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Big 12 taking notice of Buffs hoops

By Tom Kensler
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Although the losses continue to mount, progress made by the Colorado men's basketball program has caught the attention of rival coaches in the Big 12 Conference.

"No one at this point wants to play those guys," Nebraska coach Doc Sadler said of the Buffaloes during Monday's Big 12 coaches teleconference. "Over the last five or six games, they may be playing as good as anybody in the league. They're going to start winning some games pretty quick."

Colorado (9-13, 1-7 Big 12) is getting closer. All but two of CU's seven conference losses have been by 10 points or less. In its past five games, CU has defeated Iowa State, lost by two points to Kansas State and Nebraska, and took games to the final minute at two of the toughest places to play in the Big 12 - losing 66-61 at Kansas and 77-72 at Oklahoma.

The Buffaloes play at Iowa State (12-11, 1-7) on Wednesday night.

"Besides Colorado's game at Missouri (107-62 blowout win by host Tigers) to start the conference, they've been in every one of their games," Iowa State coach Greg McDermott said of the Buffs.

"They impose their will on you with what they do offensively. They're going to do what they do, and you have to figure out a way to stop it."

Kansas State needed overtime to win in Boulder on Jan. 24 and has since defeated the likes of Missouri, Texas and Texas A&M.

"The thing that nobody ever gives any credit to is experience," said Kansas State coach Frank Martin, when asked about Colorado. "Lacking experience is a big problem when you compete in the Big 12. It's too good a conference, has too many good coaches, has too many good players for a team lacking experience to find immediate success. It's just not going to happen.

"The (Colorado) guys, I'm sure, did not play up to what Jeff Bzdelik wanted them to play. But they've continued to fight, which you can see on tape when you prepare to play them. They're playing better. They've got guys that can score off the dribble. They've got five guys on the floor that can shoot the basketball. As they continue to get older and more understanding of the game and more mature, they're guarding better.

"You can tell they have that desire. You've got to

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have a desire to have a chance. They play that way."

Bzdelik said he sees improvement each day.

"We're close, yeah. But close doesn't mean anything," he said during the teleconference. "We need to continue to improve. We need to continue to get stronger. We need to continue to take care of the basketball and do a better job on the boards so we can turn some of these close situations into a couple of wins.

"Our guys' attitude is great. They're energy is great. They're willingness to learn is great. We just need to continue to get better. I've said many times, gaining experience and wisdom comes at a high cost. That high cost right now is losing games.

"But there is no other way to get wisdom and no other way to get experience than to be scarred by going out there and learning on the job. But it's the best way to learn because these young players are learning what this league is all about."

Team morale has not been a problem, Bzdelik said.

"Losing can beat you up, there's no question about that," he said. "But this is what I tell them on a daily basis: 'It is an absolute privilege to play college basketball, especially in the Big 12. If you can't get excited about going out there and play on TV in front of big crowds against great teams and great coaches, then you're in the

wrong league.' "

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Thorburn: Coaches buzzing about Bzdelik

By Ryan Thorburn

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BOULDER, Colo. — There is a buzz among Big 12 coaches about Jeff Bzdelik.

Colorado is tied for last place in the conference at 1-7, but those who get paid to study the game film believe it's only a matter of time before Bzdelik builds a winner in Boulder.

In the last five games the Buffs have lost close ones to Kansas State (77-75), Kansas (66-61), Nebraska (55-53) and Oklahoma (77-72) with their lone conference win coming against Iowa State (55-49).

"It all starts with the guy leading the program," Nebraska coach Doc Sadler said during Monday's media teleconference. "Jeff's coaching obviously speaks for itself, and they're getting players that fit the way he wants to play. Unfortunately for him you look over the last four or five games and his team may be playing as good as anyone and they just haven't been able to get the wins. ...

"Believe me, no want wants to play them right now."

When CU hosted K-State last month both teams were winless in Big 12 play. The Wildcats escaped with the overtime victory on Jan. 24 and haven't looked back with five consecutive wins after an 0-4 start in conference.

"You don't want to be 0-4. I don't go to bed and sleep well at night when we're 0-4," K-State coach Frank Martin said. "I was worried about our record, but I was never worried about the team."

Bzdelik says he isn't worried about the collective psyche of the young Buffs, either. Despite a 9-13 overall record the team is still excited about playing and understands the long-term plan.

A few rebounds here or less turnovers there, perhaps CU could have been the team that turned its season around instead of K-State.

"I thought they were good going into that game. They're young and they can really shoot the basketball," Martin said. "The thing that nobody ever gives credit to is experience. The Big 12 has too many good coaches and players for a team without experience to find any success."

The scary thing for the other teams in the league is that the Buffs already have experience playing the role of spoiler at the Big 12 Tournament.

It wouldn't surprise any of Bzdelik's peers if CU wins another first-round game and gives one of the top seeds all it can handle in the quarterfinals next month in Oklahoma City.

"I thought Colorado was terrific," Jeff Capel said on Monday when asked about his No. 2 Sooners'

struggle to beat the Buffs in Norman 48 hours earlier. "Those kids really executed their offense and made shots and made plays."

The Buffs could really burst some NCAA Tournament bubbles with Texas, Missouri, Oklahoma State and Texas A&M all scheduled to visit the Coors Events Center down the stretch.

"They continue to fight and you can see it on tape when you're preparing to play them," Martin said. "You have to have a desire, and you can tell they play that way."

Over the bump

Last month Kansas coach Bill Self admitted "bumping" into John Wall, rated the No. 1 recruit in the 2009 class by rivals.com, outside the locker room after attending one of the prospect's games.

The exchange took place during a "dead" period when college coaches are not allowed contact with recruits other than to exchange greetings.

Most of the Big 12 coaches have Self's back on this issue.

"It happens a lot," Capel said. "The parents may wave at you and say hello or the kid might walk by you and say hello. You have to politely say that you're not allowed to engage in a conversation and move on."

Texas coach Rick Barnes, a great recruiter, said bumps are almost unavoidable.

"It happens to everybody if you're out doing your job," Barnes said. "What happened with Bill, that's happened to anybody who has been out there recruiting. I know Bill Self and I know he wasn't trying to get an advantage from it. I'm not sure you can get an advantage by just saying hello to someone."

Texas Tech's Pat Knight says bumping isn't as innocent as it sounds. His father was a stickler for the rules and the apple didn't fall far from the tree.

"It's easy to stay away from the kids," Knight said. "You know where they're going to be at. There's not a lot of accidental contact going on."

Husker pride

Sadler -- whose surging Huskers are 16-7 overall and 5-4 in the Big 12 after Saturday's upset of Texas -- is not afraid to raise expectations for Nebraska basketball and is determined to turn the program into an annual NCAA Tournament qualifier.

"If you compete in the Big 12 and you are one of the five or six teams that gets to compete in the NCAA tournament, then you have a chance to be successful in that tournament," Sadler said. "That's what I want to do year in, year out."

Nebraska is the Big 12's best defensive team, and the hard-nosed coach says that's the only way his team will be able to compete for any kind of championships.

"I do believe being at Nebraska you may not have an opportunity to coach a lot of great offensive players at one time," Sadler said. "So you have to hang your hat on something. ... Defense is something

we've taken great pride in selling and our guys have bought into it."

Bears fading

Baylor, one of the most talented and experienced teams in the conference, takes a five-game losing streak into Wednesday's home game against Oklahoma.

Only Texas Tech, Iowa State and Colorado are looking up at the Bears in the standings entering this week's action.

"Coaches always realize you're going to have adversity and hard times," BU coach Scott Drew said. "I don't think we envisioned a losing streak as long as this one."

The Bears (15-8) -- who beat Arizona State, Providence and Washington State and played Wake Forest tough before losing during non-conference play -- could really use a win over the Sooners (23-1, 9-0) to enhance their NCAA Tournament resume.

"We're playing the second-ranked team in the country and most people are expecting us to lose," Drew said. "So we're looking at it as a great opportunity."

Northern exposure

Last week teams from the North Division went 5-1 against the South. CU's last-minute loss at OU prevented a complete sweep.

Right now four of the top five teams in the Big 12 standings are from the North.

"It doesn't surprise me," Missouri coach Mike Anderson said of the shift in the balance of power. "The coaches knew that the league was up for grabs. That speaks to the parity that does exist."

RPI update

The Big 12 was fourth in conference RPI as of Monday behind the ACC, Big Ten and Big East. Oklahoma's RPI was No. 3 behind Duke and Pittsburgh.

Kansas (16), Missouri (22), Oklahoma State (31), Texas (45) and Texas A&M (46) are in decent shape in that department.

Baylor (55), Nebraska (67) and Kansas State (70) still have work to do.

And Texas Tech (108), Iowa State (139) and Colorado (209) will only play in the postseason by winning the conference tournament.

Notable

Texas Tech (0-7) and CU (0-6) are the only Big 12 teams yet to record a true road win this season. ... Missouri senior forward DeMarre Carroll is the Big 12's player of the week after scoring a career-high 31 points to lead the Tigers to a win at Iowa State. ... Texas Tech senior guard Alan Voskuil has scored in double figures in nine of the last 10 games. He had three points and only took one shot against CU on Jan. 20.