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Expectations high for new women's basketball seasons

By Rocky Mountain News
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Can the University of Denver build on the success of last season's 20-11 finish?

Can Air Force, Colorado and Colorado State rebound after losing seasons?

Those questions will start to be answered this week, when the women's college basketball season tips off.

COLORADO STATE

Rams are unselfish and bright but need polish

Three questions for coach Jen Warden

1 What positives do you see going into the season?

"I think we have a lot of players who can contribute. It's difficult to play 10 or 11 players every game, but the minute I think I'm going in one direction with a playing rotation, something happens to change it. So the race for playing time is full-on from top to bottom of the roster, and that's a really good thing. The other thing is this is a team that won't have to battle selfishness. This team is a bright team, and they're a quick study. We're a long and athletic team, even if we're not a huge team. I want to coach long, athletic athletes, and we have a lot of players like that."

2 What have you accomplished so far in practice, and what do you still need to accomplish before your opener on Friday?

"We've made some strides, but we need continual work on the details - footwork, stances, the defensive and offensive techniques. Our individual games need to take on a more disciplined shape as we move forward. I think our start is critical. Momentum is big for this team and this program, and somehow, you have to create your own momentum. If we could do well early, that would really help our confidence level since we have so many new faces."

3 What kind of style do you want to play? What sort of team do you want this to be?

"I think we can be a dangerous team from the three-point line and I'd like to see us work the ball from the paint to the outside and back. This team wants to run, and I want them to run. I want to get high-percentage baskets and I want them to get to the free-throw line. Are we a finished product? We're a long way from that. But you have to trust your recruiting and trust the kind of people you've brought in. I think this has a chance to be a very together team, a team that's very close and likes to be together and play together."

At a glance

- **Coach:** Jen Warden (third season at CSU, 17-41; 46-100 overall, including three seasons at Boise State).
- **Regular-season opener:** Friday, at Northern Iowa.
- **Last season:** 8-21 overall, 3-13 (eighth) in the Mountain West Conference.
- **Returning starters (three):** G Sara Hunter, 5-foot-6, 12.5 points a game, 4.3 rebounds, 2.3 assists; F Juanise Cornell, 5-10, 7.7 points, 6.8 rebounds; F Kelly Rae Finley, 6-2, 4.5 points, three rebounds.
- **Starters lost (two):** C Marilyn Moulton, 6-4, 7.9 points, 8.4 rebounds; G Justine France, 5-5, 0.6 points, 1.5 rebounds. (Two other players who started, F Kelly Jo Mullaney and G/F Molly Nohr, left the team during last season and no longer are in the program).
- **Impact newcomer:** Kandy Beemer, an excellent three-point shooter, hopes to give the Rams added firepower from outside after leading the nation's junior-college ranks in field-goal percentage last season at Jefferson College in Hillsboro, Mo.

- **Glass half-full:** CSU has only four returnees from last season, with the rest of the team made up of transfers and freshmen. But a revamped look can be a good thing when a team finishes 8-21. Hunter, a Fort Collins native, is the cornerstone of the team, a polished, veteran player who came on last season as a consistent scorer. Cornell and Finley had nice moments last season and should develop. Among newcomers, freshman forwards Elle Queen and Lauren Young have potential. If everything comes together, this season could be a positive step in Warden's rebuilding plan.

- **Glass half-empty:** The Rams stumbled in their exhibition opener against Metro State, losing 55-42, and several of their potential weaknesses were exposed. CSU shot only 32.5 percent from the floor and made only 2-of-9 three-pointers. It remains to be seen whether the newcomers can congeal with the four returnees, and CSU needs to play scrappier and take care of the ball better.

Randy Holtz

COLORADO

Buffaloes will try to maximize their personnel

Three questions for coach Kathy McConnell-Miller.

1 What would you like to improve most about your team before the season begins?

"Guard play. There is no doubt that the strength of this team is the front line. When you have Jackie (McFarland), Kara (Richards) and Aija (Putnina), you have strength down low as well as offensive and defensive ability - not to mention their experience. It's hard to keep any of them off the floor. The guard play should be improved; last year was the first for Susie (Powers), Whitney (Houston) and Bianca (Smith). . . . We need them to take care of the basketball and not turn it over."

2 If you could point to one primary offseason focus, what was it?

"Outside shooting. . . . We told our players to take as many threes as possible this offseason to add to efficiency and ability. Especially with Whitney Houston. We wanted her to change her shot to more of a Division I shot - and she's done that and really improved that part of her game. . . . And we wanted to improve our mental toughness. We designed a lot of drills to help this team get mentally tougher, from the offseason mile runs to various drills we've run in practice. We really wanted this team to be mentally tough."

3 Why did you decide to change your offense?

"(Assistant) coach Tom McConnell (her brother) brought it up to me and really challenged me to get outside my comfort zone, the high-post, low-post offense . . . to play to the strengths of our team. Teams double-teamed (McFarland) and the posts and we needed to get them in single coverage because they can score when they are only going against one defender. We needed to find ways to utilize our guards and wanted to start playing from the outside in. . . . It's not an easy offense to learn (but) it's not the Princeton offense either."

At a glance

- **Coach:** Kathy McConnell-Miller (third season at Colorado, 22-38; 113-126, including six seasons at Tulsa).

- **Last season:** 13-17 overall, 6-10 (tied for seventh) in the Big 12 Conference.

- **Returning starters (four):** F Jackie McFarland, 6-foot-3, 17.8 points a game, 10.8 rebounds; C Kara Richards, 6-4, 7.0 points, 4.7 rebounds; G Susie Powers, 5-10, 3.8 points, 2.6 rebounds; G Bianca Smith, 5-9, 5.1 points, 1.6 rebounds; G Whitney Houston, 5-5, 7.9 points, 2.6 assists.

- **Starters lost (one):** F Jasmina Ilic, 6-2, 12.4 points, 3.2 rebounds.

- **Regular-season opener:** Nov. 16, at San Francisco (exhibition Thursday vs. Colorado Mines).

- **Impact newcomer:** Forward Brittany Spears' athleticism, accuracy from the perimeter and work ethic have impressed coaches. CU wants scorers on the floor this season, and the 6-2 Spears, who spent last season at Notre Dame Prep School in Fitchburg, Mass., should help fill that need. She averaged 23 points as a senior at Pasadena (Calif.) High School.

- **Glass half-full:** The Buffaloes will run a four-out, one-in offense this season, a change designed to get the most out of personnel and prevent opponents from double-teaming McFarland. Guard play - a seasonlong question mark in 2006-07 - should be improved, with Powers lending stability to the position and Houston and Smith returning with a year's experience. McFarland, Richards and versatile forward Putnina should comprise a frontcourt that can bang in the Big 12. Spears and athletic swing player Hannah Skildum should contribute quality minutes. Transfer Dina Piterneice, a three-point threat, is recuperating from a broken left toe and is expected to miss at least five games.

• **Glass half-empty:** The Buffs were picked to finish last in the Big 12 for a reason, actually several. McFarland is the only proven commodity on a team that shot 41.8 percent from the field last season (30.7 on three-pointers), averaged more than 20 turnovers a game and wasn't particularly fast or athletic in a league that has become more of both.

B.G.Brooks

AIR FORCE

McInelly is hoping to follow success of men's team

Three questions for coach Ardie McInelly.

1 What is your outlook for the upcoming season?

"The biggest thing we have going for us right now is Alecia Steele and Pam Findlay. Alecia has been a starter since her freshman year and Pam was a part-time starter her freshman year and a starter the past two years. They give great leadership to our team. That's the key right there. They are going to have to play consistent this season. We can't have them get into foul trouble, we can't have them get hurt, they have to be steady and have to set the example in games and practice. Last year, we lost in games here and there, but they weren't blowouts. One or two shots near the end of the game and we get a win instead of a loss. We have some great talent coming in as freshmen and that will help, and we have some good returnees."

2 What is it going to take to turn the women's program around, similar to the men's program?

"I think it can happen only if we stay healthy, we don't allow our key players to get in foul trouble and we have some people that really step up their games. Our players work hard, and they've seen the success the men have had. They saw that, 'Hey, they are in there working their tails off in the summer and putting in their time, and now we're doing those things.' We have some good players. I'm really feeling good about that aspect. We have to build that depth. We're still in the process. I'm pleased with our seniors. We have some juniors that I think will do well for us. We have some freshman that can come in and take some shots."

3 Are there rewards other than winning at Air Force?

"When we won 13 games (in 2005-06), we really thought it had turned for us. Then we lost three players for whatever reason. Can we do what the men did? Well, if we had retained Lauren Henderson at point guard, Ashley Mickens, a two guard, and Ellen Jaeschke, a 6-foot-3 player, can you imagine those players with Alecia and Pam? That didn't happen. That was two years ago, and we don't talk about that anymore. What keeps me going as a coach is the young ladies' success. I care about them as people and I care about them basketball players. We're all in it together. We've gone through so many experiences and shared so many memories together . . . that's why I'm still where I'm at because I love our players and love the academy. It's tough and extremely challenging, but I'll never back down from a challenge. And neither will our players. What makes me tick is the relationship with the players."

At a glance

- **Coach:** Ardie McInelly (seventh season at Air Force, 40-129; 117-191 overall, including five seasons at Idaho State).
- **Last season:** 6-23 overall; 1-15 (ninth) in the Mountain West Conference.
- **Returning starters (two):** F Alecia Steele, 6-foot, 12.1 points a game, 7.9 rebounds; G Pamela Findlay, 5-11, 8.3 points, 4.9 rebounds.
- **Starters lost (three):** G Letricia Castilla, 5-8, 6.7 points, 1.7 assists; G Andrea Taylor, 5-7, 1.8 points; G Jacki Novak, 6-2, 5.3 points, 3.7 rebounds.
- **Regular-season opener:** Friday, at Oklahoma State.
- **Impact newcomer:** Raimee Beck, a 5-8 freshman guard, can provide much-needed scoring punch from the perimeter. She averaged 20 points a game as a senior at Blackfoot (Idaho) High School and made 42 percent of her three-point attempts.
- **Glass half-full:** Air Force has two solid returning starters in Steele and Findlay. If talent can be developed to surround them, a winning nonconference record is possible.
- **Glass half-empty:** If the Falcons don't improve on their 36.8 shooting percentage from last season, it could be another grueling year. Air Force never has compiled a winning record since becoming a Division I team in the 1996-97 season.

Jim Benton

DENVER

Preseason expectations don't weigh on Tanner

Five questions for coach Pam Tanner

1 You lost only one player (Tyasha Lowery), albeit a key one, from last year's team and have been picked to finish second in the Sun Belt Conference West Division. Is there a burden with preseason expectations your team has not had in years?

"I really don't think so. Our team, because we're veterans, we have an expectation of where we want to be. I don't think we feel any pressure from the outside or anywhere else. I'm certainly not putting any undue pressure on them. Things are operating very smoothly right now. By Nov. 11, I think we'll be ready to go."

2 Lowery brought the ball up the floor probably about 90 percent of the time. How do you replace her?

"I think that probably is our one big question. The good news is, Brooke (Meyer) has point-guard experience. A lot of it. Jenna Cole can play the point, and she will play some of the point. Britteni Rice, who is a freshman, has done a really solid job so far in practice at the point. And then we have a junior-college player, Celena Otero, who played at Western Nebraska and went to Hinkley High School. So we have four people who can play that position. Not that it's better or worse, it's just a different look for us. I think we have adjusted well. I feel real confident in what (Meyer) will do for us there. She will start at point."

3 Will you continue to run 10 or 11 players into every game?

"I like that. I think as coaches, it gives us a chance to see who can play in what role in pressure situations. It also gives all the athletes reinforcement that they can make a difference in their game and their opportunity to play by working hard in the summer. I use the preconference, in particular, to find out who I can count on and who I can't. That's not a negative. I think every coach does that one way or another, and I like using game opportunities to do that."

At a glance

- **Coach:** Pam Tanner (13th season at Denver, 179-162).
- **Last season:** 20-11 overall, 12-6 in the Sun Belt Conference (second in West Division, reached semifinals of league tournament).
- **Returning starters (four):** F Alisha Godette, 6-foot, 9.9 points a game, 5.8 rebounds; G Brooke Meyer, 5-4, 6.0 points, 2.8 rebounds; F Sara Benham, 6-0, 9.4 points, 4.5 rebounds; G Jenna Cole, 5-11, 7.1 points, 3.2 rebounds.
- **Starters lost (one):** Tyasha Lowery, 5-6, 12.2 points, 3.9 assists.
- **Regular-season opener:** Sunday, vs. Duke.
- **Impact newcomer:** Rice, a true freshman from Pampa, Texas, is expected to help fill some of the backcourt void left by Lowery. Picking up more of the slack will be Otero, who returns to her native Denver after earning all-region honors at Western Nebraska Community College.
- **Glass half-full:** The Pioneers are experienced, deep and boast perhaps the best forward combination in the Sun Belt in Godette, Benham and reserves Nnenna Akotaobi and Brianna Culberson. The core of the senior class - Meyer, Benham and Cole - have been full-time players together since they were freshmen, and the group has been targeting this season for making a run at the Sun Belt title. DU won eight of nine games down the stretch last season before losing in the conference tournament semifinals, and with nearly the entire cast returning, that momentum could continue.
- **Glass half-empty:** Lowery was a dynamic ball-handler and, despite the capable replacements at the point-guard spot, her floor leadership will be impossible to duplicate. While Godette is scrappy inside, she lacks the size to lock horns with some of the bigger post players in the league. DU will count on role players such as 6-2 Sara Bents and 6-3 Anne Jaspersen, both juniors, to provide solid minutes from the center position.

Pat Rooney

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