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## Shaky Buffs win, now brace for Big 12

*By Patrick Ridgell*

*Longmont Times-Call*

BOULDER — The last thing the Colorado Buffaloes wanted Wednesday was to find themselves in a fight for their basketball lives against a Division II school. Well, guess what?

The Buffs finally did beat Western State 65-52 to end their non-conference schedule at 8-6. They led by a point at halftime, then briefly trailed early in the second half. They used a pressing defense and better care of the ball to eventually wear down the visitors, snap their three-game losing streak and avoid an ignominious loss.

Cory Higgins scored 24 points, grabbed 10 rebounds, and extended his Big 12-record free throw streak to 45 straight.

It would have been nice for CU had it been able to build a big lead and play reserves major minutes, possibly letting some players stoke their confidence before heading to Missouri next Wednesday for the Big 12 opener (7 p.m., ESPN). Nothing comes easy for this team, though. That sounds unlikely to change soon.

"It's about where we're headed," CU coach Jeff Bzdelik said. "All of these young players are getting great amounts of experience early in their careers, which will pay dividends in the future."

As Big 12 play looms, a daunting future immediately awaits the Buffs. Wednesday's story was how far they've progressed though 14 games. Or rather, how far they must go.

Asked for an assessment, Bzdelik said, "We're kind of all over the map."

He cited CU's field-goal percentage, which remains among the nation's best, and its rebounding margin, which at minus-5.6 entering Wednesday was the Big 12's worst. He called remaining patient important, saying, "It's about handling them right."

Seeking better play from his big men, Bzdelik didn't play Casey Crawford until the second half, opting instead to use Trey Eckloff and Toby Veal 5 minutes each in the first half to "see what they could do." Eckloff had two points and two rebounds, and Veal had two and three. Neither returned after halftime, when the game's outcome hinged.

Crawford scored eight points in 10 minutes. He did not grab a rebound. The Buffs outrebounded Western State 37-33. There might be some teams in the Big 12 that can rebound better than Western State.

"Coach sounds like a broken record," Higgins said. "Rebounding and taking care of the ball are his two main points."

### COLORADO 65, WESTERN STATE 52

#### WESTERN STATE (6-6)

Burney 4-18 0-0 10, Brooks 1-6 4-4 6, Avalos 6-15 0-0 16, McFarland 3-8 2-2 8, Spencer 3-5 2-4 8, Alvarado 0-0 0-0 0, Zehnder 1-2 0-0 2, Kirwan 0-1 0-0 0, Hart 0-0 0-0 0, Gentry 0-1 0-0 0, Graham 0-0 0-0 0, McCoy 0-0 0-0 0, Slabach 0-0 0-0 0, Bogar 0-1 2-2 2. Totals 18-57 10-12 52.

#### COLORADO (8-6)

Jackson-Wilson 3-4 2-2 8, Dufault 1-5 2-2 4, Tomlinson 3-8 2-4 9, Higgins 9-14 5-5 24, Thorne 3-6 2-2 8, Kelley 0-1 0-0 0, Coney 0-1 0-0 0, Veal 1-1 0-0 2, Knutson 0-4 0-0 0, Zehnder 0-0 0-0 0, Crawford 2-4 3-4 8, Eckloff 1-2 0-0 2. Totals 23-50 16-19 65.

Halftime—CU 26-25. 3-Point Goals—WS 6-26 (Avalos 4-10, Burney 2-9, Brooks 0-3, Kirwan 0-1, McFarland 0-3), CU 3-13 (Tomlinson 1-3, Higgins 1-3, Crawford 1-3, Thorne 0-1, Knutson 0-1, Eckloff 0-1). Fouled Out—None. Rebounds—WS 33 (Burney 9), CU 37 (Higgins 10). Assists—WS 8 (Brooks 6), CU 8 (Tomlinson 3, Thorne 3). Total Fouls—WS 17, CU 14. Technicals—none. A—2,833.

CU was 8-6 entering conference play last year, when it went 3-13 in the Big 12 and generally had a miserable time. Their non-conference schedule in 2008-09 included only two true road games, and they lost to Montana State, Buffalo, TCU and Vermont.

Perhaps what made CU proudest Wednesday was Harvard's win over No. 24 Boston College, which won at North Carolina last week. CU beat Harvard on Nov. 22, 70-57.

Otherwise, CU hadn't lost to a Division II team since Jan. 16, 1996, the final game of the Joe Harrington era. CU struggled to beat another Division II team Wednesday.

Bzdelik said confidence fluctuates even for the best of teams, but he added he hopes young players forget fast. For at least two Buffs, that seems true.

"We're as confident as we can be," Higgins said. "I'm sure nobody expects anything from us. We're all we have."

Said Jermyl Jackson-Wilson: "In past years no one expected us to win any games in the Big 12. Teams better look out."

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# Higgins leads Buffs past Western State

## It's last tuneup for Big 12 for Buffs

Perhaps some day Dick Vitale will come to Boulder to call a college basketball game.

On Wednesday night the legendary hoops commentator and infamous ex-Detroit Pistons head coach finally returned to the NBA as part of ESPN's Denver Nuggets-Miami Heat broadcast at the Pepsi Center.

Not even Jeff Bzdelik, a former Nuggets head coach and Heat assistant, would argue that Colorado's non-conference game against Western State was Dickie V worthy.

But it was important for Bzdelik's young Buffs, who snapped an ugly three-game losing streak with a 65-52 victory over the Division II Mountaineers at the Coors Events Center in front of 2,833 college basketball junkies.

Cory Higgins scored 24 points and grabbed 10 rebounds to will CU to the win. The sophomore shooting guard also extended his Big 12 record for consecutive free throws made to 45 after a 5-for-5 night at the line.

Despite a slow start, the Buffs (8-6) said getting up to play the little guys from Gunnison was not an issue.

"Not for me. I'd rather play the blind sisters than practice," senior forward Jermyl Jackson-Wilson said. "I'd rather play against someone else than to beat up on my teammates every day. You want to practice to get better, but there's nothing like playing college basketball. Playing against someone else is always fun."

There wasn't a lot to be amused about at halftime after Bzdelik experimented with a rotation that included Toby Veal, Ryan Kelley and Javon Coney with a total of 10 players getting floor time for CU.

The Buffs led only 26-25 at the intermission, despite holding Western State's leading scorer, Cameron Burney(17.1 ppg), scoreless on 0-for-8 shooting.

"I've been patient," Bzdelik said. "I understand it's about handling them right. At halftime there was no panic, I didn't raise my voice. I just said, 'These are the adjustments we must make.'"

Justin Avalos -- who the Buffs made look like Stephen Curry during the first half when the senior guard was 4-for-7 from behind the arc with 14 points -- scored just two points after the break.

Burney finished with 10 points but was 4-for-18 from the field.

And the Mountaineers, who were shooting 42.6 percent as a team entering the game, were 31.6 percent

from the field, including 6-for-26 (23.1 percent) on 3-pointers.

"We gave a very good effort and did what we needed to do to stay in the game," Western State head coach Mike Moskowitz said. "We defended, we got offensive rebounds, we didn't turn the ball over. We just didn't shoot particularly well."

CU out-rebounded the Mountaineers 37-33 and outscored them 34-12 in the paint. Both teams finished with eight assists and eight turnovers.

"We just needed a 'W' for confidence," Higgins said. "No matter what, if it was going to be a blowout, if it was going to be close, we were going to get the win."

It wasn't Upset City, baby!

But the Buffs are clearly the underdogs in the Big 12 after finishing 8-6 against during non-conference play.

"I've been an underdog since I've been here," junior Dwight Thorne said. "This year I'm going to come out and play hard and leave it all out there. If we do that we should be OK."

## **CU 65, Western St. 52**

### **WESTERN ST.**

#### **FG FT Reb**

#### **Min M-A M-A O-T A PF PTS**

Burney 34 4-18 0-0 0-9 1 4 10

Brooks 37 1-6 4-4 2-4 6 2 6

Avalos 34 6-15 0-0 1-3 0 1 16

McFrInd 33 3-8 2-2 0-1 0 3 8

Spencer 26 3-5 2-4 5-7 0 3 8

Alvrdo 1 0-0 0-0 0-0 0 2 0

Zehnder 6 1-2 0-0 0-2 0 0 2

Kirwan 2 0-1 0-0 0-1 0 0 0

Hart 6 0-0 0-0 0-0 0 0 0

Gentry 6 0-1 0-0 0-0 0 1 0

Graham 5 0-0 0-0 0-1 0 0 0

McCoy 1 0-0 0-0 0-0 0 0 0

Slabach 1 0-0 0-0 0-0 0 0 0

Bogar 8 0-1 2-2 1-3 1 1 2

Totals 200 18-57 10-12 10-33 8 17 52

**Percentages:** FG .316, FT .833.

**3-Point Goals:** 6-26, .231 (Avalos 4-10, Burney 2-9, Kirwan 0-1, Brooks 0-3, McFarland 0-3).

**Team Rebounds:** 2.

**Blocked Shots:** 0.

**Turnovers:** 8 (McFarland 3, Burney 2, Brooks, Slabach, Spencer).

**Steals:** 1 (McFarland).

**Technical Fouls:** None.

## COLORADO

### FG FT Reb

#### Min M-A M-A O-T A PF PTS

Js-Wsn 21 3-4 2-2 0-5 1 3 8

Dufault 32 1-5 2-2 2-5 0 1 4

Tmlnsn 35 3-8 2-4 1-2 3 4 9

Higgins 38 9-14 5-5 0-10 1 0 24

Thorne 36 3-6 2-2 0-4 3 3 8

Kelley 3 0-1 0-0 0-0 0 0 0

Coney 5 0-1 0-0 2-2 0 0 0

Veal 5 1-1 0-0 0-3 0 0 2

Knutson 9 0-4 0-0 0-2 0 1 0

Zehnder 1 0-0 0-0 0-0 0 0 0

Crawford 10 2-4 3-4 0-0 0 2 8

Eckloff 5 1-2 0-0 1-2 0 0 2

Totals 200 23-50 16-19 6-37 8 14 65

**Percentages:** FG .460, FT .842.

**3-Point Goals:** 3-13, .231 (Higgins 1-3, Tomlinson 1-3, Crawford 1-3, Eckloff 0-1, Knutson 0-1, Dufault 0-1, Thorne II 0-1).

**Team Rebounds:** 2.

**Blocked Shots:** 0.

**Turnovers:** 8 (Thorne II 3, Veal, Higgins, Eckloff, Jackson-Wilson, Coney).

**Steals:** 2 (Thorne II, Jackson-Wilson).

**Technical Fouls:** None.

**Western St., Colo. 25 27--52**

**Colorado 26 39--65**

**A--2,833.**

**Officials--**Curtis Shaw, Scott Thornley, Paul Janssen.



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## Bzdelik experiments with lineup

By Ryan Thorburn

Wednesday, January 7, 2009

Ten different Buffs played in the first half of Wednesday night's non-conference finale at the Coors Events Center.

Casey Crawford -- the 6-9 forward Colorado is counting on this season -- was not one of them.

Jeff Bzdelik decided it was time to take another look at freshmen Trey Eckloff and Toby Veal with Division II Western State in town and Big 12 play looming next week.

The problem was the Buffs needed to lean on the starters, especially Cory Higgins, to pull out a 65-52 victory over the Mountaineers at the Coors Events Center.

Crawford scored eight points in 10 minutes to help CU turn a 35-33 deficit with 16:25 remaining into a 13-point win.

"We kind of have a logjam there and I'm trying to get other guys to play a few minutes to see what they can do," Bzdelik said when asked about Crawford's lack of playing time. "I wanted to look at Toby and I wanted to look at Trey. I talked to Casey at halftime and said, 'Hey, you're going to get in there, just be ready.'"

"That's all, just trying to get some guys minutes."

Veal showed off his athleticism, albeit briefly, with two points, three rebounds and one turnover in five minutes of action. Eckloff had two points, two rebounds and a turnover during his five minutes.

It's clear that Veal could help the Buffs on the boards. But ...

"He also has to learn the offense and not turn the ball over, those kind of those things," Bzdelik said. "So we'll continue to work on his skill development. ... One guy can do one thing well, and another guy can't. No one has really shown me completeness. And, again, they're just young players."

### Higgins extends

#### free throw record

Higgins was 5-for-5 at the foul line and extended his Big 12 record for consecutive free throws made to 45. The sophomore guard also made his first seven shots from the field, finishing 9-for-14 with 24 points and a game-high 10 rebounds.

"I've tried not to think about it," Higgins said of his streak at the stripe. "I just go through the same

routine. But it's in the back of my head."

The NCAA record for consecutive free throws made in a season is 73 by Villanova's Gary Buchanan during a 21-game stretch in 2000-01.

The record for a career is 85 consecutive free throws by Butler's Darnell Archey over a 57-game stretch from Feb. 15, 2001, to Jan. 18, 2003.

### **Notable**

Bzdelik's coaching record against teams from the state of Colorado is now 14-0. ... It was the first meeting between the programs in 73 years. CU leads the series 10-4. ... CU sophomore walk-on Andrew Zehnder got to face his brother Steve, who is a junior at Western State. The Buffs' Zehnder only played the final minute of the game and did not score while the Mountaineers' Zehnder played six minutes and finished with two points. They were both on the court at the end of the game.



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