



Bzdeliks build stronger bond as Buffs

By Ryan Thorburn

Sunday, November 9, 2008

Basketball coaches are people, too.

That's something that often gets lost in our firethecoach.com society.

Throughout a 30-year career on the bench, Jeff Bzdelik has tried to realize his hoop dreams while also being a good husband to his wife and good father to his children.

It can be tough balancing the two worlds with the vagabond lifestyle, long hours and job insecurity involved in the high stakes profession.

"I did the best I could to find time," Bzdelik reflected during a recent interview with the Camera. "But it is extremely difficult, especially at the NBA level, finding time to spend with your family."

And then Colorado came calling.

Bzdelik -- the head coach of the Denver Nuggets from 2002-04 and at Air Force from 2006-07 -- was intrigued with CU athletic director Mike Bohn's offer to complete the Centennial State hat trick by rebuilding the floundering program in Boulder.

Truth be told, the person who really sold him on the idea was his son Brett.

Timing is everything and CU approached Bzdelik at the same time Brett was about to graduate from Regis High School and trying to figure out where to attend college.

"It was the day after Mike Bohn and (CU chancellor) Bud Peterson had come to my house. It was a Tuesday. Brett was off from school and he drove down to the Academy and we talked," Bzdelik recalled. "I had the best of both worlds to have this opportunity and to have the opportunity at the Air Force Academy. And as we were driving down I-25, Brett looked at me and said, 'You know, if you go to Colorado and I go there then we can be together.'"

"I said, 'Let's do it.' And that was it."

A lot of sons and daughters can't wait to graduate from high school so they can get some space from their parents. Brett, who is one of four team managers in the CU men's basketball program, says he relishes the chance to see his dad on a daily basis.

And the elder Bzdelik -- who kept the same address in Lone Tree while commuting to the Pepsi Center, Clune Arena and even the Coors Events Center last season so his two children could attend the same high school for all four years -- also gets to see his wife Nina and daughter Courtney when he gets home

from work.

"No. 1, moving," Brett said when asked what was the hardest thing about growing up a coach's son. "And that's why when he told me Colorado was going to offer him the job I said, 'Take it and I'll go to CU.'"

"I don't want to move again, especially now that we live in Colorado. I feel like this home."

Tough traveling calls

Brett, 19, was born in Columbia, Md., while Bzdelik was working as an assistant coach under Wes Unseld with the Washington Bullets.

"I remember when he was first born big Wes Unseld held him up there about nine feet off the ground by holding his arms outstretched," Bzdelik said. "So one of the first people to hold Brett outside our family was a Hall of Famer."

Bzdelik has a picture of Brett, a kindergartner at the time, posing with 7-foot-7 Gheorghe Muresan and 7-6 Manute Bol at his birthday party.

After a six-year run with the Bullets, legendary NBA coach Pat Riley entered the picture when he hired Bzdelik as a scout for the New York Knicks in 1994. The family packed up and moved to ... North Carolina?

"We moved to North Carolina because he was just scouting and didn't want us to live in the city," Brett said. "I've never even been to New York."

It wouldn't be long before the moving truck pulled up in the driveway again as Bzdelik followed Riley to Miami to serve as an assistant coach/director of scouting for the Heat in 1995.

The more high profile position made Bzdelik's commitment to his family even more challenging.

"There were times when Brett was playing youth baseball in Florida. After he'd practice I would go there and pitch batting practice and spend hours on the baseball field with him," Bzdelik said. "Then I would take Brett, Courtney and my wife to go out for ice cream. And finally when everybody went to bed at 10, I would then sit down and literally work until two or three in the morning doing my work for Pat. I'd get up three hours later at 6 a.m. and get into work and pretty much burn the candle at both ends."

"I had to do all that to juggling to meet the priority of family time and also get my job done for someone who was very demanding."

Mile high

roller coaster

After six years in Miami, Bzdelik was offered a scouting position with the Nuggets. He parlayed a very impressive stint coaching the franchise's summer league team into being named the head coach of the struggling franchise in 2002.

The Nuggets, in a blatant attempt by then general manager Kiki Vandeweghe to pile up ping-pong balls

prior to the LeBron James draft, had a roster full of players unworthy of the NBA.

Beat writers who covered the team at the time thought Bzdelik did well to get 17 wins out of the CBA-like group. But long suffering Nuggets fans were fed up following the 65-loss campaign.

After the excruciating season came to an end, the perils of being in the spotlight as an NBA head coach hit home.

"I remember my son was in his first couple days at Regis High School, and when I picked him up from school you could tell he was upset," Bzdelik said. "I said, 'What's wrong, Brett?'"

There was no response. Finally, Brett's friend told Bzdelik to take a look inside the school at a poster hanging in the hallway.

"So we went in and looked at it and it was a project done by seniors about people who are successful and people who aren't," Bzdelik said. "And they had a couple pictures of successful people and then a picture of me as a loser, along with a couple of other people."

"It was a great lesson for him and my family to know that these are things that happen when you coach. It's funny, because later on that year we had a great year with the Nuggets and went to the playoffs. But I think he understands the highs and lows of coaching and can put all that aside. It's a great life lesson. My kids, their skin is very thick. And that's a great thing."

After Bzdelik guided the Nuggets to their first playoff appearance in nine years, Vandeweghe fired him 28 games into the 2004-05 season and three days after Christmas.

While Carmelo Anthony and Kenyon Martin shrugged their shoulders upon hearing the news, Brett and Courtney were in tears.

"When he was coaching in the NBA it was unique and eye opening for me," Brett said. "But I like him in college. Here he has control over the team and in the NBA there are GM's and owners and it was tough."

More success at CU?

Taking the Nuggets from 17 wins to the playoffs during Anthony's rookie year was one of the greatest single-season turnarounds in NBA history. Leading Air Force to a 50-16 record with appearances in the NCAA tournament and NIT Final Four is the greatest two-year run in the military academy's basketball history.

If Bzdelik can build a nationally respected program at CU -- where men's basketball ranks last in the Big 12 when it comes to the standings, facilities and interest -- it might be an even better story.

Entering his second season, Bzdelik has already been criticized by pockets of the Buffs' meager fan base for parting company with most of Ricardo Patton's recruits.

And although significant progress has been made on the recruiting trail and with the program's infrastructure, last season's 12-20 record didn't exactly create a buzz at the Coors Events Center.

The losing in Boulder made for some long car rides back to Lone Tree last winter.

"There are certain games that take longer to get over," Nina, who attends every CU home game that doesn't conflict with Courtney's extracurricular activities at Regis, said when asked if her husband ever brings work home. "I try to get over them, and I know he tries. But if you really care about your job and what you're doing it can be tough."

Bzdelik's peers have picked the Buffs to finish last in the Big 12 preseason coaches poll. All they really know about the young team at this point is that Richard Roby and Marcus Hall aren't on it anymore.

CU will likely start three freshmen and two sophomores. Role players Jermyl Jackson-Wilson and Dwight Thorne are the only upper classmen on the roster. And even Bzdelik says he won't know how good or bad the 2008-09 squad will be this season until he sees these young players react in places like Lawrence and Lubbock.

"Obviously, we're young. But I'm really excited for the team and for my dad because he's never been somewhere where he's had his own players," Brett said. "We're having a great recruiting class for next year already. I'm really liking what I'm seeing. There's a lot of talent on the team."

That's coming from a team manager who is at every practice and gets to interact with the players much differently than the head coach.

Brett's ground floor view of the program is something the old man appreciates.

"Brett's a smart guy. He's a very smart guy. He doesn't say a whole lot ... but he digests, he listens, and he sees," Bzdelik said. "He's been around Alonzo Mourning and Tim Hardaway. He's been around Pat Riley. Danny Ferry was his babysitter a couple times. Being around basketball his whole life, he has a great understanding of the game and actually whispers in my ears sometimes his thoughts."

CU point guard Nate Tomlinson noted that Bzdelik -- who is very calm and calculated in front of the media and boosters -- has a healthy pair of lungs he's not afraid to use in practice where he affectionately refers to the freshmen as "rat bags."

"People don't realize how strict he can get. They're always like, 'Your dad yells? No way,'" Brett said. "He does and you have to in order to get through to so many players. You have to show passion for the team. He gets really intense during practice and during games. By all means I think that's fine. I've seen that side when I get in trouble. I know what he expects and what he doesn't expect."

Like father, like son?

Before becoming a coach, Bzdelik played basketball at the University of Illinois-Chicago where he was the team's most valuable player as a senior during the 1975-76 season and still ranks as one of the program's all-time leading scorers.

His better half was an even better athlete in college. Nina was a standout volleyball player at UIC from 1974-76 and is a member of the school's athletic hall of fame.

After graduation, Bzdelik was an assistant at Davidson (1978-80) and Northwestern (1980-86) before getting his first head coaching job at the University of Maryland-Baltimore County (1986-88).

"When Jeff first started traveling it took me a good year to adjust to it," Nina said. "We had some difficult moves. I was happy in some of the communities we lived in and had some great friends. We've

lived in so many cities and states, but I rank Colorado as one of my favorites and we'll always have ties here."

Brett played basketball as a high school freshman before gravitating towards golf and rugby at Regis. The CU sophomore is thinking about enrolling in the school of architecture and doesn't have any designs on following in his dad's coaching footsteps.

"I like watching my dad coach but as far as me being a coach, maybe a golf coach. I would do that," Brett said. "But he's definitely a phenomenal coach. I grew up playing sports and I've had a lot of good coaches and can recognize good coaching. I love watching his style of coaching and I'm glad to be a part of the team."

Who knows how the story might have changed had Brett decided to follow through on his original plan to enroll in an ROTC program at a small college in Georgia instead of talking to his dad about a CU partnership.

For at least the next four years -- Brett admits that he plans on making dad pay for five years of CU tuition -- Bzdelik will try to enjoy the best of both worlds.

"It's an absolute terrific feeling to be able to know that I can see my son on a daily basis. He's probably the main reason I'm here and to have this opportunity to be with him makes this job even more special," Bzdelik said. "I feel like I've won the lottery. I've had other opportunities, but we truly love this state.

"Couple that with the fact that Air Force and Colorado have allowed me to stabilize my family in an area that they love and are entrenched in for all the right reasons ...

"I feel very blessed."



© 2006 Daily Camera and Boulder Publishing, LLC.