



Buffaloes drawing attention

With five straight wins, CU on verge of joining Top 25

By Chris Shelton

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Jackie McFarland isn't really sure how to feel.

The Colorado senior has never been in this situation before -- the Buffs knocking off Top-25 teams in consecutive games, including a win over No. 20 Vanderbilt on the road Sunday that put the CU women's basketball team at No. 26 in this week's AP poll.

"It's overwhelming for me almost," said McFarland, a star forward on a team that's suffered three consecutive losing seasons in her tenure at CU. "I've been hoping and working for this for three years and for it to finally get here is such a huge reward."

To see the Buffs one place out of the Top 25 is quite remarkable considering where they were nearly three weeks ago when CU lost in the opening round of the Coors Classic to Siena, 83-74.

In that Nov. 23 game, CU sophomore guard Bianca Smith missed all 11 of her shots, 10 of which were from 3-point range, as she shot the Buffs out of the game.

But in her last four games, Smith has scored 10, 11, 16 and then 22 points for an average of 14.8 points per game as CU (6-2) has gone on a five-game win streak.

"After that game, I couldn't let myself down," said Smith, the reigning Big 12 Player of the Week. "I just had to get back in the gym and keep shooting."

Smith took 500 to 1,000 shots every night after practice so she could get back on track after the Siena loss. But Smith's shooting was just one of several developments that has helped CU turn it around — routing rival CSU, knocking off No. 21 Wyoming and beating Vanderbilt in a span of eight days.

Junior guard Hannah Skildum brings good energy to the team in having moved into a starting role the past four games. Junior forward Caley Dow has proven effective against zone defenses. Sophomore forward Aija Putnina is posting good numbers since becoming a starter five games ago. Freshman center Courtney Dunn teamed up with junior Kara Richards to provide a big body on Vanderbilt's Liz Sherwood, and Dunn can post up or shoot the 3.

One more addition is coming, too.

Junior guard/forward Dina Piterniece is about 80 percent ready to go following her absence to start the season due to a broken toe. The junior college transfer is expected to add another outside scoring threat that already includes Smith, freshman Brittany Spears and senior Susie Powers.

"A lot of players feel good about their role and where we are," CU coach Kathy McConnell-Miller said. "Therefore, their confidence is really good."

So good the Buffs wouldn't mind facing another Top-25 team next, even though Texas Southern is next on the schedule with 2-5 Tigers of the Southwestern Athletic Conference coming to town on Friday win an RPI of 320 out of 339, according to collegeRPI.com (CU's is 39).

"You kind of want to bring (someone ranked) in and see what you can do," McFarland said. "But, with Texas Southern, we need to stay focused. They're going to come after us now that we've won a couple games and are getting some attention. We have to be ready and keep working hard."



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