



Young Buffs begin critical offseason

Conditioning, strength will be keys for Bzdelik's squad next year

By Ryan Thorburn
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OKLAHOMA CITY -- Austin Dufault's body doesn't feel very good.

That tends to happen when you hit the wall.

The freshman ran smack into it down the stretch of his first Big 12 season and could barely get up.

In Colorado's last five games of a long 9-22 season, Dufault -- who was playing in the North Dakota Class B Tournament a year ago for Killdeer High School -- scored a total of 16 points.

"I don't remember ever being as sore as I was after the Kansas State game," Dufault said of the Buffs' regular-season finale, a 76-64 loss in Manhattan in which he was called for more traveling violations (three) than he made shots (two). "My legs are still sore after that game. That was the most physical game I've ever been a part of. There is nothing like that in high school to get you prepared for something like that."

You can guess what Jeff Bzdelik's offseason plan is.

CU's head coach will be on the road looking for more talent and depth while the returning players are participating in an intense strength and conditioning program.

The goal for all five freshmen: Improve their bodies and games the way Cory Higgins did from his first season in Boulder to his sophomore season.

By the way, how did he do that?

"I think a lot of it will come just with all the experience they got," Higgins said. "That was the biggest thing for me. And then in the offseason you can't take anything for granted. I think they'll make vast improvements."

Higgins has started every game of his career at CU (63 and counting). After playing third fiddle to Richard Roby and Marcus Hall last season, the son of former NBA player Rod Higgins stepped into a leadership role and was the young team's leading scorer (17.4 ppg) and rebounder (5.4 rpg).

"That's the kind of jump I expect from our young players," Bzdelik said. "And I need Cory to make another jump."

Dufault, who started all 31 games, said he will focus on being stronger with the ball, ball handling,

finishing around the rim and expanding his shooting range.

"I need to get better lower-body strength," he admitted after limping into the Big 12 Tournament.

Nate Tomlinson, who had three turnovers and two assists in 39 minutes during Wednesday's 67-56 loss to Texas at the Ford Center, will be spending a lot of quality time in the new weight room at the Coors Events Center this summer.

"Every possession matters, every shot has to be a good shot in the Big 12," Tomlinson said. "Going into next season I'll definitely be aware of that."

Trey Eckloff, still only 18, was able to gain some valuable experience guarding Oklahoma's Blake Griffin, Kansas' Cole Aldrich and Texas' Dexter Pittman this season. The freshman from Cherry Creek would like to show off his offensive skills more as a sophomore.

"I thought I held my own pretty well. Obviously, after going through the entire Big 12 season you see how much harder you need to work in the weight room and to how much more dedication there has to be to conditioning your body," Eckloff said. "This summer I just really need to focus on small things like finishing around the basket more consistently. You can always improve your jump shot and work on your defensive stance."

The other members of the class, Toby Veal and Ryan Kelley, are talented players who showed flashes of brilliance during their brief opportunities.

Veal scored a career-high 10 points against Texas A&M on March 4 and was awarded with more minutes down the stretch, which senior Jermyn Jackson-Wilson gracefully yielded to benefit the raw freshman's development.

"I think it's going to lead to a good season for me next year," Veal said after giving up about three inches and at least 75 pounds to Pittman. "I need to practice on my dribbling and work on my mid-range game."

The coaching staff probably won't make Veal play the center position as he did this season. The 6-7 forward will likely be in the four or three spot.

Kelley, a pure shooter, scored 19 points at Missouri before a knee injury kept him out for about a month. Vince Kelley's nephew will have to improve the way Dwight Thorne did last offseason in order to be a more consistent part of the rotation.

"You've got to work hard and understand that your team is going to be dependent on you," Thorne said when asked what the young players need to do between now and November to make sure 9-22 doesn't happen again. "When you think you can't go any harder make sure you go harder. Make sure you know there's someone out there working just as hard as you."



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