



Three seniors on CU women's team hope to go out winners

Bufs host KSU in finale today

By Kyle Ringo
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BOULDER, Colo. — Kathy McConnell-Miller sat in her office Friday afternoon talking with the seniors on her basketball team who will be honored today at the Coors Events Center before and after the Buffs' regular-season finale against Kansas State.

One common theme emerged as coach listened to players reflecting on their careers.

"They're shocked at how fast it has gone," McConnell-Miller said.

Dina Piterniece, Hannah Skildum and Kara Richards all joined the program hoping to restore it to the heights reached under former coach Ceal Barry. While that dream never came true, each has contributed to a rebuilding process that could blossom as soon as next season.

Piterniece has been the consummate team player, the glue that holds the Buffs together. Skildum is a passionate defender who brings intensity to everything she does, and Richards has finally developed into the player and team leader Barry thought she might be when she recruited her six years ago.

"I feel like they all feel like they have something to celebrate (today)," McConnell-Miller said. "I really feel like they feel like they can celebrate their careers because they can leave here knowing that they gave everything."

They bring a disappointing 11-16 record into today's game against the Wildcats (2 p.m.). It appears to be a meaningless game on paper, but the outcome will go a long way toward deciding the seeding and who plays whom in next week's Big 12 Conference tournament in Oklahoma City.

If the Buffs can upset the Wildcats -- they've taken three of the past five in the series -- they could finish in a two or three-way tie for last place with Missouri and Oklahoma State. OSU would win the tiebreaker with both because it beat the Buffs and Tigers.

Provided Missouri loses today at Texas Tech, the Buffs and Tigers would be tied throughout all the conference tie-breaking options until the final one. Team names would be written on two slips of paper, put in a box and a Big 12 official would pull out a name to decide the 11th and 12th seeds.

It's possible the Buffs could play back-to-back games against Kansas State depending on today's results and the seeding. Regardless, the Wildcats figure to meet an emotional group in black and gold today.

"I really want to win this game," Skildum said. "Every year the senior night game I think is a huge deal. It's for the seniors and I remember every year just playing for the seniors. It's different that it's me now, but I definitely want to go out with a win. It would be really good to end that way."

The Buffs seem to match up well with the Wildcats, who are led by three senior starters in Shalee Lehning, Danielle Zanotti and Marlies Gipson. Zanotti is averaging 16.6 points a game, but might not be the best player on her team.

Lehning's stats say she is one of the most complete players in the nation. She enters the game averaging 10 points, seven rebounds and 7.5 assists.

Kansas State is the toughest defensive team in the conference and one of the best in the nation. The Wildcats are allowing just 52 points per game. CU hopes to make the last regular-season game its most complete outing. The Buffs want to avoid the turnovers, long scoreless stretches and lack of bench scoring they have fought all season.

Richards comes into her final home game on a hot streak, playing the best basketball of her career. She has three 20-point-or-more outings in the past four games. It's a good feeling for a player from Graham, Texas, who has seen plenty of tough times and difficult losses since she chose to become a Buff.

"You know? I don't think I would have had it any other way," Richards said. "The rougher times are what make you grow and mature a lot faster."



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CU women's preview: March 7, vs. Kansas State

TODAY -- Colorado (11-16, 3-12) vs. Kansas State (22-6, 9-6) at 2 p.m. at the Coors Events Center.

BROADCAST -- Live streaming video for subscribers on CUBuffs.com; Radio: KKZN (760 AM) with Mike Rice and Carol Callan.

STORYLINE -- CU seniors Kara Richards, Hannah Skildum and Dina Piterniece play the final home game of their careers in what could be the first of back-to-back games against the Wildcats, depending on seeding for the Big 12 tournament.

KEY STAT -- Kansas State is the best defensive team in the conference, allowing opponents an average of just 52.3 points per game. The Buffs have to make the most of their opportunities today.

COACHES -- Kathy McConnell-Miller is 52-69 in her fourth season at CU. Deb Patterson is 262-144 in her 13th season at KSU.

PROBABLE STARTERS

CU -- G Kelly Jo Mullaney, 5-8, sophomore, 5.3 ppg, 1.5 apg., G Bianca Smith, 5-9, junior, 9.6 ppg, 4.0 rpg, G Alyssa Fressle, 5-10, freshman, 7.8 ppg, 2.7 rpg, F Brittany Spears, 6-1, sophomore, 18.1 ppg, 7.9 rpg, C Kara Richards, 13.0 ppg, 7.3 rpg.

KSU -- G Shalee Lehning, 5-9, senior, 10.6 ppg, 7.5 rpg, G Kari Kincaid, 5-10, junior, 7.9 ppg, 2.3 rpg, G/F Danielle Zanotti, 6-2, senior, 2.7 ppg, 2.7 rpg, F Ashley Sweat, 6-2, junior, 16.6 ppg, 5.2 rpg, F Marlies Gipson, 6-0, senior, 12.5 ppg, 6.6 rpg.

SERIES - CU leads 32-30, including winning three of the past five. Kansas State won the first meeting this season 72-60 in Manhattan, Kan.

UP NEXT -- The Buffs play in the first round of the Big 12 Conference tournament Thursday in Oklahoma City against an opponent still to be determined.



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