



Woelk: Bzdelik's 'desperate energy' will be a requirement

By Neill Woelk
Friday, October 26, 2007

Ask folks who know Jeff Bzdelik, and most people describe the Colorado Buffaloes' head coach the same way.

Words like "driven" and "focused" and "intense" pepper the conversation.

But maybe the best description this corner has heard yet came Thursday from a young man who has known Bzdelik only a few months.

"He told us one time that he coaches almost out of fear," said Buff senior Marcus Hall. "A fear of not succeeding. A fear of letting people down.

"Basically, just a fear of not getting the job done. That's the way he coaches and teaches, and that's the way we have to play. Desperate energy — that's his thing."

Get used to that term, "desperate energy." That is Bzdelik's trademark, his mantra. Anyone who saw his Air Force teams play the last couple of years knows exactly what it means.

Quick translation: every minute, every second, every possession as if it were the most important of the game.

That's the way Bzdelik's Falcons played, and it was good enough for one NCAA berth, an NIT Final Four berth, and wins over a half-dozen NCAA Tournament teams a year ago.

Of course, that Air Forceconnection is also proving to be a double-edge sword for Bzdelik. Since the day he took the job at Colorado, expectations for CU's program immediately ramped up.

"I was in a restaurant yesterday and a lady came up to me and said, 'We're going to win a lot of games, aren't we,' " Bzdelik said at Thursday's CU media day. "I said, 'Ma'am, we're going to do our best.' "

Yes, basketball expectations have risen.

Now, here's what else you need to know about Bzdelik. There is no magic wand, no sorcery, no secret weapon that will automatically transform a team that finished 7-20 a year ago into an NCAA Tournament contender.

The reality is this: As of today, the Buffs are not a good team. They were picked to finish last in the Big 12 ("I voted us 13th," Bzdelik says, only half-jokingly), and there's a reason: new coach, new system,

virtually no depth and the only marquee player on the squad is coming off by far his worst season ever.

Simply, there's no reason to think the Buffs should be good.

"I can't wave that magic wand," Bzdelik said. "I don't have that."

Yet ...

Bzdelik can coach. Richard Roby and Marcus Hall can play the game. While expectations may not be in line with reality, do not think for a second Bzdelik or any of his players are thinking about anything other than winning.

There is no magic wand, but there is a formula, one that has proven effective wherever Bzdelik has coached:

Desperate energy, great intelligence and great team play.

"To have a chance to be competitive, we have to have those things," Bzdelik said. "If we don't do those things, we have no chance. But if we do, we have a chance to be competitive in every game."

That's all it is: a chance to be competitive. That would be a major improvement over a year ago.

Still, the question is whether his players really believe in his formula. If they do buy into the system, if they truly invest in everything their coach says, they may actually have that chance.

If not ...

"What he's teaching us is the only way to succeed," Hall said. "I can tell you this: Every guy out there believes him. If we do what we're supposed to do, if we play the way we can play, if we listen to what he says ... we can win. I honestly don't think people can guard us if we play the way he teaches us."

The Buffs play their first exhibition game next Thursday. They open the regular season on Nov. 9 against a New Mexico team that embarrassed them in Albuquerque a year ago. The Lobos have most of those players back from last year, plus a new coach in Steve Alford.

"He mentions that game to us almost every day," Hall said. "He says we should be desperate in that game."

"I think we will be."



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Guard Hall anxious to make up for lost time

Buff senior sat out last year with academic issues

By Chris Shelton
Friday, October 26, 2007

Marcus Hall sat out last season to focus on his grades.

But the Colorado senior guard also learned what life was like to not be playing basketball, and he didn't like it.

"I've been told that, I guess, it's supposed to help me build character," Hall said during CU's media day Thursday. "I'd rather build that on the court. Last year was the hardest thing I've ever had to experience in my basketball life. Going through surgery, it's nothing compared to sitting out and watching your team struggle knowing that you could help."

The struggle didn't end there.

Hall spent much of his spare time this summer studying film of new coach Jeff Bzdelik's offense and talking with the coaching staff about the offense so he would be prepared to lead the team in its new system when practices began this month.

And then he went and had to have surgery last week to repair a torn ligament in his right hand as the team began preparation to try to bounce back from last year's 7-20 season under former coach Ricardo Patton. "It hurts him because he has to miss (parts of) practice," Bzdelik said. "But he follows me around and does all the defensive drills. The players don't like it — someone got hit on the head with his cast the other day."

Hall's cast is expected to be removed on Monday and he can start shooting again on Tuesday. He'll likely miss the Nov. 1 exhibition game against Brock University, but is expected to be ready for the Nov. 6 exhibition game against Regis and the season opener against New Mexico on Nov. 9.

Hall has bounced around between point guard and shooting guard in his CU career, which includes 23 of 30 starts in his junior season two years ago when he led the team in assists with 4.1 per game and finished first in Big 12 play in assist-to-turnover ratio (2.1).

He wouldn't specify what his position will be this season, mostly because of CU's style of offense.

"Point guard on this team is more like a leadership role," Hall said. "You have to know all five spots. There are going to be times where the five man (center) will be outside and I'll be in the post. Everything's interchangeable."

He likes the new offense, too.

"It's the best offense I've run since I've been playing basketball," Hall said. "It's a continuing offense. There are too many things you can do out of it. We base it off of, if you take this away from us, we do that. If you take that away from us, we do this."

Given that he missed last year, Hall appreciates Bzdelik's philosophy of this year's team needing to play with "desperate energy."

"It's the only way I can play now," Hall said. "After being out for a year, he doesn't even have to tell me about desperate energy."

Williams update

Colorado sophomore forward Jeremy Williams, who started 18 of 27 games last year but is academically ineligible this semester, is doing his best to make sure he can return in January.

"Jeremy is doing everything humanly possible to become eligible," Bzdelik said. "He comes to our office and we make him read three times a week. He's a talented player and a player that we need."

Knutson lights it up

Freshman guard Levi Knutson reminds Hall of former Buff Blair Wilson, a 3-point shooter. Knutson, Bzdelik said, hit 71 3-pointers during a drill in which players had five minutes to shoot using only one ball and one rebounder. Bzdelik said former West Virginia player Kevin Pittsnogle holds the record in that drill with 78.

Notable

Bzdelik said it's a misconception that teams in his offense can't get out and run. Last year at Air Force, his team led the nation in wins of 30 or more points with 11. "I get so upset with that," Bzdelik said. "When you win 11 games by 30 or more points, you're not holding the ball. At Air Force, we averaged more points than some Big 12 teams." ... Bzdelik said he has talked to his team about losing last year to New Mexico by 41 points, adding that Air Force twice beat New Mexico last year. "I wasn't here," Bzdelik said, "but it bothers me."



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THE DENVER POST

CU BASKETBALL

Roby can school foes in Princeton offense

By Tom Kensler
The Denver Post

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BOULDER — After three seasons of roaming the perimeter, Colorado senior Richard Roby will be called upon to slide inside more often in the new "Princeton-style" offense being taught by first-year coach Jeff Bzdelik.

The 6-foot-6 Roby, who averaged 17.3 points last season but shot just 38.3 percent, doesn't seem to mind that at all.

"I'm more capable of going inside and outside this year so (defenders) don't just see me in one place," Roby said Thursday during CU men's and women's basketball media day activities.

"In past years, teams put smaller, quicker guys on me because I was on the perimeter. That took away my driving capabilities. But now I have opportunities to take those little guys to the post."

Women's offense changes. In an effort to give her frontcourt players more room to operate

underneath the basket, Colorado women's coach Kathy McConnell-Miller has switched from her signature high-low offense to a "four out, one in" style.

It's hoped the new offense, which keeps only one player in the post, will prevent teams from double-teaming Jackie McFarland. A 6-3 senior forward, McFarland was named to the all-Big 12 first team last spring after averaging 17.8 points and 10.8 rebounds. The new offense also should keep 6-4 center Kara Richards and 6-3 forward Aija Putnina from getting in each other's way.

"We needed to get the (frontcourt players) in single coverage because they can score when they are only going against one defender," McConnell-Miller said.

Women's footnotes. Look for former Connecticut and Highlands Ranch High School star Ann Strother to soon be named director of operations for the CU women's team. Strother will continue to play in the summer for the WNBA's Indiana Fever....At times, McConnell-Miller might put sophomore Whitney Houston and freshman Brittany Spears in the backcourt together. "A lot of people on campus think it's funny," Spears said with a grin. ...

Men's footnotes. Marcus Hall could be ready by the second exhibition (Nov. 6 against Regis University), Bzdelik said. Hall underwent recent surgery to repair a torn ligament on his right thumb....Bzdelik praised both freshmen signed in November by Ricardo Patton. Bzdelik said 6-11

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THE DENVER POST

Caleb Patterson of tiny Ringwood, Okla., "has great potential," and pointed out that 6-4 Levi Knutson from Arapahoe High School recently hit 71 3-pointers in a five-minute drill (out of an estimated 80 to 85 attempts). Bzdelik said the lone scholarship freshman he signed, 6-5 Cory Higgins, reminds him of former Air Force star Antoine Hood.

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Desperate Buffs look to surprise

By Patrick Ridgell

Longmont Times-Call

BOULDER — Basketball media day at Colorado and no bombshells. Go figure.

A year ago at the annual event, former coach Ricardo Patton announced his plan to leave following the season, an unveiling that rocked the program. But Thursday's installment featured new coach Jeff Bzdelik discussing the job he's assumed and the challenges ahead.

While Thursday lacked last year's drama, Bzdelik's takes on his new team were intriguing — especially when the coach revealed where he wanted to vote the Buffs in the Big 12 coaches' preseason poll.

"I picked us to finish 13th," the coach said.

The other coaches placed CU 12th, which is not exactly a vote of confidence. But as expected, Bzdelik is in the embryonic stages of building the Buffs, and he's still learning how his players learn. He said there have been good practices and ugly ones, and he's encouraged by how willing and eager they are to soak up the intricacies of an interchangeable offense that even has Richard Roby playing a little power forward.

Still, there's a mindset the coach believes must be embraced before the Buffs surprise anyone, because as Bzdelik promised, he can't merely wave a magic wand and make this group win.

"We have to play with a desperate energy, with great intelligence and great team play on both ends of the court to have a chance to be competitive," Bzdelik said. "And if we don't do those things I just mentioned, we have no chance. But if we do those things, we have a chance to be competitive in any game we play."

"I'm a realist, and I've told our team, 'Look, you're going to get picked to be last, and some people are going to pencil in wins against you. You have to be an active participant in your rescue. You'll win when you're tired of losing.'"

As for Thursday's ramblings, Bzdelik offered some insights:

He hasn't found a starting five and probably won't soon. The five who start next Thursday in the exhibition opener will probably be much different than the five who start in the second exhibition five days later.

"It's not about who starts, but who impacts the games and how," Bzdelik said.

Senior guard Marcus Hall has assumed a leadership role.

"He has a competitive spirit and a quality about him that's very contagious in a positive way," Bzdelik said.

Hall said the cast on his right hand, placed there following ligament surgery last week, probably will be removed Monday. He hopes to play in the second exhibition.

Eight or nine Buffs are vying for regular playing time, and three are freshmen.

Cory Higgins reminds Bzdelik of Antoine Hood, one of the Air Force's best players ever and a guard Bzdelik coached during his stint at the academy.

Levi Knutson can shoot. In a drill during which he was asked to make as many 3s as possible in five minutes, with one ball and one rebounder, Knutson hit 71.

And 6-foot-11 Caleb Patterson "has great potential. He's long, and he can shoot the basketball."

CU needs a post player to emerge while forward Jeremy Williams tries to regain his eligibility. Williams "is doing everything humanly possible" to get eligible, Bzdelik said. He works with the team on a limited basis and is seeing tutors and leaving practices early to study.

Aside from CU's depth problems in the post, there's another reason Bzdelik can't wait to put the forward in the lineup.

"He is a heck of a talent," Bzdelik said.

Asked if Roby is especially eager to soak up Bzdelik's NBA savvy, the coach said, "All the players are excited and anxious."

Roby and Hall said they believe this is a much different team than last season's, which went 7-20 and finished last in the Big 12. Just by the sheer turnover in the coaching and personnel department, that's obvious. But they say they see the mindset Bzdelik wants and they're more than willing to strive for it.

"For the most part, as a team, we have a whole different view of how things should go," Hall said. "And for me, I wasn't that much a part of last season. But I do feel like some of these guys need to be re-boosted, or re-spirited, and coach has instilled that."

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Rocky Mountain News

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Knutson expresses long-range intention

By B.G. Brooks, Rocky Mountain News
October 26, 2007

BOULDER - There's much more to impressing a basketball coach than making shots, but let's just say hitting 71-of-80 three-point attempts in five minutes is guaranteed to catch your coach's eye.

That's what University of Colorado freshman Levi Knutson did recently - and coach Jeff Bzdelik took notice. The marksmanship of Knutson, one of three scholarship freshmen on Bzdelik's first CU roster, shot to the forefront in a drill Bzdelik employed at Air Force and also is used by West Virginia.

It calls for one three-point shooter, one rebounder and a shot clock set for five minutes. The shooter works his way around the three-point arc, with the rebounder hustling after misses to ensure the shooter as many opportunities as possible.

Bzdelik said the record number of treys in the drill, 78, was set by former West Virginia wingman Kevin Pittsnogle. That Knutson was only seven short reaffirms he "can really shoot the ball," Bzdelik said, adding that the 6-foot-4 guard is also "working hard to expand his game - he's learning to gain separation off the dribble and is improving his defense."

Knutson calls Bzdelik's offense, which demands every player know every position, "an equal opportunity for everybody . . . anybody can get open and shoot."

Senior guard Marcus Hall said Knutson's accuracy is reminiscent of former CU swingman Blair Wilson, the school's career leader in three-pointers made (257) and attempted (679), No. 2 in single-season three-point percentage (42.9) and No. 3 in career three-point percentage (37.2).

"He could be that caliber of player," Hall said.

Since practice began midmonth, Bzdelik has identified "eight or nine guys," the three freshmen included, who will be counted on in a rotation requiring "desperate energy" to make the Buffaloes competitive.

ETC.: Hall is sporting a cast on his right hand and thumb, the result of recent minor surgery to repair a torn ligament. He said the cast is scheduled for removal Monday, and he plans to be shooting the next day . . . CU's regular-season opener (Nov. 9) is against New Mexico, a Mountain West Conference member handled twice last season by Bzdelik's Air Force team. The Lobos pounded the Buffaloes by 41 (106-65) . . . Forward Jeremy Williams continues to practice with the team and is on track to regain his eligibility for the spring semester, Bzdelik said.

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McConnell-Miller delivers strong message to Buffs

Women's coach sets specific goals for her players

By Chris Shelton
Friday, October 26, 2007

Before last summer's classes began, coach Kathy McConnell-Miller told her players on the Colorado women's basketball team that she would accept nothing less than an A or B on their summer report cards.

She also issued goals for every player to reach in areas such as conditioning, shooting and strength.

It was the first time in her tenure at CU that the coach, entering her third season of rebuilding the Buffs, began requiring players to meet certain objectives. Before this summer, players didn't have goals. They were told to go out and do the best they could.

"She made a point, which woke a lot of people up," said CU senior forward Jackie McFarland during Thursday's CU media day. "She said, 'Each scholarship is renewable from year to year. If you don't make these goals that I set for you, don't think you're automatically going to walk back in here. You have to earn your scholarship.' ... There are people who never would have set that goal for themselves. When you see you can achieve something that you never thought possible, it opens your mind to other things you can accomplish."

It's not that McConnell-Miller has become meaner in her third year. She's just rais-ing expectations for a team that hopes to be playing in the postseason for the first time since last going to the 2004 NCAA tournament under former coach Ceal Barry.

McConnell-Miller's first two seasons were marked by a lack of depth and inexperienced guard play as the Buffs went 9-21 her first year and 13-17 last season.

"Anytime you take over a program, you want to progress ... as quickly and efficiently as you can," McConnell-Miller, 40, said. "I can tell you this, being the start of my third year, this is the best I've felt. The biggest difference is the preparation of this young team from last year to this year in the offseason."

She cited the international experience that McFarland received playing in Taiwan this summer for the U.S. Jones Cup team, leading the USA in field-goal percentage. McFarland was named a preseason All-Big 12 player. Sophomore Aija Putnina, a candidate for starting small forward, played this summer for the Latvia Junior National Team, averaging 16.6 points, 11 rebounds and 1.5 blocks per game.

The rest of the team stayed on campus and worked on their offseason goals, which they all met.

The Buffs return starting center Kara Richards, who looks much stronger, and will have a more experienced backcourt, with senior Susie Powers and sophomore Whitney Houston back for their second seasons. Incoming freshmen Britney Blythe and Brittany Spears will compete for starting jobs at point guard and shooting guard, respectively. Junior college transfer Dina Piterniece, once healthy, will be a big 3-point shooting threat.

"(McConnell-Miller's) taking this program to another level," Blythe said. "All the pieces of the puzzle are coming together."

McConnell-Miller also changed the offense so that the Buffs wouldn't be dumping the ball inside to McFarland, watching her get double-teamed and then struggling from there.

This year the Buffs may look a little like the men's team and will pull four players outside with one inside to try and isolate someone down low one-on-one with screens. The Buffs will read the defense to see what opponents are trying to take away from them and go to someone else on offense. Guards, such as the 5-foot-10 Powers, could be posting up just as easily as Putnina could be running a play as point guard.

"Everyone is interchangeable," Powers said. "Guards need to know the post position, as well. ... As a tall guard, that works to my advantage."

The Buffs believe they have the system, some new players who will contribute heavily and some veterans with valuable experience to keep the program heading in the right direction.

But there's still more work to be done, and McConnell-Miller has a plan. Although still not official, former Colorado prep star Ann Strother has been hired as CU's director of operations and part of her job will be to improve in-state recruiting. McConnell-Miller inherited one in-state player in junior Caley Dow, and saw Powers transfer after McConnell-Miller got the CU job out of Tulsa.

Putnina, who played one year of Colorado prep basketball as a Latvia native, has been CU's only in-state signing under the new regime.

"The No. 1 issue we've tried to address is to attract the Colorado players," McConnell-Miller said. "If you can keep the Colorado players home, you're talking about a top-10 team year-in, year-out. It's something I've sat down and talked to coach (Barry) about extensively. It's something as a staff we've tried to overcome."

This could be the most important time for in-state recruiting. The junior class is expected to be one of the strongest in recent memory. Highly-touted Highlands Ranch senior Alyssa Fressle has narrowed her choices, with CU being one of her top three. Maybe Strother, who won a national title at Connecticut and who now plays in the WNBA, can help.

"I just felt like we needed some Colorado representation," McConnell-Miller said. "She can see, from the inside, how great a place this is and maybe share that with some of the people that she influences and look up to her."

Notable

Strother was at practice Thursday, but could not comment on her new job until it becomes official. ... Piterniece has a broken toe on her left foot, which she suffered last week, and is expected to be out for

six weeks, meaning she will miss at least the first five games. ... Sophomore guard Bianca Smith suffered a mild concussion in Sunday's scrimmage and has practiced in a very limited fashion since then. She's listed as day to day. ... McFarland will usually miss Thursday's practices this semester due to a scheduling conflict with one of her classes.



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To Buffaloes' 'divas,' duet feels natural

By B.G. Brooks, Rocky Mountain News
October 26, 2007

BOULDER - In this case, assigning roommates might have been a no-brainer for University of Colorado women's basketball coach Kathy McConnell-Miller.

Let's see . . . Whitney Houston, meet Brittany Spears.

In her third season on the job, McConnell-Miller is searching for more backcourt efficiency and solid perimeter shooters than divas, or their namesakes, in a new "four out, one in" two-guard front offense.

In Houston, a sophomore, and Spears, a true freshman, the Buffaloes appear to have two pieces of the puzzle. Houston, a fiery 5-foot-5 point guard from Memphis, Tenn., and Spears, a lean and athletic 6-2 forward from Pasadena, Calif., are on-court opposites who formed a bond by telephone during the offseason.

Rooming together seemed natural, and Houston said even if her roomie last season, fellow Memphian Candace Rucker, hadn't transferred, she still would have sought out Spears.

Fine by Spears, who said, "It's like I've known her forever."

Houston spent much of the offseason working on a shooting stroke that was fundamentally flawed when she arrived in Boulder. She brought the ball so far behind her head, her shot appeared as much a back scratch as a field-goal attempt.

Now, after countless hours of catching and shooting balls fired from a machine, she says her form is "way different."

"And I *will* make more than one three this season," she promised, alluding to one trey made in 16 attempts in 2006-07.

Already, Spears promises to be more accurate than that. McConnell-Miller calls her "one of our best shooters. You don't expect a freshman to be the first one in and the last one out of the gym, but she is. It seems like there are times that I have to pull her out of the gym just to give her a break."

ETC.: McConnell-Miller has hired former Highlands Ranch/

Connecticut standout **Ann Strother** as director of basketball operations. McConnell-Miller said Strother still plans on playing with the Indiana Fever of the WNBA. . . . CU plans to sign two players during the early signing period next month. . . . The Buffs believe they are mentally tougher after conditioning work under **Jared Aurich**, who joined the staff in May after three seasons at Boise State.

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CU looks past poll, forward to season

By Ray Sobczyk

Longmont Times-Call

BOULDER — The Colorado women's basketball team was picked 11th in the 2007 preseason Big 12 coaches' poll, a major surprise to head coach Kathy McConnell-Miller and some of her players.

"I think (my players) were very surprised because of the improvement of their play, their international experience, the way they came back, and the addition of Brittany Spears, Britney Blythe, Chelsea Dale, Courtney Dunn and, of course, with another year under Susie (Powers') belt," McConnell-Miller said Thursday during media day at the Coors Event Center in Boulder.

So, any words of wisdom for the Buffaloes as they prepare to build off last season's seventh-place finish in the Big 12 when they open the 2007 season Nov. 16 at San Francisco?



Colorado's Bianca Smith strikes a pose for a promotional video during the Buffs' men's and women's basketball media day on Thursday at the Coors Events Center in Boulder. The Buffs were chosen 11th in the Big 12 preseason coaches' poll. They open the season Nov. 16 at San Francisco. **Lewis Geyer/Times-Call**

"Someone said the Rockies were picked second to last in the conference this year, and they're in the World Series. So rankings don't mean that much," All-Big 12 forward Jackie McFarland said. "Obviously, they're playing for the world championship. We're just going to go out, focus day to day, play hard and focus on getting better."

McConnell Miller is entering her third year at the helm of the Buffs, and after two sub-par seasons, she is implementing major changes in the team's offensive style to free up her post players and integrate more production from the guard spot.

Which means the Buffs will utilize the 3-point line much more. The team worked heavily on its outside shooting in the offseason to improve its perimeter game.

"We wanted to change the offense to really play to the strengths of our team," McConnell Miller said. "We saw so much double-teaming on Jackie and our post players that we felt like we need to pull out things a little bit more, as far as our offensive sets with three out and two in."

"We really felt like if we can get one of our post players out on the block in single coverage, they can score. So our offense is really designed on the perimeter, setting screens, utilizing post players, utilizing guards, finding ways to go from the outside in or from the inside out."

McConnell-Miller said the players are starting to pick up the new offensive scheme, even though it is not the easiest style to learn.

"It's really shaping up," said McFarland, who tallied 18 double-doubles in 2006. "It allows everyone a better chance to score, because if they do try and double, everyone is in a different position, and they can use their strengths to score and put the ball in the basket."

Added Powers: "I like that you can interchange and be everywhere on the floor, and as a tall guard, that works to my benefit. Everyone is interchangeable."

Along with the new offense, the Buffaloes welcome four freshmen to a team that returns four starters — McFarland, Powers, Kara Richards and Whitney Houston — from last season's squad, which beat Texas Tech in the opening round of the Big 12 tournament before being ousted by Texas A&M a day later.

Freshmen Blythe and Dale — both from California high schools — bring stability to the backcourt, and McConnell-Miller has high expectations for her two other freshmen, Dunn and Spears, in the frontcourt, creating a nice mix of young players and veterans for the Buffs.

"Coming into practice, they are the best conditioned that I've had; they're the strongest and the most competitive group that I could have hoped to have been handed on the 12th of October," McConnell-Miller said of her team. "We have a great combination of veterans and some really inexperienced players, but ones that know the game of basketball and continue to elevate this program."

And being picked 11th in the conference has given the Buffs plenty of motivation to elevate the program to new heights.

"There is definitely a little extra motivation, I think," McFarland said. "If anything, it's always been fun for me to be an underdog; I guess you can't be worse than what people are expecting."

Coming off its best season in the past three years — with a 2006 record of 13-17, 6-10 in the Big 12 — CU is expecting the best.