



CU's Wenino ably fills big cleats

Laura Munnelly's successor was All-Big 12 pick

By Joshua Lindenstien
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Colorado soccer coach Bill Hempen began last spring looking for a new central defender, and thus leader, of his defense. The rock he'd grown accustomed to, Laura Munnelly, had finally graduated after playing every minute in her college career.

One candidate, Brittany Dornseif, suffered an ankle injury before the season started.

But by the beginning of October, the unassuming Michelle Wenino had finally cemented herself as the new anchor in the back for the Buffs.

"You could see all of a sudden she got a little bit better and a little bit better, and you could see the players looking to her with no prompting from any of the coaches," Hempen said Wednesday. "It was just something that kind of evolved naturally."

Wenino started 23 games as a freshman and 13 last year as a sophomore before missing the Big 12 portion of CU's schedule with a knee injury.

This year, Wenino's selection as a first-team All-Big 12 pick attests to her abilities.

As someone who's certainly less vocal than Munnelly was, taking over as defensive ringleader on the field was a bit intimidating for Wenino at first. But it's something she's quickly embraced.

"I was excited to step into that role and follow behind (Munnelly)," Wenino said. "It's a hard thing to do, but it's also a good thing because I watched her for a couple years, knowing what she does best and building off of that."

Like Munnelly always did, Wenino leads the team in minutes played this season. And although she learned from Munnelly the past two seasons, Wenino's game is much different. But she's effective in other ways.

While, as Hempen said, "Laura was crush first and ask questions later," Wenino is more of a finesse player. She'll routinely pick-pocket opponents' top scorers and then get the attack started herself. Last season, as a wing, she was tied for fourth on the team in goals scored.

"Don't get me wrong, Laura got forward," Hempen said. "But not like Michelle."

One attribute of Munnelly's that Wenino does have is the trust of her teammates.

"As a freshman, I look up to her," defender Kym Lowry said. "Everything she does, she's done a great job for us this year. I know if I mess up or make a mistake, she'll be back there supporting me."

Wenino acknowledges the fact that it's been somewhat of a rollercoaster season for the CU defense. Aside from herself and Lowry, the Buffs have had a revolving door in the back, and they've given up big numbers at times. They've also posted nine shutouts, including last week against Texas in the Big 12 tournament against a Longhorn squad that scored four goals on them five days earlier.

But Wenino thinks the kinks are worked out. For one thing, forward Nikki Marshall will be sliding back to fortify the defense when the Buffs take Prentup Field for the first round of the NCAA tournament on Friday.

"I feel like we've got our groove finally," Wenino said. "We've got the girls together that seem to be working in the back."

Wenino said her main task in keeping the defense improving has been keeping her teammates upbeat and focused when pressure-packed situations arrive — and don't always go their way. It's a formula she's used herself when faced with filling the soccer spikes of one of the best players in CU program history, and one she learned while enduring the rigors of a four-sport athlete at Smoky Hill High School in Aurora.

Wenino played point guard for the Smoky basketball team and was also a standout for the track and cross country squads, in addition to the soccer team. She lettered 15 times in her prep career — a rare feat, especially at a Class 5A school.

"I think it's just one of those things," Wenino said. "If you're able to push yourself in every area of life, you can succeed in everything you do."



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Woelk: Even in trying year, CU makes statement

By Neill Woelk

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In case you haven't noticed by now, that was a clear acknowledgment of a job well done over a long period of time handed out by the NCAA earlier this week.

We're talking about the NCAA Tournament berth extended to the Colorado soccer team, giving the Buffs their fifth straight NCAA appearance.

Not that the Buffs didn't deserve a bid. They play in one of the nation's toughest conferences, they played a demanding nonconference schedule (three games this year against teams currently ranked in the top 25) and they did finish the regular season by winning two of their last three, including a victory at No. 21 Oklahoma State.

But this was not the kind of season that helped build the reputation of Bill Hempen's program as one of the nation's best. Rather, the season proved to be one of the most challenging in Hempen's career.

"We were constantly searching for the right combination," said Hempen, whose team not only received an NCAA berth, but will host the first two rounds beginning Friday at Prentup Field. "It was a difficult thing. You had kids asking themselves who would be the leader, who would take over ... And to be honest, no one ever really did."

In a 9-7-4 season, there were plenty of ups and downs, with more down moments than the Buffs have become accustomed to in recent years. A tough loss to top-10 Stanford early, a three-match losing streak in the middle of the Big 12 season and what most thought would be the season-ending match, a loss to Texas on penalty kicks in the Big 12 Tournament opener.

"Not until the Big 12 Tournament did we ever really play with a sense of urgency," Hempen said. "But when we went to the tournament, I think they finally realized it. It wasn't just a slap in the face, it was a full-on punch. The season might be over."

Even after the overtime loss to Texas, the overriding feeling was that the Buffs' season was finished.

But along with doing enough to at least catch the eye of the NCAA Selection Committee, the Buffs also had history on their side. In what was clearly recognition for the program Hempen has built here, the Buffs not only heard their name called, but also found themselves as the home team for at least one and possibly two games.

Now they have new life.

"It's been a long time since I've seen a team take so long to click," Hempen said. "We didn't beat Texas in the tournament, but we played as well as we've played all year."

If the Buffs can replicate that effort, they could be in for a long weekend. They open the tournament at 11 a.m. Friday vs. Hawaii at Prentup Field. If they win, they'll play the winner of the Denver-Portland game Sunday at 1 p.m.

No doubt, Friday's game time isn't the most optimal for attracting fans. One CU official said Wednesday, "We're encouraging folks to take a long lunch break and come watch us play."

But it's still an NCAA Tournament game, Colorado's ninth in the last five years.

That's a strong statement for any program.



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