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By B.G. Brooks, Rocky Mountain News (Contact)

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BOULDER — Like most of his young teammates on the Colorado men's basketball team, freshman Trey Eckloff wages a daily battle with the learning curve.

Some days he finds it frustratingly steep; other days, footholds and handholds are relatively easy to find.

But be certain of this: Eckloff, a forward from Cherry Creek High School, is gaining confidence with every ascent. He sees it and feels it, as does CU coach Jeff Bzdelik.

"Wisdom and experience come at a great price . . . that's who we are as a team, and Trey is no different," Bzdelik said. "Trey is an individual example of the whole picture.

"Unfortunately, we've got a team full of Treys — and that's not a good thing in the Big 12. But one day they'll grow up."

Until then, Bzdelik keeps pushing his "team full of Treys." But the intensity and physicality of the college game, the hustle required to match its speed, are all but foreign to most of the Buffs.

Eckloff's background and basketball savvy might offer him a leg up. "He's very intelligent and comes from a great high school program," Bzdelik said. "His habits are good . . . he's got a good base. We just need to continue down the road of development."

Since arriving on campus, Eckloff's growth in a number of areas is not difficult to chart. His size and shooting range initially caught Bzdelik's eye; his defense, well, not too many high school players become college freshmen capable of playing the defense their new coaches require.

"He knows he's not a shot blocker — maybe he was in high school, but now he's not," Bzdelik said. "He needs to learn how to put his body in front of drivers. He's understanding how to 'chin' the ball and keep it away from people."

Assimilating into Bzdelik's offense is not an overnight act, but Bzdelik says Eckloff's first-half passing from the post against Kansas was a sign that knowledge is seeping in. "He's learning where needs to be offensively in terms of how the defense is playing him."

Not surprisingly, Eckloff still is not as strong as he or his coach believes he can be. He hopes to add 10 pounds to his 6-foot-9 frame and play at 240 pounds.

"I'd like to get to 240, but I want good weight . . . and I don't want to lose mobility and quickness," he said. "It's essential in college basketball, especially in this offense. I don't want to compromise agility and speed for weight."

Just past the midway point of the season, Eckloff is averaging 11.4 minutes for the Buffaloes, who entertain Kansas State Saturday (4 p.m.) at the Coors Events Center. His overall field goal percentage (.455, 15-of-33) and his three-point shooting (.545, 6-of-11) "are off the charts for a freshman," Bzdelik said.

Then, there's his free throw percentage (.357, 5-of-14) — an exasperating number coach and player have targeted for improvement.

Said Bzdelik: "That's in his head, not his technique."

Oddly, Eckloff says throughout his career, he's been a good free throw shooter. "Coming out of high school, and even my whole life, free throws have not been a problem for me. But for whatever reason (now), it's been kind of a mystery.

"I just need to refine my free throw (shooting) . . . every time I shoot the ball I think it's going in, but it's just rattled out. I just need to (shoot) a couple hundred free throws every day and get my rhythm back. It'll come; it's just been a dreadful process. It's not like I'm not a good free throw shooter."

Averaging 2.8 boards, Eckloff also believes he can rebound better — but that's been a team-wide mandate from Bzdelik. The Buffs (8-9 overall, 0-3 Big 12) are grabbing a league-worst 28.8 rebounds a game, and when coupled with an average of nearly 15 turnovers, shortcomings in those two areas present a huge barrier for any team — but particularly an inexperienced one — to overcome.

Eckloff, though, said he sees gradual improvement. "Everything else is getting better every day. It's been a long process, going back to last June until now.

"But I feel like we're getting there, all the other freshmen are getting there — some a little quicker than others. But we'll all be there sooner or later."

STRONG WORDS: On Thursday, Bzdelik planned to tell his team of a telephone call he received from former New York City fireman Jim Morandi, who befriended the former Air Force coach and gave him and his Falcons players a tour of the World Trade Center site.

Buried in the rubble of one of the Twin Towers during 9/11, Morandi contracted cancer from the dust and spends time now speaking about his battle with the disease. Bzdelik said Morandi's message to the Buffs was, "Keep getting back up."

Said Bzdelik: "He's living it."

WHITE OUT SATURDAY: CU officials are encouraging fans to wear white for Saturday's game against Kansas State. The first 1,000 students to enter the Events Center through the student (southeast) entrance with a valid Buff OneCard will receive a free CU basketball white T-shirt.

Also, CU will recognize former Buffs basketball players at a Friday reception at the Broker Inn, and at halftime Saturday. For more information, contact Bill Harris at 303-492-5065 or bill.harris@cufund.org.

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