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The big 'Mac' attack

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Colorado women's basketball head coach Kathy McConnell-Miller doesn't pull any punches when it comes to discussing how her team needs to improve.

She was asked that specific question at CU's annual Basketball Media Day last Thursday at the Coors Event Center and she responded with an emphatic, "Guard play."

With talented post players such as preseason All-Big 12 Jackie McFarland, European do-it-all Aija Putnina and center Kara Richards, the front court is as solid as they come. The question mark is in the backcourt.

At times last season, the offense was left stagnant with too much of the offense being forced into those talented bigs. So, over the summer McConnell Miller and assistant coach Tom McConnell decided they had to change the offense in order to create more movement.

As a result the guards are more involved and now every player will be in constant motion, creating different looks for everyone. For example, instead of McFarland staying in the post all game, she will be moved outside and will play more of a swingman role. Guards will have the opportunity to post up and drive, and shooting, which coaches say they emphasized this summer, will be more important.

"I get to move around a lot more," said McFarland. "The movement in the offense, I love to catch the ball on the move to use my quickness. There are a lot of people bigger and stronger than me, so if you just set me there, they are going to be a wall."

One of those players bigger and stronger than McFarland is Oklahoma's Courtney Paris. When asked about the schedule, if there were any matchups that stood out, McFarland jumped on the OU game.

"The obvious one is Courtney Paris and in my opinion she is the best player in the conference if not the country right now. Anytime you get to go against someone like that it gives you a chance to improve you own game and see how you do. It's a challenge and I love challenges," said McFarland.

The Buffs were voted to finish 11th in the Big 12 preseason coaches poll. McConnell-Miller would not say how she reacted, but one can only imagine she too looks forward to the challenge of proving doubters wrong.

FRONTCOURT

Led by McFarland, the 6-foot-3 senior forward averaged 17.8 ppg and 10.8 rpg. This summer she played well for the U.S. Jones Cup team, an experience that she said has helped her pick up the new offense and has given her added confidence.

Putnina also received some international experience over the summer while playing for the Latvian U-20 National Team. She averaged 16.6 ppg and 11 rpg during that time, including five double-doubles.

Putnina (6-foot-3) said that she returned from abroad with a lot of confidence and she looks forward to playing in the new offense, one that can use her multiple skill set.

Kara Richards will see the bulk of time at center, a tough position to play in the loaded Big 12. At 6-foot-4 she has the size and strength; it is only a matter of where she will fit in with all the movement going on the offensive side of the ball. If she can improve her outside shot, the Buffs frontcourt will be a formidable one that can spread the floor.

Redshirt freshman Courtney Dunn is also 6-foot-4, can shoot the outside shot and will provide the Buffs some depth down low, she is just inexperienced and conditioning could be an issue.

The Buffs have a handful of players standing between 6-foot-0 and 6-foot-2, including juniors Hannah Skildum and Caley Dow as well as freshmen Chelsea Dale and Brittany Spears. It is not exactly fair to call them frontcourt players as they will all see time, likely in the 'swingman' role, helping out both down low and around the perimeter. Skildum and Dow have both had playing experience which will help the freshmen ease into their roles.

McConnell-Miller spoke especially high of Spears, saying that she is already one of the team's top shooters. Spears has been known to be the first one in and the last one out of the gym, a rarity for a first year player.

BACKCOURT

The area in which McConnell-Miller said she hopes to see the most improvement will be lead by sophomore point guard Whitney Houston and senior guard Susie Powers.

While there is no word yet on whether Houston and Spears are forming a singing group, Houston can definitely handle the basketball. Able to break down most defenders off the dribble, driving to the hoop has been no problem for Houston. It is her shooting that McConnell-Miller wants to see improved. Also, her assist-to-turnover ratio (64 assists, 97 turnovers) is not where it needs to be for a point guard.

Powers will bring senior leadership and steadying force to the Buffs guard play. She can play both the point and the shooting guard spots, and at 5-foot-10 she can defend taller guards.

Sophomore Bianca Smith showed up as a reliable backup guard last season, playing in all 30 games and is the Buffs top returning three point shooter.

Freshman Brittany Blythe has been described as a smart guard and junior college transfer Dina Piterniece brings the Latvian representation to two along with Putnina, and while she is currently injured, when she returns she will see time at both guard and forward.

SCHEDULE

The Buffs open the season with a trip to California where they will face San Francisco and then a talented USC team. They return to host the 21st annual Coors Classic, and then they have a tough non-conference test when they travel to Vanderbilt on Dec. 9, a game that Susie Powers looks forward to as she has a former teammate on the Vandy squad. The Big 12 will be tough as usual, and the Buffs have road tests at Missouri, Oklahoma and Kansas. Considering they went 1-10 on the road last year (13-17 overall), they have a daunting task ahead of them. They may need to take heed to CU men's coach Jeff Bzdelik's now-famous saying and play with "desperate energy."