



Motivated Buffs set for NCAA opener

By CJ Powell, For the Camera
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He might not have expected an NCAA tournament berth this year, but coach Bill Hempen still thinks his team deserves it.

After surprisingly making the tournament for the fifth consecutive year, the Colorado women's soccer team (9-7-4) will face off against Hawaii (15-4-2) at 11 a.m. today in the NCAA's first round at Prentup Field.

In last year's tournament, the Buffs advanced two rounds before losing to No. 1-ranked Notre Dame.

But that Colorado team finished the regular season with an 11-5-2 record and had won four straight before playing in the Big 12 championship.

"Last year, we were expecting to get in and this year we weren't, honestly," Hempen said. "The kids are legitimately excited about the opportunity to continue to play. Motivation should not be a factor."

The tournament bid from the NCAA wasn't the only surprise. Despite its rocky season, the NCAA made Colorado a host for the first and second rounds of the tournament. "It's amazing," said junior defender Michelle Wenino, who led the Buffs in minutes this season and was a first-team All-Big 12 selection. "None of us expected it at all. We were pretty surprised, but we're really excited."

Even though the team had its ups and downs this season, Hempen said the NCAA's tournament bid isn't without merit.

"I've thought all along that this was a good team — maybe one of the better individually talented teams that we've had here," he said. "It's just taken a little longer for us to play with each other, instead of relying on individual talent."

Hawaii is making its first ever appearance in the NCAA tournament after winning the Western Athletic Conference regular season title.

"They're a possession-oriented, high-pressure, knock-and-move kind of team," Hempen said. "It should be a good game because we like to think we can do the same thing."

Colorado's season was hardly a mode of consistency as the Buffs never won or lost more than three games in a row. At times, the young Buffaloes showed flashes of brilliance; at others, a mental error here and there cost the team a victory.

Nevertheless, Hempen believes that the team's youth will not be a factor in the playoffs.

"Every team at this stage in your season is no longer a young team," he said. "The young players can't say, 'I'm a freshman,' they have to say, 'Hey, I've got Brittany Dornseif (a senior) out there and Alex Cousins (a junior) out there. ... If nothing else, I have to reward them for their efforts throughout their careers here.'"



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Chance at hand for CU

Buffs host Hawaii today

*By Patrick Ridgell**Longmont Times-Call*

BOULDER — The University of Colorado women's soccer team is getting a mulligan.

And not to use the golf lingo too much, but if the Buffs hadn't hit out of that bunker in the middle of the season and started playing with the urgency coach Bill Hempen wants, they wouldn't be here today. Today, they're playing in the first round of the NCAA Tournament for the fifth year in a row, and the Buffs are serving as hosts for the second straight year.

"There are a lot of teams out there that probably don't think we deserve to be in," Hempen said. "We get a second chance."

CU (9-7-4) plays Hawaii (15-4-2) at 11 a.m. today at Prentup Field in Boulder. If CU wins, it'll meet the winner of the today's match between Denver and Portland on Sunday.

The Buffs were 4-3-3 following a 1-0 home loss to Texas Tech on Sept. 28. It was somewhere around then something clicked. They aren't sure what, or why.

"I think toward the end of the season everyone realized it's going to be over, so we had to start doing well," junior midfielder Alex Cousins said. "There's really no reason to why things started clicking."

Said Hempen: "Every group of kids I've had to deal with progress as a team at a different rate. This was certainly the slowest rate."

Hempen suspects his players struggled to replace Laura Munnely, whom he called a "dominating personality" who showed teammates what to do in difficult times prior to her graduation last season.

He said that former Skyline High School star Nikki Marshall, CU's leading scorer, has started to fill that role with her recent play. Marshall is fast, but Hempen said she's discovered another level of speed to reach.

Others are noticing.

"Kids are going, 'OK, I get it now, I want to play as hard as she's playing,'" Hempen said. "That's made a difference.

"Nikki so desperately wants to please people."

CU's play may have grown more urgent midway through the season, but it won only five of its final nine regular season games prior to losing to Texas on penalty kicks in the first round of the Big 12 Tournament.

That CU reached the NCAAs and gets to host, too, might say something about what Hempen's program has become. He believes playing a difficult schedule and excelling in last year's NCAAs — the Buffs reached the Sweet 16 by winning two games at Prentup Field — helped their cause.

“I don’t know that we were necessarily chosen for this tournament based on this particular team, but our teams in the past have paved the road for this team to get this opportunity,” Hempen said.