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cu men's basketball

CU's Crawford stretching defense

New Buff's shooting yanks foe's center out of paint

By Chris Dempsey
The Denver Post

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Casey Crawford, a 6-foot-9 sophomore transfer from Wake Forest, is being counted on to provide a long-distance shooting threat for the Buffaloes. (Helen H. Richardson, The Denver Post)

BOULDER — In basketball, there are guys, and then there are Guys.

Casey Crawford is a Guy.

At Blue Valley North High School in Overland Park, Kan., he was Mr. Basketball in the state, the Gatorade player of the year, a first-team all-state selection and his school's all-time leading scorer, rebounder and shot blocker. He averaged 22 points, 10 rebounds and four blocked shots as a senior and took those talents to Wake Forest.

But Wednesday, he stood in a hall just outside of the Colorado men's locker room at the Coors Center, having transferred to CU a year ago, talking about himself not as the guy, but just another guy. Coach Jeff Bzdelik's system doesn't create stars or highlight individual players, but Crawford will

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help make the 3-point shooting, back-door cutting philosophy of his coach run.

"It's interesting," Bzdelik said. "Every time we've had practices with defenders, Casey has drilled a few 3s in just a couple of minutes. And that stretches defenses out."

And that is the point.

By all rights, at 6-foot-9 Crawford is an undersized center. But that might not matter much. In Bzdelik's

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offense, the center is frequently at the top of the key. If that player is a must-guard 3-point threat, it takes the opposing team's big man out of the paint, which then opens up back-door cutting lanes.

And after just three weeks of practices, Colorado players say they've already seen a difference with Crawford in the rotation.

"Definitely," said guard Cory Higgins, CU's leading returning scorer from last season. "It opens up all sorts of cuts. If the big man does help off of him, they'll quickly learn not to because he'll knock it down."

Added guard Dwight Thorne: "Casey brings the big man at the top of the key that we were missing last year that can hit open jumpers and facilitate the ball a little bit better. I think with him it kind of brings the offense together even more than last year."

Crawford shrugs and smiles.

"I fit in real well with the system," the sophomore said. "Coach likes big men who can shoot the ball, so that's what I do. I fit the bill."

A combination of wanting more playing time, being far from home and other factors led to Crawford's transfer from Wake Forest in 2007. Colorado was not on the initial list of schools he was interested in, but that quickly changed when Bzdelik called.

The CU coach and assistant Derrick Clark recruited Crawford out of high school when they were at Air Force. Also, assistant Steve McClain expressed a desire to sign Crawford while he was the head coach at Wyoming.

"So I kind of knew them," Crawford said. "It ended up being between CU and Northwestern."

After a year of sitting and learning, Crawford is ready to play. He'll get his first chance Friday night in the season opener against Arkansas-Pine Bluff.

"It kind of really hasn't sunk in yet," he said. "I'm sure it's going to sink in as soon as I get out there on Friday night. That's when it's going to hit me, actually being out there, not in a polo on the end of the bench."

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The Crawford file

After sitting out a transfer season, Casey Crawford is ready to boost Colorado's offense with his long-range scoring ability:

Class: Sophomore. Ht: 6-9. Wt: 235.

Skill set: Crawford's shooting threat from outside will force opposing centers to follow him out of the lane, thus allowing the openings required for the Buffaloes' back-door cutting.

Resume: Transferred from Wake Forest after playing in nine games. . . . Was Kansas' Gatorade player of the year and all-state as a senior in Blue Valley North in Overland Park, Kan.

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college basketball

Outlook: CU men's basketball

In his second season, Colorado coach Jeff Bzdelik's rebuilding project has blossomed with team chemistry.

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CU coach Jeff Bzdelik. (Associated Press file photo)

Three keys to the season:

Rebounding. The Buffs won't be big or burly. At the offensive end, rebounding can especially be a challenge in a Princeton-style offense. For CU, rebounding must be a team effort.

Outside shooting. In a new environment and with hands in their faces, true freshmen often struggle with their jumpers. "When we get open looks, we

have to make our fair share," Bzdelik said.

Limit turnovers. Bzdelik knows every possession will be critical.

Most improved part of team: Bzdelik said the chemistry that already has developed among his team "is pleasing and exciting." It starts with 6-foot-2 freshman PG Nate Tomlinson, an Aussie who played high school in Maine. "He's a

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pass-first point guard, who we have to tell to shoot," Bzdelik said. "That's contagious."

Biggest surprise: Cory Higgins. Bzdelik thought the 6-5 guard might be the best player on the team anyway. "But he has really elevated his game," the coach said. Higgins, son of former NBA player Rod Higgins, may be the best defensive player on the roster.

Who has taken ownership of the team?

Tomlinson. His teammates already are saying he acts like a coach on the floor while directing traffic and distributing the ball. True point guards are hard to find. CU finally has one.

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Game/stretch most worrisome: The coaches and players are sure to learn a lot about the team during the Nov. 29 road game against Stanford in the Big 12/Pac-10 Hardwood Series.

Roster adjustments: Junior forward Trent Beckley, a 6-9 former walk-on from Vail, will redshirt to heal a stress fracture in his lower back.

Coming out strong: As is the strategy with most coaches trying to instill confidence in a young team, Bzdelik lightened CU's nonconference schedule. Before the start of Big 12 play in January, Stanford will be the only opponent from a "power conference" (BCS affiliation in football).

Tom Kensler, The Denver Post

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Bzdelik says 2009 recruits provide major step forward

Men's team receives all three letters Wednesday

By Ryan Thorburn

Thursday, November 13, 2008

They are all good fits.

That's how Colorado assistant coach Steve McClain, who has spent more time in gyms and airports evaluating talent than he has in his new office at the Coors Events Center, described the three players the men's basketball program signed to letters of intent on Wednesday.

As expected, the Buffs' 2009 class consists of point guard Alec Burks, small forward Keegan Hornbuckle and center Shane Harris-Tunks. CU head coach Jeff Bzdelik plans to add one more player during the spring signing period.

Now that these future players signed and sealed, the coaching staff's focus is now completely on delivering some wins during the 2008-09 season, which begins on Friday when the Buffs host Arkansas-Pine Bluff.

"With the signing of these three young men, once again we have taken a major step toward creating the vision for this program," Bzdelik said. "All three are highly skilled, highly intelligent and play with a competitive spirit."

Burks is from Grandview, Mo., and gave CU a verbal commitment after visiting Boulder and Kansas State.

"Alec has the potential to be a 6-foot-5 point guard because of his athleticism and passing ability," Bzdelik said. "Not only is he an excellent shooter, he has great vision."

Hornbuckle is a 6-6 small forward from Los Angeles who was also recruited by Arizona.

"Keegan is a long, skilled and athletic perimeter player that fits our system," Bzdelik said.

And Harris-Tunks, a 6-11 center from Sydney, Australia, could be the most valuable piece to the puzzle on a young roster that could use some size to compete better in the Big 12.

"Shane comes to us with an abundance of international experience. He is a wide, big body who will provide us with a defensive post presence, defensive rebounding and shot blocking," Bzdelik said. "From an offensive standpoint, he gives us a physical presence who can also pass and shoot the ball from the perimeter."



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Bzdelik's Buffs face road warriors Friday

Golden Lions start 11-game road trip Friday at Colorado

By Ryan Thorburn

Thursday, November 13, 2008

If the Arkansas-Pine Bluff men's basketball team had a theme song it would be Johnny Cash's remake of "I've been everywhere."

Boulder is the first stop on Friday when the Golden Lions open the season against Colorado at 8:30 p.m. in the Coors Events Center.

Other destinations on the brutal 11-game non-conference schedule, which does not include a single home game, include College Station, Texas, Lincoln, Neb., and Columbia, Mo.

In addition to the four Big 12 road games, Arkansas-Pine Bluff visits opponents from the ACC (Georgia Tech), Big Ten (Purdue), Big East (Cincinnati), Conference USA (SMU), Missouri Valley (Creighton), Mountain West (San Diego State) and WAC (Nevada).

The team's home opener is on Jan. 3 against Mississippi Valley State, which also happens to be the Southwestern Athletic Conference opener.

According to Arkansas-Pine Bluff athletic director Louis Perkins, the average payout for each game on the trip is about \$70,000 and CU is "within a couple thousand" of that figure.

Perkins insists that the program is thinking about March Madness as much as the money.

"It does generate revenue to play 11 money games, and eventually we might want to play maybe only seven or eight money games," Perkins said during a phone interview with the Camera. "But we want kids who want to play and compete against bigger institutions and prepare themselves to win our conference."

Perkins pointed out that last year's SWAC champion, Mississippi Valley State, lost 70-29 to UCLA in the first round of the NCAA Tournament.

If the Golden Lions achieve their goal of getting invited to the big dance, which means winning their conference tournament, they want to be prepared to compete with the big-name schools.

Arkansas-Pine Bluff is confident that first-year head coach George Ivory, a former SWAC player of the year during a stellar career at Mississippi Valley State and a longtime assistant coach in the conference, will be able to get his team to survive this gauntlet and make the Golden Lions stronger down the stretch.

“Around here his name is synonymous with success,” Perkins said. “You’re not going to outwork coach Ivory. And he’s a monster recruiter. I think teams are going to be surprised with our size and quickness.”

Ivory has brought in eight new players he believes will immediately upgrade the talent and prospects for the program, which was 50-124 over the previous six seasons under Van Holt.

“Right now it’s mixing pretty good,” Ivory said. “We’re trying to learn how to play with each other and practice hard.”

And there will be plenty of time to bond on the long road ahead.

“Our players are used to traveling and they understand it,” Ivory said. “You would always love to have some home games in there but we’re ready for the challenge.”

The Golden Lions will play at Texas A&M on Sunday with a visit to Nebraska on Nov. 22 and Missouri on Dec. 2.



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Woelk: Bzdelik's Buffs on accelerated learning curve

By Neill Woelk
Thursday, November 13, 2008

The Coors Events Center is often the site for mid-term and final exams for some of the bigger classes at the University of Colorado.

This fall, it's been the site of a daily class, geared toward freshmen but bent toward an accelerated learning curve.

Tonight, that class gets its first exam of the season when Jeff Bzdelik sends his oh-so-young Buffs out before a crowd for the first time this year.

Bzdelik admits he's not sure what to expect. While the Buffs played well in scrimmages against Utah and Northern Colorado, that doesn't mean his freshmen won't suffer a little stage fright tonight when the lights go on and there are actually a few people sitting in the Events Center seats.

The guess here is that they'll get over that stage fright in a hurry.

Folks who appreciate solid fundamental basketball will like this team. Not because it will win a bucketload of games -- particularly not in the rough-and-tumble Big 12 -- but because these players know their way around the floor.

It should be a fun team to watch grow as the season progresses.

Freshmen Austin Dufault and Nate Tomlinson are the sons of coaches. They've been around basketball since the day they were born, and they act like it. Cory Higgins is the son of a former NBA player and current NBA executive. He's spent a lifetime on and around the court, and he acts like it.

This team knows hoops. In fact, the basketball IQ of this bunch might be higher than any other that has taken the floor at CU since the days when Chauncey Billups wore a Buff uniform.

Not that there won't be plenty of growing pains. The mere fact that Bzdelik will start as many as three freshmen virtually guarantees plenty of rough spots.

But Bzdelik did formulate a schedule that will give his team at least the chance to experience success early on.

This corner has never supported cupcake schedules. But we're willing to give Bzdelik a pass -- just once -- because this team does indeed need to taste a little success early, and also because we know the schedule will get much tougher, beginning next year.

Already, the Buffs are entered in the 2009 Maui Invitational, a tourney field that will include Arizona, Maryland, Louisville, Gonzaga, Vanderbilt and Wisconsin. (And, if you want to look a little farther down the road, word is that Roy Williams has tentatively agreed to bring North Carolina to the Events Center in 2010. Tough enough for you?)

But back to this year.

If the Buffs win all their non-conference home games -- not an unrealistic expectation, given the schedule -- and pick up a win or two at the Rainbow Classic, that would send them into the Big 12 season with 11 wins.

That might be enough momentum and confidence for the young Buffs to steal a few Big 12 victories.

But more important for this team will be how it grows as the season progresses.

What to look for immediately?

This should be a good 3-point shooting team. They've shown the ability to be consistent from long range in practice; if they can translate that to games, it should make them competitive right away. In particular, if big man Casey Crawford hits his 3's, it will force opposing centers to follow him to the perimeter -- and open up the back-door cuts to the basket Bzdelik so dearly loves.

Keep an eye on the defense. Bzdelik has been stressing a match-up strategy that could make life miserable for opponents. This team will work on defense.

Most of all, however, watch to see how this team improves as the year stretches on.

You might like what you see.



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