



Now it's McClain's turn

CU assistant will face his former team Saturday in Wyoming

By Ryan Thorburn
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Jeff Bzdelik wasn't the only coach under verbal fire at the Air Force Academy last Thursday.

Colorado assistant Steve McClain, whose Wyoming Cowboys made March maddening for Bzdelik's Falcons, received his share of attention from the Cadets.

One sign in the stands at Clune Arena read: Don't think we forgot about you, McClain!

"They love Steve," an Air Force official said on press row before the Buffs' 60-50 victory. "He was so animated on the bench. They used to have to get security guards down there when he went at it with Joe Scott."

After posting a 157-115 record in nine seasons at Wyoming, McClain was fired last March. A couple of days earlier, his team upset Air Force in the first round of the Mountain West Tournament for the second consecutive season to burst the Falcons' NCAA Tournament bubble.

If you can't beat 'em ...

"What factored into hiring him was that he beat me three times and I had to make sure he was on my side," Bzdelik said with a smile earlier this year. "Steve is a brilliant basketball mind. He doesn't work for me, we work together, as all my assistants do. He is an outstanding recruiter. He knows what he's doing. And to be honest with you, I don't see him being here long because he needs to be a head coach somewhere. And I'm sure that will happen soon."

If you watch the Buffs' bench you can tell that McClain, who pushed the boundaries of the coach's box as a head coach, is still adjusting to his more reserved role.

"There are times when I find myself grabbing the chair," McClain said. "But I worked for Billy Tubbs at TCU and it's easy to get back into that role. Your job is to watch the game and look for adjustments that we can make and then give the head coach those suggestions."

Saturday could be an emotional road trip for McClain when CU plays at Wyoming (2 p.m., the mtn.). He coached the Cowboys to a pair of Mountain West titles and an upset of Gonzaga in the 2002 NCAA Tournament.

"I spent nine years at Wyoming and I've got a lot of great friends and memories there," McClain said. "It will be weird. I've never sat on that other bench."

Perhaps McClain was a victim of his own success. After posting a record of 100-52 in his first five seasons in Laramie, the Cowboys went 57-63 over his final four seasons.

Despite a 17-15 record last year with a young team, McClain was fired and replaced by Heath Schroyer, one of his former assistants. Wyoming athletic director Tom Burman said the decision was made due to a "conglomeration of things," including declining attendance.

McClain has turned the page and said his wife, Kim, and 6-year-old son, Dylan, are enjoying Boulder. Still, facing Wyoming at the Arena-Auditorium will be bittersweet.

"My son was born there and he'll always be a Cowboy," McClain said. "My wife and son both have a lot of friends there, too."

During his career at Wyoming, McClain was 2-0 against Ricardo Patton, including a 76-73 victory at the Coors Events Center last season. He coached former Buffs standout Shaun Vandiver in junior college and hired him as an assistant for the Cowboys.

"I didn't spend a lot of time in Boulder, but I'd always felt in the back of my mind this was a situation where you could win with the support of the administration," McClain said. "When I had the opportunity to come here I looked at it as an opportunity to get with a proven winner who had coached at all levels. Someone I could grow as a coach with."

Because Bzdelik didn't forget about him, McClain said he isn't in a hurry to leave CU to become a head coach again unless the right opportunity presents itself.

"It makes you feel good," McClain said. "I think Jeff respected what we did at Wyoming, how we went about things, and how hard my teams played."



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