



Bzdelik's Buffs remain focused on 'D'

Colorado hosts Lafayette in bid to improve to 3-1

By Ryan Thorburn

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A year from now the Colorado men's basketball team will be competing against programs like Arizona, Louisville and Maryland at the Maui Classic.

For now, Jeff Bzdelik is just trying to get his young team some confidence against non-conference opponents that include Prairie View A&M, Louisiana-Monroe and Western State.

After a victory over Harvard and with a road trip to Stanford looming, it will be Bzdelik's job is to make sure the Buffs take Lafayette -- a smaller and lesser known but also highly respected academic institution -- as seriously as they will next season's marquee matchups in paradise.

Tonight's CU-Lafayette tip-off at the Coors Events Center is scheduled for 7:05 p.m.

"They're very similar to Harvard," said Bzdelik, whose young team overcame a nine-point deficit in the second half to beat the Crimson 70-57 on Saturday. "They're not going to beat themselves, they move extremely well without the basketball, they all can shoot it, they're extremely well-coached ...

"And these are games that are extremely challenging and the type of games that our team can grow from."

The Leopards (2-2) -- the first Patriot League team CU has ever played -- are coming off back-to-back home losses to Temple and Rider.

Lafayette had four players -- Jeff Kari (21 points), Jared Mintz (16), Ryan Willen (13) and Andrew Brown (11) -- score in double figures during the 84-77 loss to Rider on Sunday.

CU has also had pretty good balance offensively so far this season with four players scoring in double figures in all three games, but the team's strength and focus remains on the defensive end of the court.

Bzdelik's team is scoring 76.0 points (up from last year's average of 62.4) and giving up 66.0 points (up slightly from last year's 64.4).

"The defensive possessions where we are stopping the other team have been there," CU sophomore Cory Higgins said. "But the rebounding hasn't been. So we have to finish those possessions off."

Higgins, a 6-4 guard, leads the team in rebounding, averaging 7.3 boards per game. He's also the Buffs' leading scorer (15.7 ppg) and best defender.

"Of course we're going to focus on ourselves, but (Lafayette) is similar to Harvard," Higgins said. "They're a smart team and they're not going to beat themselves. We have to execute our offense."

CU is shooting 50.7 percent from the field and allowing opponents to shoot 46.1 percent.

Bzdelik gave his team a failing defensive grade after breaking down film of the loss to Montana State a week ago, but was pleased with the progress shown against Harvard.

"The defense improved tremendously and that's all we're looking for," Bzdelik said. "Our defensive grade went up about 22 percent from our previous game. Again, the whole focus of this extremely young team is just to continue to get better."

The Buffs are looking for their first 3-1 start since the 2005-06 season. Ricardo Patton's team opened that campaign 10-1 before a late-season slide cost the program an NCAA Tournament bid and the head coach a contract extension.

So far the hiring of Bzdelik hasn't translated into more fans at the Coors Events Center with CU averaging 3,568 through three home games.

"I would definitely like for there to be more fans in the stands," Higgins said. "I guess after we start winning, if there are still not fans then I might be upset a little bit. But right now I'm all right."



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