have a good season.

