



Familiar foes await Bzdelik this week

Bufs play at DU tonight, Air Force on Thursday

By Ryan Thorburn

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Jeff Bzdelik is in a tough spot this week.

The Colorado men's basketball team, still trying to pick up the pieces from a disastrous 7-20 campaign and off to an underwhelming but predictable 3-2 start in his first season in Boulder, has been circled on the schedules of its next two opponents.

Bzdelik obviously has a lot of rebuilding to do to compete at the level at which he would like. The new CU coaching staff recently signed a recruiting class of five that most recruiting gurus believe is third to Kansas and Texas A&M in the Big 12.

But that's not going to help Bzdelik tonight at Magness Arena against the University of Denver (7 p.m., Fox Sports Net) or on Thursday when CU plays at Air Force.

The only way the Buffs can make this a successful two-game trip up and down I-25 is to play with the same passion and intelligence that Joe Scott will demand of the Pioneers and Jeff Reynolds can count on from the Falcons.

"They're going to play hard. We're Colorado, and they're supposedly the little brothers of the state," CU point guard Marcus Hall said. "They're going to look forward to this game, and we've got to be able to match their intensity."

Scott, who took Air Force to the NCAA Tournament in 2004 before leaving for Princeton, recruited most of the Falcons Bzdelik won big with the past two seasons.

DU is off to a 2-2 start — including a 30-point loss to Oklahoma and an 18-point loss at Northern Colorado — but upset Wyoming in its only homegame under the team's intense first-year head coach.

"I have tremendous respect for Coach Scott," Bzdelik said. "I give him a lot of credit for what he was able to accomplish at Air Force and I'm sure he'll do the same at DU. ...

"This will be a great learning experience for our players because what needs to change here and what we need to do here is build an environment conducive to winning."

Bzdelik told his players that there are only a handful of programs — Duke, UCLA, North Carolina, Arizona, Connecticut — who are consistently stocked with "elite" talent.

The hundreds of other teams? Well, they have similar talent and must separate themselves with work

ethic, unselfish play and a will to win.

"In our next couple of games we're playing teams that, to be honest with you, we're on equal footing in terms of talent," Bzdelik said. "The talent level is probably equal."

That means the Buffs, still trying to grasp the nuances of Bzdelik's system, will have to execute better than DU and Air Force and match their intensity in order to win either game.

The Pioneers and Falcons don't care about Bzdelik's rebuilding process. They just want to take advantage of the rare opportunity to beat a Big 12 opponent at home.

"It's definitely a challenge," CU guard Richard Roby said. "It's two games we feel we can win and we're looking forward to them."

Notable

Xavier Silas is healthy and ready to play after missing the win over Colorado Christian last Tuesday with a bruised leg. ... Austin Dufault, a member of CU's recruiting class from Killdeer, N.D., is a McDonald's High School All-American nominee this season. ... Hall will have dental work done today after losing two teeth in the Wisconsin game. "It takes 15 minutes to snap them in. I said I'd do it, but he didn't want me to do it," Bzdelik said. ... The Buffs stayed in Denver on Monday night and will travel to Colorado Springs after tonight's game. Bzdelik said tutors will accompany the team on the trip and there will be daily study sessions to keep the players caught up academically.



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cu basketball

The cradle of basketball

Higgins, brought up on the NBA courts of his father's teams, plays like he was born to the game

By Tom Kensler
The Denver Post

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BOULDER — A freshman guard on the Colorado men's basketball team, Cory Higgins was sorting through his travel bag before a recent road trip when it became time to load up the bus for the drive to DIA. Higgins figured he couldn't be too careful.

"I had to make sure everything was in here," he said while zipping up the bag. "You can't trust managers to do those things."

At age 18, how could Higgins possibly be mature enough to know that?

"You're talking about a kid whose father's best friend is Michael," CU coach Jeff Bzdelik said.

Yes, that Michael. Rod Higgins played 13 seasons in the NBA and was a third-year pro with the Chicago Bulls when Michael Jordan arrived as

a rookie in 1984. Jordan, part owner of the NBA's Charlotte franchise, hired Rod Higgins earlier this year to be general manager



Colorado freshman guard Cory Higgins, son of former Chicago Bull Rod Higgins, grew up bonding with the likes of Michael Jordan and Chris Mullin. (Jonathan Castner, The Daily Camera)

of the Bobcats. Higgins had been general manager at Golden State.

Cory Higgins, a 6-foot-5 wing guard and instant starter for the Buffs, has been around the game's highest level all his life. He served as a ball boy for the Warriors and is friends with Jordan's two sons.

It's no wonder Higgins displays a cool

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temperament on the court, the demeanor of a much older player. He certainly has a feel for the game. In Colorado's opener, Higgins made

CU Basketball

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an impact all over the court with 10 points, five rebounds, two assists and a game-high three steals against New Mexico.

"If you had walked into the arena and didn't know, you wouldn't have guessed that Cory was the freshman in the lineup," CU assistant Steve McClain said afterward.

Through five games, Higgins is averaging 6.2 points and leads the team with eight steals. He became Bzdelik's only scholarship signee last spring after the former Air Force and Nuggets coach arrived in Boulder. Higgins looks to be quite a find — he didn't make any national top-150 recruiting lists.

"Cory fell under the radar a little bit," Rod Higgins said.

The younger Higgins earned a spot in the starting lineup as a freshman at Monte Vista (Calif.) High School but then leveled off as a player. Midway through Cory's senior year, Rod placed his son in The Pendleton School at Bradenton, Fla., where Cory could work under fitness instructors at the prestigious IMG Academy nearby.

"That changed his body," Rod said. "The workouts there are top-notch. The facilities are top-notch. Cory already had the diligence. He wants to be successful. He always envisioned himself that way."

Higgins certainly doesn't appear to be intimidated by his new surroundings.

"Guys like Cory and me, I think we got a jump-start because we had somebody in the house always talking about basketball," said CU sophomore Xavier Silas, whose father, James, played professionally for 10 seasons and had his No. 13 jersey retired by the San Antonio Spurs. "It's just a different way to grow up than most guys."

It rubs off.

"Cory was around Michael Jordan a ton when he was growing up," Rod Higgins said. "He got tight with Chris Mullin. When you've been around people of that caliber, the shock part or being in awe of new surroundings is not going to affect you like it would others."

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