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cu women's basketball

Mullaney knows the score

Bufs' transfer from CSU provides offensive gifts

By Chris Dempsey
The Denver Post

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BOULDER — If the Colorado women's basketball team achieves its stated goal of qualifying for the NCAA Tournament this season, it will take a solid plumber to get there.

That's right.

Nicknamed "The Plumber," sophomore guard Kelly Jo Mullaney will step in as the point guard in a now guard-dominated Buffaloes team. The transfer from Colorado State had to sit out last season under NCAA rules.

"She's one of the toughest kids that you'll see on the floor," Buffs coach Kathy McConnell-Miller. "She's just a fighter. She's not extremely vocal, but she leads through example. She gets us going in that 'Don't stop until the play is over' mentality. She doesn't mind getting her hands dirty. She doesn't mind the physical nature of the game."

CU Basketball

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She's tough like a plumber, but she has better hands: She can really score.

As a freshman at Colorado State, the Minnesota native averaged a team-best 14.5 points in 13 games, starting 12. At CU, she'll be among those expected to help pick up a team that lost last season's leading scorer and rebounder, Jackie McFarland, to graduation.

Mullaney said sitting out last season — for the first time since grade school — was hard.

"I haven't done that since I was in third grade, basically," Mullaney said. "I've been playing basketball my whole life. . . . Last year, it's given me a lot of energy to looking forward to everything to come this year."

Mullaney said the decision to go to Boulder from Fort Collins was easy, wanting to stay close to family. Her father, 12-season Minnesota Vikings defensive lineman Mark Mullaney, lives in Denver and was a first-round draft pick from Colorado State in 1975.

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Sunday's exhibition against Regis was Mullaney's first college game since Jan. 4, 2007. She and three CSU teammates were suspended for a prank in January 2007, and Mullaney decided a month later to leave the team. In her return to basketball Sunday, she had 16 points (5-of-6 shooting).

Colorado will start four guards and give up size many nights. McConnell-Miller knows McFarland, who led the team in scoring 21 times in 34 games, was CU's go-to player, but adds the Buffs got a good deal of work done from the perimeter, hitting 32.3 percent on 3-pointers (236-of-730).

The Buffs' 16-3 run to open Sunday's game was led by four 3-pointers. They were 8-of-26 for the game from behind the arc.

"People associate Jackie McFarland with our team, but if you think about our strengths and you think about our weaknesses, we were still a 3-point shooting team," McConnell-Miller said. "Now we have four players on the floor that can make a shot from beyond the 3-point line. Jackie McFarland would have died to have four players on the perimeter that could make plays and she could basically go through a year with single coverage.

"I think it's ever-evolving, but for the first time in a long time we'll be a guard-dominated team. . . . There are enough shots for all the guards."

But can CU improve on last year's run to the WNIT semifinals and a 19-15 finish without McFarland's 19.7 points per game?

"We started playing together and got more mentally tough toward the end," sophomore Brittany Spears said. "We have to start that way this year."

Said McConnell-Miller: "There is no doubt we're happy with how far we went last year and how we

competed. But this team, they want more. They want the next step. They want to take that step to the NCAA Tournament."

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college basketball

Outlook: CU women's basketball

A lack of depth, especially in the frontcourt, has coach Kathy McConnell-Miller working hard.

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CU's Kara Richards (Associated Press file photo)

Three keys to season:

Staying healthy. Colorado will have only 11 available players this season.

Senior center Kara Richards. After playing in the shadow of Jackie McFarland for three years, the 6-foot-4 Richards needs to at least regain her freshman form (9.0 points and 5.3 rebounds).

Sharing point guard duties. With Whitney Houston (ACL) out for the season, several players must take turns with ballhandling responsibilities.

Most improved part of team: Scoring potential

from several positions. The backcourt additions of freshman Alyssa Fressle and CSU sophomore transfer Kelly Jo Mullaney provide more options.

Biggest surprise: Julie Seabrook. The 6-3 freshman post

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from North Vancouver, British Columbia played on Canadian national teams. "Playing internationally, her maturity level is beyond what our expectations were," McConnell-Miller said.

Who has to take ownership of the team? The veteran trio — seniors Richards and Hannah Skildum and junior Bianca Smith. They have stepped up and assumed the leadership role held for so long by McFarland, who left as the program's No. 2 all-time scorer.

Game/stretch most worrisome: Like in football, the Big 12 could be the nation's toughest conference. Eight teams qualified for the NCAA Tournament last March and for the first-time ever, all advanced at least to the second round.

Roster adjustments: CU lost two major contributors before the preseason drills. Houston tore the ACL in

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her left knee during individual workouts and junior forward Aija Putnina returned to her native Latvia to play professionally.

Coming out strong: After opening with two home games, the Buffs take to the road for a Nov. 24 battle at Virginia, McConnell-Miller's alma mater. CU could face Minnesota in its Thanksgiving weekend tournament.

Tom Kensler, The Denver Post

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