



Baines: CU play-by-play man doesn't mind doing some double duty

By Gary Baines
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Mark Johnson is just beginning his working relationship with Jeff Bzdelik, but Johnson has little doubt that the new Colorado men's basketball coach fits in just fine with some pretty heady company in the college basketball coaching ranks.

As a broadcaster, Johnson has worked with the likes of Gene Keady at Purdue, Jim Boeheim at Syracuse and Kevin Stallings at Illinois State. And now Johnson is beginning a run with Bzdelik, the former Denver Nuggets and Air Force coach.

"It's fun to watch Jeff (coach)," said Johnson, the radio play-by-play voice of CU football and men's basketball since 2004. "He knows the game inside and out. That's been fun. I've been lucky enough to work with Gene Keady, Kevin Stallings and Jim Boeheim, and Jeff fits right in with that group."

Johnson, who will call tonight's CU game at Wisconsin (6 o'clock tip-off on KKZN-760 AM), has only worked three games since Bzdelik came on board, but he's quickly come to respect him not only as a coach but as a person.

One episode particularly drove that point home. On Sept. 16, Johnson's wife Susan suffered a stroke, losing the ability to speak for six or seven hours. While Johnson was in the intensive care unit with Susan, he received a call from Bzdelik, who was on the road recruiting.

"He said he was concerned for us and praying for us," Johnson said of their phone conversation. "At that point, we didn't have much of a personal relationship, but what he did spoke volumes."

Johnson reports that Susan is now "99.9 percent" recovered from the stroke.

Meanwhile, with the football and men's basketball season overlapping in November, Johnson has been kept hopping. Last weekend, for instance, CU's basketball season opener was played the night of Nov. 9 in Boulder. The next morning, the CU football team played a 10:30 a.m. game at Iowa State.

Not wanting to miss Bzdelik's first game as CU coach, Johnson and radio cohort Charles Johnson called the action at the Coors Events Center, did a postgame show and hustled off to Centennial Airport, where a booster's plane took them to Des Moines. They arrived at their hotel about 1 a.m., and got about 3½ hours of sleep before leaving for the stadium, arriving before 7 a.m. to prepare for the football game.

"It was a little crazy," Mark Johnson said. "It was a pretty quick turnaround. But the university has tried to put support behind Jeff and I wanted to do the same from a broadcasting standpoint."

This week, while there's no CU football game, Johnson and Johnson are broadcasting three CU

basketball games in three days as the Buffs play in a tournament in Wisconsin. All the while, Mark Johnson also holds down duties as the sports director at KOA radio.

"Doing games is the fun part," he said. "I enjoy that. There are moments like last week where you lose some sleep. But as I've discussed with (longtime CU broadcaster and former KOA sports director Larry Zimmer), when you've got football and basketball going at once, it makes for some long hours and lost sleep. But when you get into the business you know that."

Like many in the broadcast media, Johnson has made his share of moves to accommodate his career. But at this point, unlike at some times in the past, he feels genuinely settled in.

"I love this state of Colorado," he said. "I enjoy being here and doing CU games, filling in on some Rockies games and being the sports director at KOA. I was just telling someone I used to work with that for the first time in my life, I'm not looking for (another) job."



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