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## Higgins shows Dad's old stuff

For CU's budding star, it's in the genes

By Tom Kensler  
The Denver Post

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Cory Higgins scores two of his 28 second-half points in Wednesday's win over CSU. (Karl Gehring, The Denver Post)

boulder Well into the second half . . . down by eight points . . . clock ticking away . . . nobody else is hot . . . time to step up, stay cool, take control. Growing up behind NBA benches, Colorado sophomore guard Cory Higgins must have watched Michael Jordan confront a similar situation countless times. Something was bound to rub off.

"One thing I learned is, a player can't get too high or too low during a game," said the 6-foot-5 Higgins, the son of former NBA player Rod Higgins. "Your mind can go all kinds of places when you get wrapped up in other stuff like pressure."

Keeping focus and being the go-to player has become Higgins' new role. It was on display Wednesday when he scored 28

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points in the second half to rally the Buffs past Colorado State.

Last season, as a freshman, Higgins was the team's third scoring option, behind seniors Richard Roby and Marcus Hall. This is Higgins' team now — within the framework of coach Jeff Bzdelik's pass-happy

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offense, of course.

"Cory is the guy we look to," freshman point guard Nate Tomlinson said.

Higgins leads the Buffaloes in scoring (18.4), rebounding (6.0) and steals (12) and is second in assists with 20, one behind Tomlinson.

"I'm ready to make that transition," Higgins said of evolving from role player to go-to guy.

Bzdelik wants to make sure Higgins realizes what that involves. The coach has had several conversations with Higgins and his father about how to handle his new responsibilities.

"Last year, Cory was kind of like the third wheel (behind Roby and Hall)," Bzdelik said. "He has moved up a couple of spots. He is now the focal point of teams trying to stop him.

"I told him it's going to be different. He is going to draw the best defender. I remember last year in the Texas A&M game, they put their worst defender on him."

Still, it has been easy for Tomlinson to find Higgins, because his teammate seems to be everywhere. Higgins can shoot from outside or drive the lane after taking a defender off the dribble. He has 3-point range and also a nice midrange repertoire.

The latter has become almost a lost art, but Higgins has a feel for the game — a sixth sense on the court that can't be taught, Bzdelik said.

He showed it in the comeback win over CSU. Colorado trailed 40-32 with 15 minutes to go before Higgins took over en route to a career-high 33 points.

Cory is sure his father, now general manager of the Charlotte Bobcats, couldn't wait to text M.J. with the news. Rod Higgins played 13 seasons (1982-95) for seven NBA teams, beginning his pro career with the Chicago Bulls. The Higgins family remains close to Jordan and his sons.

Rod got help from Chris Mullin and other pros in teaching Cory about the game when the youngster was a ball boy for the Golden State Warriors.

"Cory has been around a lot of professional athletes his whole life, and he sees how they act," Rod Higgins said in a telephone interview. "He sees how they perform in different situations."

Go-to players must have a different mind-set. Tomlinson said he has talked to Higgins about playing aggressively on offense to get an opponent on its heels. There's a fine line that must be balanced, however. Bzdelik has an "equal opportunity" system in which he wants the ball moved from side to side and screens set for all five players.

Bzdelik might strain his vocal cords if he sees everybody clear out while Higgins goes one-on-one. That works in the NBA. But it's not in Colorado's playbook.

"The best part about Cory's game (against CSU) was all his shots were really good shots in the framework of our offense," Bzdelik said.

Higgins understands. He has a team-first attitude anyway. Bzdelik's unselfish, Princeton-like system is one thing that attracted him to Colorado.

"Cory is going to do what the coach asks him to do, because he has grown up with that," Rod Higgins said. "He might look at things a little differently than other guys. He's a huge believer in the group or the

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team. He knows that always works best.

"But Cory also understands he has a great opportunity to be the leader of the team at such a young age. If the team needs him to be 'the guy' on a certain night, he'll want to do that. He can do that."

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## Role-playing

*A look at Cory Higgins' numbers this season compared to last, when he was part of the supporting cast and not the go-to guy:*

Averages 2007-08 2008-09

Scoring 8.3 18.4\*

Rebounds 4.3 6.0\*

Assists 2.28 2.86

Steals 1.13 1.71\*

\*Leads team. Last season he was the leading scorer twice in a game. This season he has led CU in scoring four times in seven games.

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