



CU men not ready to quit

Bufs not letting long odds affect their mindset

By Ryan Thorburn
Wednesday, March 11, 2009

OKLAHOMA CITY -- What seed will the Buffs be in the NCAA Tournament if they win on Saturday?

No. 12? No. 16? Play-in game?

Stop laughing.

In their heart of hearts the Colorado men's basketball team understands the odds of them cutting down the nets at the Ford Center are about the same as purchasing the winning Powerball ticket.

But the Buffs -- despite their No. 12 seed and 9-21 record -- were actually debating this topic in the locker room recently.

Hey, they're young Division I basketball players. And this is March.

"We should go in there with a good mindset thinking we can win the game, win the whole tournament," junior guard Dwight Thorne said. "It's a one-game situation right now, but we can make it a 10-game season."

Then the first step on the road to the Final Four is today when the Buffs play No. 5 Texas at the Ford Center (1 p.m., Altitude).

Despite packing an 11-game losing streak on the trip, Jeff Bzdelik is feeling good about his team's chances to make this a very competitive game for 40 minutes, but ...

"Do we have the confidence to finish games?" the coach wonders. "That remains to be seen with a team that hasn't had success and is so young. We have to fight our way through that."

The Longhorns (20-10) -- 85-76 overtime winners in Boulder on Feb. 14 -- handed the Buffs one of their 11 single-digit losses during the regular season.

Cory Higgins scored a career-high 34 points and grabbed nine rebounds in the first meeting to help CU come all the way back from a 15-point deficit in regulation.

But the emerging star's efforts were not enough to overcome a combined 50 points on 20-for-33 shooting by A.J. Abrams (29 points, five 3-pointers) outside and Damion James (21 points, 14 rebounds) inside.

"We can improve defensively," Bzdelik said. "We need to take care of the ball better. And our Achilles' heel is still rebounding."

Texas only won the battle of the boards 29-27 at the Coors Events Center, but a key offensive rebound in the closing seconds prevented CU from having an opportunity to win the game.

Instead, James was awarded two free throws with 1.6 seconds left in regulation. He missed both attempts, but the deeper Longhorns outscored the home team 13-4 during the extra five minutes.

"This league has been real tight all year long from top to bottom. Everyone here realizes that," freshman forward Austin Dufault said. "It's just a matter of who shows up and wants it more."

The winner of the CU-Texas game will play No. 4 Kansas State at 1 p.m. on Thursday at the Ford Center.

The Buffs lost to the Wildcats 77-75 in overtime at home and 76-64 in Manhattan. K-State won 85-81 in overtime at Texas this season.

"We have to refresh our guys minds with Texas more than Colorado because we just spent three days on Colorado," said K-State coach Frank Martin, whose team dropped the Buffs' Big 12 tally to 1-15 on Saturday. "Colorado ... they're difficult. I don't care what their record says, they're difficult to play."

And, apparently, the Buffs are not ready to stop playing.

"We've got a group of young guys and good character guys. We never quit and we're not going to quit," Thorne said. "This tournament is just another opportunity for us. We've squandered some opportunities this year and hopefully we can take advantage of this one."

CU became the first No. 12 to upset a No. 5 last year in Kansas City with a double-overtime victory over Baylor.

Four years ago the Buffs were the first No. 11 to beat a No. 5 with a win over ...

Texas.

"I don't want it to end," said Jermyl Jackson-Wilson, CU's only senior. "I'd like to win the first game again and talk about the next game after that."



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Frustrated Bohn aims to change perceptions

A.D. hopes to convince CU fans that hoops games fun to attend

By Ryan Thorburn
Wednesday, March 11, 2009

OKLAHOMA CITY -- Mike Bohn is frustrated.

Colorado's athletic director is here for the Big 12 Tournament and he's not happy about the fact that his men's and women's programs will both be seeded No. 12.

Jeff Bzdelik's Buffs are 9-21 overall and 1-15 in conference play. Kathy McConnell-Miller's Buffs are 11-17 overall and 3-13 in conference play.

Bohn is also patient. He believes in his coaches -- from Dan Hawkins to Liz Kritza.

The Camera sat down with Bohn to get his state of the CU basketball union. Here are excerpts from the conversation:

Q. How do you feel the rebuilding process is going with the men's basketball program?

A. Well, there's no question we are dramatically improved in virtually every aspect of the program that the fans don't see. So what are we talking about? We're talking about academic progress, we're talking about the way the operation is run in the form of professionalism and respected within the coaching circles in the state and across the country, we're talking about the teaching and the coaching aspect of what's going on out on the floor, we're talking about our facilities, we're talking about the work ethic of our coaching staff.

That's led by Jeff, obviously, and his personal dedication. I'd struggle to find a day when the team was off when he wasn't on the road personally recruiting. The recruiting enterprise is dramatically different. The overall sense I get from our fan base and constituents who are supporting the basketball program is that they understand that. But yet we're not producing the wins that people would like to see as quickly as some would like to see. I couldn't be more excited about what Jeff's doing. I'm fired up. I think the fundamental structure he has in place is healthy and producing results where we need to see them. And I really believe the scoreboard results will start coming our way.

Q. What do you expect next season when the team will be more experienced but still very young?

A. I wholeheartedly believe the future is bright and we've got to stay with it. I just left a marketing meeting and we're already working on the new campaign for next year and we're going to have to come up with some maybe non-traditional marketing tools to help create the type of environment that will help the team and help in recruiting and help us win some games and begin to change the perception of Colorado basketball with local media, with officials, with conference officials, with casual basketball

fans that maybe aren't tied to the Buffs. We've got to change the perception. We've upgraded the facilities and made a lot of improvements, but we've got to change the perception. And the perception needs to be that it's fun to go to, that they're entertaining, that they're well-coached, that they play good competition.

We tried some things this year that didn't work. The 8:30 (p.m.) tip-offs were a challenge for us, but if we're going to continue to play great teams we're going to have to be flexible when we want to be on national TV. We need to grow the program with the fan base that helps command the respect from others, and we're not there yet. And I'll take responsibility for that.

Q. Is winning the only way you're going to get CU students involved at basketball games?

A. Maybe. That's a cultural issue. I grew up here and went to CU games as a youngster and sat in prime seats at center court. We've got to change that and we're not going to get the respect that we want until we change that. Again, I think that's on all of us. I think we need to get our horns out more. We feel like we've done a lot and we've made some major improvements, but not enough. We have significant room for improvement.

Q. Since Bzdelik was hired, new basketball offices have been added to the Coors Events Center, a new men's locker room was built, a weight room was added, a new floor was added ... is the \$10 million basketball/volleyball practice facility still on track?

A. We selected an architect last week and we're pushing hard. We're hopeful to have some good news soon on a major gift associated with that. Or two gifts, or three. We're making progress there. Again, we're pushing the rock uphill and the rock rolls back and bloodies our knuckles a lot. We're getting tired of that. But we realize we have a long ways to push the rock yet and we're not there.

Q. Are you planning to talk to Bzdelik about a contract extension similar to the ones Dan Hawkins and Kathy McConnell-Miller signed?

A. I think we'll have an opportunity to talk about that. Knowing Jeff that's the last thing on his mind because he's so focused on what he wants to put together. I think we've all just got to collectively continue to push that rock up the hill a little bit because when it comes flying down the other side it's going to be exciting for all of us.

Q. Next year the football program and both basketball programs won't be completely rebuilt, but they should be ready to take a step forward. How important is it for Hawkins, Bzdelik and McConnell-Miller to have some success to validate your patience?

A. It could be a great year and the reason why it could be is because the foundation is in place with great kids. We have great depth in our academic support unit, our strength coaching unit is doing a great job in making some adjustments to help Jeff and Kathy as well. I think getting the (practice) facility out of the ground will be huge. All those things are coming our way, but we're not there yet. We've got to keep pushing and keep energizing the basketball enterprise and the fan base in general.

What makes Folsom Field special on game day? Well, Ralphie starts it off. The band does a great job. The fan base comes and they fill the grass lot behind the stadium suites and they tailgate and they're fired up and saying, 'Let's go.' They challenge our athletes, they challenge our coaches, they challenge each other to get their horns out and get going and make a difference to win games. They've proven that time and time again.

So how do we translate that into basketball? That's the big hurdle. I'm as frustrated as anybody when we play the Jayhawks and their fans have an influence in that game. They influence the players on the floor and they influence the officials and they influence the coaches and all the other people that are there. They influence the media. Again, back to that perception and the respect of the program. We've got to find a way to do that in basketball.



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college basketball

Bzdelik awaits better times

CU strives to climb Big 12 ladder

By Tom Kensler
The Denver Post

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CU coach Jeff Bzdelik sees a team that made strides this season even though the Buffs scored just one Big 12 victory. (Kathryn Scott Osler, The Denver Post)

as the men's basketball coach at Colorado.

"I want you to stick with these guys," Bzdelik told CU fans after the final home game, yet another loss. "They're headed for better days, trust me."

For the third consecutive year, Colorado (9-21, 1-15 Big 12) is seeded last in the Big 12 Tournament, with the past two on Bzdelik's watch. Hired to make CU's program competitive, Bzdelik has been unable to get it out of last place. If anything, the Buffs have gotten worse, finishing with one conference victory this season, their fewest since going 0-14 in Big Eight play in the 1985-86 season.

OKLAHOMA CITY — Growing up in a Chicago suburb not far from Wrigley Field, Jeff Bzdelik couldn't help but develop a sense of humor — and eternal optimism.

It proved to be good training for his current job

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Far from being down, Bzdelik, like the eternally optimistic Cubs fan, believes big things are around the corner.

"You choose your attitude about each day," said Bzdelik, as his Buffs prepared for today's

opening-round Big 12 Tournament game against Texas. "You can choose doom and gloom or you can choose glory and optimism.

"Losing beats you up; there's no question about that. It affects players, coaches, fans, everybody. But as I've said many times, successful people are only momentarily discouraged."

With the enormity of the rebuilding chore facing him, few would be surprised if the former Nuggets coach and longtime NBA assistant entertained thoughts of returning to the big league. But Bzdelik, 56, insists he's at CU for the long haul.

"Call me crazy, but I love challenges," he said. "Believe me, I am committed. I am excited about the future."

He points out that if he were merely coasting until a cushy NBA job came along, why wouldn't he just let his assistants do the heavy lifting?

Improvements in works

After last Wednesday's loss to Texas A&M in Boulder, for instance, Bzdelik had a late dinner with signee Keegan Hornbuckle and his father, who were visiting from Los Angeles. Bzdelik got to sleep about 1 a.m. His alarm went off at 4:30 for a recruiting trip to California. He was back home by midnight and in his office early the next morning.

"Everybody sees the commitment and the passion and the incredible work ethic that Jeff

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has," athletic director Mike Bohn said. "Where this program was when he inherited it did not happen overnight, and we're not going to get out of it overnight."

His players don't sense that he is about to leave.

"I think he's enjoying coaching college ball, but who wouldn't want to go back to the NBA?" said forward Jermyl Jackson-Wilson, the only senior on CU's roster. "If he can, he may take that opportunity someday, but I think he's enjoying this while it's happening."

Fans fed up with the program's futility might support Bzdelik going back to the NBA, where he spent 15 years before guiding Air Force to 50 victories in two seasons.

Bzdelik understands fans' frustration but points to a youthful team with one senior that showed encouraging signs with eight conference losses by an average of 5.2 points — including making league powers Kansas, Oklahoma and Texas sweat until the final minute.

Off the court, things are going better than in the won-lost column. When Bohn hired Bzdelik, the new coach was promised that construction of a practice facility adjacent to the Coors Event Center must begin by his third year. Bohn said that deadline will be met and that an architect was hired last week.

CU Basketball

View slide show of the career of

- Colorado coach Jeff Bzdelik .

Visit the CU Stats Page for men's boxscores, Big 12 standings, team leaders and

- more .

Visit the CU Stats Page for women's boxscores, Big 12 standings, player pages and

- more .

Visit Tom Kensler's All Things Buffs blog for a behind-the-scenes look at

- CU sports .

Also, Bohn heard Bzdelik's plea and will move a strength-and-conditioning coach from the Dal Ward Center to the basketball arena to work primarily with the men's and women's basketball teams.

Patience, please

Bzdelik realizes Colorado basketball will never be Kansas. But, he said, the facility upgrades give him a fighting chance to compete in a powerhouse conference. Since Bzdelik arrived in Boulder in April 2007, the men's and women's basketball offices were moved from Folsom Field to the Coors Events Center, the men's locker room was upgraded to NBA standards, a new basketball floor was installed and an upstairs meeting room was converted into a weight room.

"I had both eyes open when I took this job. I knew what I was up against," Bzdelik said. "This

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league is as good as it gets, top to bottom.

"Changing the culture is harder than changing the X's and O's. But I feel great about the building blocks that are already in place and the players that are coming into the program."

Three players signed in November, and Bzdelik hopes to add another in April.

In the meantime, some fans are understandably restless. But they knew this was going to be a rebuilding year. But one conference victory?

"Maybe Bzdelik should have stayed at Air Force," Keith Francis, a Golden-based scientist and a 20-year season-ticket holder, wrote in an e-mail to The Denver Post. "Even (Ricardo) Patton could pull out more wins with less talent, and that upsets me because I thought CU hung onto Patton too long. Going from four conference wins last year to one win this year isn't even a building year."

The Buffs' best player, Cory Higgins, like his coach, asks for patience.

"We can only go up from here, obviously," he said. "And I think people seeing this year should be encouraged, not discouraged. Expect big things from us."

Spoken like a Cubs fan.

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Last blast for Buffs?

Long-struggling Colorado enters season's final set with high hopes

By Patrick Ridgell
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BOULDER — Ostensibly, the results that the Colorado men's basketball team posts at the Big 12 Tournament this week in Oklahoma City will finally conclude what's been a long, difficult season. Really, though, some might say this thing was over months ago.

Losers of 11 straight, buried in last place in the Big 12 for a third year in a row, CU faces a pretty good Texas team today in the first round of the conference tournament.

As the losses have piled high, the head coach has bemoaned the Buffs' lack of experience, depth and strength, reiterating lines he used in November to preview 2008-09. Jeff Bzdelik knew the past four months were not going to be easy. They were probably more difficult than he expected.

Yet for some reason — possibly their 11 single-digit losses — an air of hope permeates the team today in what outsiders might call an exercise in futility. According to junior guard Dwight Thorne, he and teammates discussed before Monday's practice what seed the Buffs (9-21) would receive in the NCAA Tournament after they nab the automatic bid that comes with the Big 12 Tournament championship.

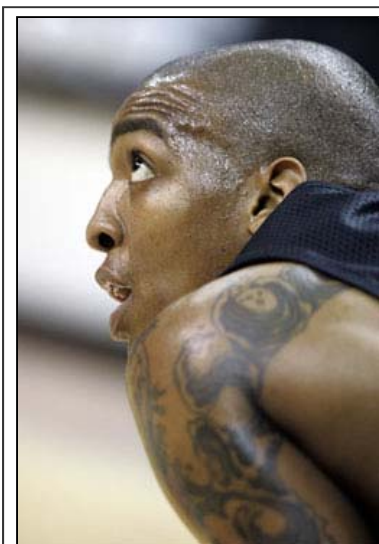
"I think we should go in there with the mindset that we can win the game, that we can win the whole tournament," Thorne said.

Said senior forward Jermyl Jackson-Wilson: "We're playing Texas on a neutral court. We played them close at home and really well at Texas last year with pretty much the same team. We're a little bit of a different team, but we play hard, and on a neutral court, anything can happen. So I'm really optimistic about playing Texas." As Jackson-Wilson said, recent history suggests CU can hang with Texas. The Longhorns beat the Buffs 85-76 in overtime on Feb. 14 in Boulder. Last year, in their meeting in Austin, Texas trailed by nine at halftime before rallying in the second half to a 69-67 win.

"I don't know if they expect us to play as hard as we do," Jackson-Wilson said. "They might come in and think they're going to run over us. We just keep playing hard, and at the end of the game, we're in the game, and anything can happen at the end of a game."

Texas (20-10) has an RPI of 35 and a high level of confidence that it'll receive an NCAA at-large bid no matter what happens today. Coach Rick Barnes was asked Monday if he liked his team's NCAA chances upon entering this week. He said he had felt good about them since entering conference play back in January.

Texas will appear in the Big 12 Tournament's first round for the first time since 2005. That year, as the sixth seed, it lost to 11th-seeded CU. It was the first time an 11 seed had won a game in the Big 12 Tournament. Last year, CU became the first 12 seed to win in the tournament.



Colorado's Jermyl Jackson-Wilson looks on from the sideline during team practice at the Big 12 Conference men's tournament Tuesday in Oklahoma City. **Donna McWilliam/AP**

Bzdelik said the Buffs must do a better job on A.J. Abrams and Damion James, who combined for 50 points on Feb. 14. The coach also said his players must rebound and take better care of the ball if CU is to have a chance.

Monday, Bzdelik called his team “resilient,” which was much different than what he said about it Feb. 25 following a 21-point home loss to Oklahoma State. That night, he was asked if he detected resignation from his youthful players, and he replied, “I don’t know how to answer that.” Thorne said coaches

have not questioned whether players were quitting on them. He said that has never been an issue.

“We got a group of good-character guys, and we never said quit, we never said never,” Thorne said. “I think that’s been evident in our play this year. We’ve never given up; we’ve never quit. And we’re not going to give up. We’re not going to quit.

“This tournament is another opportunity for us. We’ve squandered some opportunities this year, so let’s take advantage of this one.”

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