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Teams under construction

By Randy Holtz, Rocky Mountain News
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Jeff Bzdelik did it at Air Force. Can he do it at Colorado?

Joe Scott did it at Air Force. Can he do it at the University of Denver?

Tim Miles did it at North Dakota State. Can he do it at Colorado State?

Jeff Reynolds did it as an assistant. Can he do it as AFA's man in charge?

Answers will come soon enough as the four new Front Range major-college coaches officially begin working with their teams when practices begin today.



Ken Papaleo © News

Joe Scott takes over a DU team that managed only four victories last season.

COLORADO STATE

1 Aside from Stuart Creason and Ronnie Aguilar, you have an entirely new roster. What's your take on that?

I don't know many teams that have that few guys returning, so it's a little disconcerting. I certainly wish we had more experience coming back. The other way to look at it is, we've got all these new guys who, hopefully, will all pull together, and we can start with them pretty much from scratch as a coaching staff. They're guys who, from the beginning, will know what our ideals are and how we want to get things done.

2 What do you need to accomplish between now and your opener at Montana on Nov. 9?

We need to establish things very early and give the players a clear understanding of how we want them to play the game of basketball. I don't really have a timeline for when that can happen, but we obviously have a lot of work to do. I have certain expectations for our program. We want good people, good citizens who care about people and do the right thing. We want players who are good and competitive academically. And we want players who can compete in the Mountain West Conference. If you can't embrace those three elements, you won't be with us very long.

3 How do you develop a winning attitude after CSU's struggles the past few seasons?

A lot of things have to fall in place, and we're well aware of that. We need momentum in our program that isn't there right now. How do you gain that momentum? How do you do that? To do that, the players will have to perform on the court, perform in the classroom and perform in the community. I think what people are going to have understand is, we have a lot of great young players, but like any young players, sometimes those great young players make mistakes and do a lot to help the other team.

At a glance

- **Coach:** Tim Miles (first year at CSU; 99-71 in six seasons at North Dakota State; 212-132 overall in 12 seasons as head coach at NDSU, Southwest Minnesota State and Mayville State).
- **Last season:** 17-13 overall, 6-10 (tied for sixth) in Mountain West Conference.
- **Returning starters (1):** C Stuart Creason, 7-foot, 10.2 points a game, 5.5 rebounds.
- **Starters lost (4):** F Jason Smith, 7-foot, 16.8 points, 10.1 rebounds; G/F Freddy Robinson, 6-5, 2.4 points, 1.4 rebounds; G Tyler Smith, 6-3, 10.7 points, 3.3 rebounds; G Cory Lewis, 6-foot, 10.1 points, 4.2 rebounds, 4.5 assists.
- **Openers:** Nov. 1 (exhibition) vs. Regis at Moby Arena; Nov. 9 at Montana.
- **Impact newcomer:** Willis Gardner, a transfer from Ohlone Junior College in Fremont, Calif., is expected to start at point guard, replacing the resourceful Lewis. Gardner averaged 11 points and four assists while leading Ohlone to a 28-4 record. Gardner played his high school ball in Norristown, Pa.

- **Glass half-full:** Miles brings a renewed enthusiasm to the CSU program after several middling years under Dale Layer, whose program never reached the heights expected after the Rams' improbable run to the NCAA Tournament in 2003. Miles did a remarkable job at North Dakota State, a Division I independent that pulled several major upsets against big-name programs during his six seasons.

- **Glass half-empty:** Miles isn't the only new guy. After center Creason and forward Ronnie Aguilar, it's a whole new roster. That can be a good thing if the new players develop chemistry. It can be a bad thing if the newcomers don't jell. Replacing the consistent production of Jason Smith, now with the Philadelphia 76ers after leaving school a year early, won't be easy. It remains to be seen whether CSU truly has the resources to compete in the upwardly mobile Mountain West.

COLORADO

1 What would you like to see the Buffs accomplish before the season opener?

To play with desperate effort at all times, to play with a high basketball IQ at all times, to do at all times what we want them to do offensively and defensively and in transition. And do a great job on the boards.

2 What's your take on the season, or are you more concerned with the overall improvement of your players?

The winning and the losing, I'm not concerned with. The development of the team in those areas I just spoke of (is most important). The winning and losing takes care of itself, but you have to put yourself in position to be competitive and have a chance to win through those things I just mentioned.

3 ave you been able to see enough of this team to realize what the majority of the players do well, what their upside is?

Yes. The upside is their desire to learn (and) absorb everything we're trying to teach them. We do have athleticism and mobility at all positions, but we're going to be undersized. We're going to be inexperienced, and they need confidence. Their confidence was shook from last season. Richard (Roby) and Marcus (Hall) and Xavier (Silas) have done a great job in leadership. All three have really grasped the things we've asked them to do thus far.

At a glance

- **Coach:** Jeff Bzdelik (first year at CU; 50-15 in two seasons at Air Force).

- **Last season:** 7-20 overall, 3-13 (12th) in Big 12 Conference.

- **Returning starters (4):** G Richard Roby, 6-foot-6, 17.3 points a game, 5.1 rebounds; G Xavier Silas, 6-5, 12.0 points, 3.7 rebounds; F Jermyl Jackson-Wilson, 6-6, 8.0 points, 6.2 rebounds; G Marcus Hall, 6-2, 8.7 points, 2.6 rebounds, 4.1 assists (2005-06 totals).

- **Starters lost (1):** G Dominique Coleman, 11.7 points, 6.9 rebounds, 3.4 assists.

- **Openers:** Nov. 1 (exhibition), vs. Brock University (Ontario); Nov. 9, vs. New Mexico.

- **Impact newcomer:** Guard Levi Knutson is an excellent perimeter shooter and should fit in well in an offense Bzdelik calls "European" in nature, but adds, "Let's call it a Colorado offense." Knutson is an intelligent player who could adapt to most any scheme, and one plus is him not having to "unlearn" any bad habits carried over by upperclassmen from the previous regime.

- **Glass half-full:** The arrival of Bzdelik, known for his regimented offense and stringent defense, should bring changes for the better on both ends of the court. The Buffaloes have not been a particularly disciplined or cohesive team, but all indications point to those two intangibles changing, as well as the squad's lack of attention to detail. Players already are seeing a positive impact. The Buffs' first three practices (tonight, Saturday, Sunday) will be in Colorado Springs at the Olympic Training Center, offering Bzdelik a three-day stretch of strictly basketball to get things going.

- **Glass half-empty:** Here's the big question: How quickly and thoroughly have CU's returning players bought into Bzdelik's system? A secondary question: How physically able are they to adapt to it and successfully perform in it? Roby says a difference already is noticeable, but Bzdelik obviously will need time and a recruiting class or three to fashion this program into what he envisioned when he signed on last winter. Media covering the Big 12 have picked the Buffs to finish last, with Roby (honorable mention) the only player mentioned for postseason honors.

span class='headline2'>AIR FORCE

1 Will you continue to use the Princeton system?

We will definitely make some changes, but the base system will be the Air Force system, things that we've done the

last two years. Whether we can play it as fast as we've played in the past, it will take time. Joe Scott started it, Chris Mooney carried it on, Jeff Bzdelik took it to another level and now what we have to do is find a way to sustain it and move it forward.

2 What's the biggest adjustment of being a head coach instead of an assistant?

The biggest adjustment I've had to make thus far is learning to change gears and be able to juggle all the different dynamics of the program. When I was the assistant, I was involved in game preparation and recruiting and I didn't make the final decisions. Having been a head coach before at two different levels, that adjustment hasn't been as big of an adjustment as if I hadn't done it before.

3 Has the talent level improved at Air Force?

We have three freshmen who are going to play a lot of minutes for us. I would think that our talent level is up a little bit but at the same time they are having to play out of necessity because of that huge graduating class. We have a good nucleus of players back. We have seven guys that have played within the system. The success of our program this year will depend on how these players who have never been in a position of starting are going to adjust to their new roles. The system is not going to change that drastically.

At a glance

- **Coach:** Jeff Reynolds (first year).
- **Last season:** 26-9 overall, 10-6 (tied for third) in Mountain West Conference.
- **Returning starters (1):** G Tim Anderson, 6-foot-3, 9.1 points a game, 2.9 assists.
- **Starters lost (4):** F Dan Nwaelele, 6-5, 14.3 points, 2.1 three-pointers; F Jacob Burtschi, 6-6, 13.5 points, 6.0 rebounds; C Nick Welch, 6-8, 9.9 points; G Matt McGraw, 6-2, 10.8 points, 3.1 assists.
- **Openers:** Oct. 31 (exhibition) vs. Brock University (Ontario); Nov. 9 vs. Dartmouth in Air Force Classic.
- **Impact newcomer:** Evan Washington, 6-4, freshman, guard. Led the Air Force Prep School in scoring last season with a 14.1 average and was second on the team in assists, with 94. He started on the Falcons preseason trip to Canada.
- **Glass half-full:** An easier nonconference schedule than last season could help the Falcons mature and develop before the MWC schedule begins. Air Force had 10 days of practice and played five exhibition games - it went 4-1 - against Canadian teams on a trip to the Vancouver, British Columbia, area early last month. "We're a little bit further along than most teams, because we had the opportunity to go play in Canada," said Reynolds, who believes Air Force will be "retooling" rather than rebuilding. "There's a difference. If you knock something down totally and there is nothing left, if a hurricane comes through and knocks your house down and there's nothing left but the foundation, you've got to rebuild it. We've got some walls standing."
- **Glass half-empty:** If the players returning from last season can't adjust to handling more playing time, the Falcons could struggle to find that winning chemistry.

DENVER

1 What is your list of priorities as practice opens?

We have to get good at what are going to be our staples. We play a certain way and we do that so our players know we have to be good at these three things, for instance, and if we're concentrating on these three things and we get good at them, well, that's what's going to give ourselves a chance to win every game. And then it's a listening level, a

learning level. How much are they listening, learning, retaining so you see every day that improvement. That's what we're after. Getting better as a team.

2 Do you expect to have to build confidence in the returnees who endured last year's miserable 4-25 season?

I haven't seen that yet. Obviously, that's the \$64,000 question. I mean, 4-25. I think they have responded well. I'm hopeful. (Tyler) Bullock and (Nate) Rohnert, they were freshman. It's going to be in there somewhere, but how deep is it imbedded in there, that 4-25? Adam Tanner? He was out the first seven games. How much imbedded is it? Dave Kummer, he didn't even play. I'm hoping that means it's not imbedded in there that much so that we don't have to overcome it as much. We know it's in there. The degree to which is what we'll determine when we run into adversity.

3 What can people expect out of the Pioneers that was maybe lacking last year?

We're going to have five guys playing together that are going to work hard every possession to get the best shot we can get and not care who gets it. Not having players out there who care, "How many shots am I getting?" Because that creates tension. We play in a manner that eliminates tension. You're going to see guys work that way, playing together that way. You'll see that same mentality move from the offensive end down to the defensive end. It's the same five guys. If they care like you can't believe about getting the best shot every time and they don't care who gets it and they're unselfish, that's the kind of behavior they are going to show on the defensive end and that's what helps you stop teams - five guys who care like you can't believe about stopping the other team.

At a glance

- **Coach:** Joe Scott (first year at DU; 38-45 in three seasons at Princeton; 51-63 in four seasons at Air Force).
- **Last season:** 4-25 overall, 3-15 (sixth in West Division) in Sun Belt Conference.
- **Returning starters (3):** G Tyler Bullock, 6-foot-1, 11.0 points a game, 2.9 rebounds; G Joe Jackson, 6-4, 7.4 points, 3.9 rebounds; C Adam Tanner, 6-8, 6.2 points, 5.3 rebounds.
- **Starters lost (2):** G DaShawn Walker, 6-6, 14.9 points, 4.8 rebounds; F Antonio Porch, 6-8, 9.9 points, 5.4 rebounds.
- **Opener:** Nov. 8 vs. East Central University in the 2K Sports College Hoops Classic in Norman, Okla.
- **Impact newcomer:** Rob Lewis, a 6-7 freshman from Colorado Springs, has earned raves from Scott for his ability to absorb DU's new system. Lewis led all Colorado prep players in points and rebounds last season.
- **Glass half-full:** Scott will make the Pioneers play hard every game, and look for DU to shave at least 10 points off the 75.7-point scoring average it surrendered last season. Tyler Bullock and Nate Rohnert are a year older after solid freshmen seasons. And DU welcomes back versatile senior David Kummer, an experienced forward who missed last season because of a knee injury.
- **Glass half-empty:** After Steve Wetrich was forced to leave the team because of ongoing problems with concussions, the Pioneers were left without a true point guard. DU will have to rely heavily on freshmen who would be better served learning under Scott at practice. And, with the graduation of Walker, DU will have to find someone who can score consistently.

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There is a buzz in Boulder

By ELIOT DEMPSEY Colorado Daily Sports Editor
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The men's college basketball season is only a month away, with the Buffs opening the 2007-2008 season with a series of exhibition games beginning Nov. 1.

This weekend the Buffs and first year head coach Jeff Bzdelik can finally get down to business after waiting out the summer's dead period when players were allowed only voluntary workouts without the presence of Bzdelik.

The CU men's basketball team will travel to Colorado Springs for the weekend to practice at the Olympics Training Center and spend time together as a team, while also freeing up the court for a Denver Nuggets exhibition game on Friday night at the Coors Event Center.

Before leaving Boulder, Bzdelik spoke to a group of reporters on Wednesday and said that his team looks to be in great shape physically, there are just still some other things he hopes to iron out.

"To play with desperate effort at all times, to play with a high basketball I.Q. at all times, to just do at all times on offense and defense what we want them to do and to do a great job on the boards," said Bzdelik. "I'm going to sound like a broken record but you just value the ball, take the first best shot that is available to you, whether it be on a break or after going through the shot clock."

Bzdelik brings his own version of the Princeton offense to Boulder, one that he says the players are beginning to pick up.

"Everybody makes such a big deal. It is like European basketball, we'll just call it the Colorado offense," said Bzdelik. "I am seeing signs. We have had some backdoors that they kind of surprised themselves and we have had some open shots and some good post ups. Now it's just, 'O.k., can you score when we get you the opportunities?'"

One of the players that Bzdelik and the Buffs must rely on this season is returning senior swingman Richard Roby.

Roby seemed to butt heads with his old coach, Ricardo Patton, but said that so far everything is going well under 'The Buzz.' He said the adjustment period is over and that everybody knows fairly well what to expect from their new coach.

"Things are a lot different. We have to learn a lot still. It is a grind right now but we are going to get it right. I think we are doing well considering we haven't had our first official practice yet," said Roby. "We have definitely got to sharpen up our offense and our defense was a big problem for us last year. We gave up too many points and let team shoot too good of percentages on us, so we have to tighten that up."

Bzdelik said that he was pleased with the shape that the players are in now, and that he will count on guys like Roby, Marcus Hall and Xavier Silas for leadership. Because he was not able to teach them hand-on over the summer, it was those players and others who kept the ship moving.

"We are trying to teach them as much as we can in a limited time frame, fortunately for us that time frame ends on Friday," said Bzdelik. "The upside is their desire to learn and to absorb everything that we are trying to teach them. They do have athleticism and mobility at all positions, we are going to be undersized and inexperienced and they need confidence because their confidence was shook from last season."

The Buffs finished last season 7-20 overall, 3-13 in the Big 12 before replacing Patton with Bzdelik. Now the new coach has only a month to go before he will have to prove himself. He said that he is genuinely excited though, and that coaching practice and teaching young players who want to learn how to get better is his favorite part of the job. He and Roby both said they look forward to this weekend's trip.

"It is really inspiring down there," said Bzdelik. "You are going to sleep in the Olympic dorms, eat at the Olympic cafeteria. It is a beautiful facility down there. Every player will have their own basket and it will be nice and quiet and we can go Friday night, Saturday morning Saturday night and Sunday morning and come back Sunday afternoon."

"We will all be together; the coaches will all sleep in the dorms. It is inspiring there because there are Olympic athletes there, some that have won gold medals, and I brought my Air Force teams, there, plus we are going up in altitude so a little bit of extra conditioning is a good thing too."

