



Shelton: CU women in position for NCAAs

By Chris Shelton

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What a difference one month made for the Colorado women's basketball team.

Heading into last month, the Buffs were reeling from an 84-73 loss to Siena in the first round of its own Thanksgiving tournament, the Coors Classic. Colorado shot itself out of that game and it looked like it was going to be a long season unless CU could find someone other than Jackie McFarland to score points.

But on the very first day of December, Colorado's offense was unleashed and the Buffs trounced rival Colorado State 82-47 in Fort Collins.

Momentum from the CSU win helped carry CU to two very important victories.

Colorado knocked off No. 21 Wyoming 69-55 at home to snap a 23-game losing streak against ranked teams.

The Wyoming win wasn't a fluke, either, as the Buffs showed in their next game.

Colorado hit the road to face a Southeastern Conference team and beat the No. 20 Vanderbilt Commodores 62-51.

Roughly two weeks later, CU entered the rankings at No. 25. It was CU's first ranking since the 2004 season ended with the Buffs at No. 17.

Colorado topped off the month of December by going undefeated with seven wins. It was just the sixth time in program history that CU didn't lose a December contest and the Buffs (10-2) moved up in the rankings to No. 23 on Monday.

"What a great month of December for the Buffs," CU coach Kathy McConnell-Miller said. "This was a month of the team chemistry developing. ... It's a real strong bond and it's exciting."

Key to CU's emergence has been the outside shooting of sophomore guard Bianca Smith, the all-around athletic play of freshman forward Brittany Spears, the emergence of sophomore forward Aija Putnina, whose insertion into the starting lineup coincided with CU's nine-game win streak, and the steady hand of senior point guard Susie Powers.

After missing all 11 shots against Siena, Smith found her shooting touch in December. She made 46.8 percent of her shots last month, which helped draw defenders outside to help take away the double- and triple-team zone defenses thrown at McFarland.

Spears and junior Hannah Skildum, each with long arms, are coming up with steals in CU's zone press. And Spears is making an impact with her ability to rebound (6.8 per game), block shots (five against Jacksonville State) and score points (13.3 per game).

Powers leads the Big 12 in assist-to-turnover ratio at 3.7. She has 55 assists to 15 turnovers.

"There's a confidence about (the team)," McConnell-Miller said. "It starts with the point guard. I rarely see Susie get flustered on the floor."

Defense has improved, too. Colorado has held five teams under 50 points this season, which stands out considering that CU held teams to less than 50 points in just three games in the previous three seasons.

The Buffs also feature several players who can rebound and they haven't been outrebounded in 16 consecutive games, dating back to last season.

Then there's the offense.

Players had been standing around too much, watching McFarland work inside or taking quick 3-pointers. But in the last two games, players are starting to drive to the basket to open up a whole new dimension to the flow of the game.

It all goes back to chemistry.

"We can read each other really well," Powers said. "Playing with Jackie for three years now, I know what she is going to do before she does."

Now CU has a chance to show that December wasn't an aberration.

The Buffs hope to carry their momentum over into the new year. They have one more nonconference game, hosting Pepperdine at 5:30 p.m. Friday, before embarking on the Big 12 schedule with a road game at Missouri on Jan. 9.

A winning record in Big 12 play should land the Buffs in the NCAA tournament given their turnaround in December -- certainly a change in expectations for a program coming off three consecutive losing seasons and stumbling out of the gate in the Coors Classic.



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