



Buffing up: CU players adding muscle

Offseason weight program already paying dividends

By Ryan Thorburn
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BOULDER, Colo. — If there is a poster boy for Colorado men's basketball -- besides Chauncey Billups -- it is the versatile Cory Higgins, the team's leading scorer and rebounder last season.

But if there is a poster boy for the Buffs' vastly improved offseason program, it would be Austin Dufault.

Just three months after running into the wall as a painful freshman season mercifully came to an end, Dufault has added about 10 pounds of muscle to his 6-foot-8 frame while working with new strength and conditioning coach James Hardy.

"The game that I really look back on and remember that I was dead afterwards was Kansas State," Dufault said of CU's 76-64 loss in Manhattan on March 7. "It was really physical and I was pretty beaten up. We had to bounce back and go right to the Big 12 Tournament. I don't think I ever fully recovered after that game.

"It's a long season for any freshman and eventually you're going to hit the wall at some point."

Dufault scored just two points in 18 minutes during the season-ending loss to Texas four days later in Oklahoma City. Higgins, who was consistently good all season, closed his sophomore campaign with a thud -- going 1-for-11 from the field with a season-low five points against the Longhorns.

The Buffs finished Jeff Bzdelik's second season in Boulder with a 9-22 record, including a 1-15 mark in the Big 12.

Dufault, Higgins and Dwight Thorne started all 31 games for CU. Freshman point guard Nate Tomlinson started 28 games and was held out of the other three games due to a foot injury and a concussion.

All of the above are expected to have more help on game nights and competition in practice with the addition of a five-man recruiting class that consists of point guard Shannon Sharpe, shooting guard Alec Burks, forward Marcus Relphorde, forward Keegan Hornbuckle and center Shane Harris-Tunks.

"They're all gym rats," Dufault said. "The three of them that are here right now love to be in the gym and working out. Marcus, being a junior-college guy, knows how to play. And we talk to the freshmen a lot about what it was like last year struggling.

"It was not fun around here not winning games. I think they understand that we're trying to win next

year and not have inexperience be an excuse."

Dufault worked out with Sharpe and Burks on Monday morning. During evening pick-up games at the Coors Events Center the 6-7, 225-pound Relphorde is usually waiting for Dufault.

"Marcus has really impressed me," said Dufault, who was listed at 210 pounds last season and weighed in at 220 on Monday. "I had never seen him play before he got here, but just the way he approaches the game, he's a really great competitor. He plays extremely hard all the time.

"Me and him have gone at it a little bit in the gym. And that's good to get after each other."

After the program's third consecutive 20-loss season, you're not going to hear a lot of bravado coming out of the CU locker room. But there is a quiet confidence inside the new weight room at the Coors Events Center that the buffer Buffs can have a winning record in 2009-10.

"Last year I learned how hard you have to play all the time," Dufault said. "When you're younger you think you can take plays off and make up for it athletically, but in Division I basketball you can't do that. You have to play hard every single possession."

And avoid that wall.



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Thorburn: CU's Bzdelik optimistic, but rough Big 12 still a reality

BOULDER, Colo. — Colorado basketball is on the rise.

Of course, I'm not sure the program has anywhere to go but up after three consecutive 20-loss seasons.

I've been hanging out at the Coors Events Center a little bit this summer checking out some of the behind-the-scenes happenings with the Buffs, and there is no question Jeff Bzdelik is going to turn the corner at CU this season.

"The summer is the key to individual development and physical development for everyone," Bzdelik said during Tuesday's Big 12 coaches teleconference with members of the media. "It's when players are made."

There is some legitimate talent in place now when you take a look at Cory Higgins, Marcus Relphorde and Alec Burks. There are some players ready to make a big jump when you think about what Austin Dufault, Nate Tomlinson and Trey Eckloff went through as freshmen and what they're doing to prepare as sophomores-to-be.

There is an actual weight room at the CEC. A real strength and conditioning coach (James Hardy) is now officially assigned to hoops. Bzdelik and his staff even have their very own administrative assistant (Marge Marcy) this year.

And the most refreshing development I've witnessed is a new attitude from top to bottom.

Bzdelik says it's time to stop whining about what CU doesn't have (including a practice facility) and start finding a way to win, despite limited facilities and support.

There is, however, one problem still facing the program: The Big 12 is loaded from top to Buffs.

Bzdelik's team might be vastly improved, but how many rungs on the ladder can it realistically climb in 2009-10?

Kansas is the preseason favorite to win the national title with Sherron Collins and Cole Aldrich returning. Texas certainly has the talent to make it to the Final Four with Damion James and Dexter Pittman putting the NBA on hold and perhaps the top recruiting class in the country set to join them in Austin.

Texas A&M has the (dark) horsepower to steal a conference title. Oklahoma and Missouri are riding the momentum of Elite Eight appearances and will be reloading, not rebuilding.

Even some of the middle-of-the-pack or bottom-feeding programs -- like Oklahoma State (James Anderson) and Iowa State (Craig Brackins) -- feature NBA lottery-caliber stars capable of carrying them

into the NCAA Tournament.

Of the top 150 incoming recruits at rivals.com, 25 are headed to the Big 12 -- four to Oklahoma, four to Oklahoma State, three to Baylor, three to Texas, three to Kansas, three to Kansas State, three to Texas A&M, one to Iowa State and one to Missouri.

Only CU, Nebraska and Texas Tech from the Big 12 were unable to get on the exclusive national list.

"It's just like being thrown in the deep end with a weighted vest on and you don't know how to swim," Red Raiders head coach Pat Knight said when asked how difficult it is to move up in the Big 12 pecking order. "You're just treading water."

So how can Bzdelik's team avoid drowning?

For starters, CU needs to establish a home-court advantage. Bzdelik is planning to host 10 non-conference games at the Coors Events Center and it would be a good idea to win at least nine of those.

The Buffs also travel to the prestigious Maui Invitational (a 1-2 record might be paradise), Oregon State (should be a pretty fair Big 12/Pac-10 fight), Colorado State (gotta have this one) and Tulsa (the Conference USA favorite with the mess going on at Memphis).

And then things really get tough when the Big 12 slate begins in January.

"I don't think there is any question that our league is better than it has ever been," Texas head coach Rick Barnes said. "I think we have a lot of teams that can do a lot of damage."

The Buffs are indeed on the rise.

That might only translate to being on the NIT bubble or perhaps competing in the CBI Tournament. Not exactly March Madness, but a sign of progress fans should expect to see at the end of the season.

"We're not running in place. We're making strides," Bzdelik said. "But the Big 12 is the best conference in America."



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