



Home-grown talent pays off for Buffaloes

By Ryan Thorburn

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The local soccer secret is out.

Prominent national programs, from Portland to Georgia, and Big 12 rivals have discovered the quality and depth of talent that exists on the girls pitch in Colorado.

CU head coach Bill Hempen, whose current roster of 32 players includes 17 from in state, is faced with more and more competition on the recruiting trail in his backyard every year.

"Between Nebraska and Kansas, I think they probably have an apartment probably somewhere down in Denver that they split payment on," Hempen joked after Wednesday's practice. "Because those guys are here all the time. ...

"It's a good place for coaches to come and steal."

Fortunately for the Buffs, Hempen and his staff were able to hold onto Nikki Marshall. After she scored 100 goals at Skyline High School, coaches were lining up at her home in Mead making scholarship offers.

"It's funny because it was like a mad rush to recruit her toward the end," Hempen said. "We were fortunate that we were in early and maintained the presence. And we did well enough as a team during that recruitment process when she came and watched us. I guess we were in her mind all the time, which was good for us."

Marshall was the Big 12's leading scorer last season after racking up a CU-record 17 goals as a freshman. Over the summer she played on the U-20 national team at the Pan-Am Games in Brazil.

Competing in front of 70,000 fans in the gold medal game against the host team was a tad more intense than the Skyline-Longmont rivalry, but Marshall says playing in Colorado as a youth did help her development.

"Colorado is always one of the strongest states. We always have a good team going to regionals, and I think definitely the girls program in Colorado is awesome," Marshall said.

The Buffs will face quite a challenge today at 4 p.m. when No. 1-ranked Stanford visits Prentup Field.

"It's obviously an honor to have them come out here and even play us," CU freshman Amanda Foulk said. "We're pretty excited about it and we definitely want to prove ourselves. This would be a good opportunity to do that. ...

"Our preseason schedule has been awesome. Every game in the Big 12 is a battle, and it's good to prepare yourself early."

Foulk, who led the Broomfield Eagles to their first state title in 2006, said competing against many of her future collegiate teammates — including Monarch's Amanda Raley and Kelly Ross — in high school helped get her ready to make the jump.

"I definitely think that Colorado has some really good competition and I feel like I was pretty prepared for college," Foulk said. "We have a lot of good out-of-state players, but I think we definitely have produced some great players in Colorado."

Fran Munnely, who helped Hempen put CU's young program on the map during her brilliant career from 2002-05, is from Arvada. Now she's a volunteer assistant trying to help develop the next generation of home-grown stars.

"It shows that anybody can step on the field and make a difference," Raley, also a freshman, said when asked about Marshall's quick transition from high school phenom to Big 12 newcomer of the year. "Just because we're freshmen it doesn't mean that we can't do anything on the field. We can make a difference, too."

But there is a difference between dominating in high school and competing against the Stanfords of the world in college. It's usually in the state's Olympic Development Program, which CU associate head coach Paul Hogan is heavily involved in, where Colorado kids find out what they're really made of.

"When you're the best player at Broomfield High School, are you going to be the best player at a California high school in Northern California? You don't know that," Hempen said. "Once you go out and play some of the elite California teams in tournaments, then you're starting to measure yourself against kids outside of our state that are legitimate players at the Division I level. Then you have a better understanding of where you stand."

As it stands right now, Colorado is becoming a key recruiting area for college soccer programs and top coaches are starting to frequent the state to make sure they can find the next Nikki Marshall sooner rather than too late.



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