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Bzdelik ready to build 'well-oiled machine'

Whole team will be sharing the shooting

By Patrick Ridgell

Longmont Times-Call

BOULDER — Jeff Bzdelik isn't mincing many words these days.

The Colorado men's basketball coach sat down at a table Thursday to discuss the upcoming season. He told everyone what they probably already knew, and then offered his own perspective.

"We are going to be a very, an extremely young basketball team, and very inexperienced," Bzdelik said. "That's the truth.

"But we're exactly where we want to be at this stage of this rebuilding process."

The roster includes five true freshmen, three of whom are likely to start. There's five sophomores, including two walk-ons, plus two juniors and one senior, Jermyl Jackson-Wilson.

One of the juniors, Trent Beckley, is a walk-on, and the other, Dwight Thorne, is coming off an injury-plagued year in which he averaged 15 minutes a game.

Jackson-Wilson is not a perimeter threat, which renders him unlikely to start in Bzdelik's variation of the Princeton offense. That leaves sophomore Cory Higgins as the only returning probable starter. Gone are last year's top three scorers, including the program's all-time leader, Richard Roby. And Big 12 coaches picked CU to finish last in the Big 12 for the third year in a row.

That's where CU the basketball program is today.

Bzdelik said he is not a patient man.

"But I have my eyes fixed on the big picture," he said. "I want the vision to be clear. ... We want to build this into a team that's a well-oiled machine in the future."

Higgins, though, said CU's youth, "doesn't mean a thing." "We're young, but there's no reason we can't compete with anybody," he said.

Any optimism stems from Bzdelik's belief that this team better fits his system, which requires all five players on the court being able to shoot. Last year, CU regularly used lineups in which two, and sometimes three, members were not perimeter threats. Defenders sagged, clogging passing lanes and making back-door cuts difficult.

That problem should not be so prevalent in 2008-09, they say.

"Everyone being able to shoot the ball is so key," sophomore forward Casey Crawford said. "Everyone out there on the court will be a threat to shoot the ball, and that makes us more dangerous."

Said Bzdelik: "We're recruiting to the system, where everybody can pass, dribble and shoot, everybody has a high

basketball I.Q., and they're willing to totally buy in and have the attitude that they can sacrifice individually for a great cause. To me that's our only chance and that's the way we're going to play."

Crawford sat out last season after transferring from Wake Forest. He was Kansas' Mr. Basketball as a senior at Blue Valley North, and he possesses enough range to make the new 3-point line, which is a foot further back in 2008-09, something he shrugs at.

Given the chance, Bzdelik gushed over his incoming freshmen. He called forward Austin Dufault, "Highly skilled and extremely competitive." Nate Tomlinson is a true point guard with the "quickness to think one step ahead." Forward Toby Veal is a "gifted rebounder." Trey Eckloff has "great upside." And Ryan Kelley is "very athletic."

Bzdelik declined to name his starting five because he doesn't want anyone "getting comfortable," but added the rotation will go eight or nine deep. Bzdelik expects better scoring balance.

Facility improvements continue. Weights for the new weight room at the Coors Events Center are expected to arrive Monday. Bzdelik said he has seen the plans for a new practice facility CU wants to build. He added the new CEC floor will limit wear on bodies, and its new locker room is "state of the art." Recruiting is also going well.

What's it all mean? For now, it means fans better be patient.

"Quick fixes don't equate into a solid foundation that lasts for a long time," Bzdelik said. "We're young. Fans are going to have to understand that."

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Women hope best things come in 3s

Bufs will seek to score from outside

By Patrick Ridgell

Longmont Times-Call

BOULDER — The Colorado women's basketball team tried in 2007-08 an average of 21.47 3-pointers per game, which was the second-highest in the Big 12. According to what its coach and players were saying Thursday, expect that average to be quite a bit higher in 2008-09.

Kathy McConnell-Miller said CU is going to be far more perimeter oriented this year due to several reasons, mainly because that's what the Buffs' talent dictates. Gone is all-Big 12 forward Jackie McFarland, whose strengths were in the lane. And back are guards Brittany Spears and Bianca Smith, who combined to try 393 3s in 2008-09.

CU's biggest additions include guard Alyssa Fressle, a touted freshman from Highlands Ranch who admits she prefers playing the two-guard because, "you get a lot more chances to score there."

There's also sophomore guard Kelly Jo Mullaney. She averaged 14.5 points per game at Colorado State in 2006-07 before she was suspended for her role in setting off a homemade chemical bomb outside a teammate's apartment. She later quit and transferred to CU.

The personnel, McConnell-Miller said, will have CU frequently using four-guard lineups.

"You're going to see a lot of offensive sets that are geared towards the guards and getting them lots of shots and looks," she said. "They're strong, they're really an exciting group."

"Of course you have Brittany Spears, and then you add players like Kelly Jo and Alyssa that feel like the ball is their's. When they have it in their hands, they feel like they should do something very good and very special with it."

"The offense will look different. You'll see a lot more perimeter scoring."

McConnell-Miller said a new contract is ready, and she expects to sign it within a week. She declined to provide any details, but it's expected to extend her deal through the 2012-2013 season. McConnell-Miller, who talked with UCLA in the offseason about its coaching vacancy, is entering the fourth of a five-year contract.

The coach's biggest challenge early will be replacing point guard Whitney Houston, the probable starter who tore an ACL in preseason individual workouts. Fressle, Mullaney and Britney Blythe are the top candidates.

McConnell-Miller also said 6-foot-4 center Kara Richards, a senior, is ready to step out from the long shadow McFarland cast and emerge as a force.

Big 12 coaches picked CU to finish 11th in a poll released Wednesday. Three years ago, when McConnell-Miller began her tenure in Boulder, coaches angered several Buffs, including Richards, by picking them last.

This year, McConnell-Miller said, the poll triggered "little to no reaction" among coaches and players. What's the difference?

“It’s not really an issue because whether that poll came out putting us in the top six or bottom six, it wouldn’t take away from the hard work we did this summer, the hard work we’ve put in in the offseason since school started, and the hard work we’re about to put in when the season starts,” Richards said.

Said Fressle: “I just don’t think that what a poll says is going to motivate my team. We’re motivated. We want to be good.”

Patrick Ridgell can be reached at pridgell@times-call.com.



New faces mean women will have their guard up

Bufs' attack no longer will be post-oriented

By Ryan Thorburn

Thursday, October 9, 2008

When Kathy McConnell-Miller took the job as the Colorado women's basketball head coach, she got together with her staff and went over the schedule with a red highlighter in her hand.

Her assistants noted that there were not any automatic wins to circle.

"I said, 'Yes there is. It's us. Colorado is the team everyone is circling,'" McConnell-Miller said during basketball media day on Thursday. "It's not that way right now."

Yet it's the same old story for the Buffs in the Big 12 preseason coaches poll, which was released this week and tabbed CU 11th, despite its run to the WNIT's final four last spring.

McConnell-Miller -- who is entering her fourth year at CU and said she has a contract extension on her desk to sign -- has a much different view of her team than her peers apparently do.

Instead of using attrition as an excuse -- the Buffs lost Jackie McFarland to graduation, Aija Putnina to her native Latvia and Whitney Houston to a knee injury -- she's circling the wagons with a new crop of potential stars.

"Without a doubt I am going to have my challenges this year with this particular group," McConnell-Miller said. "Just knowing that we've been very post-oriented for three years and now we are extremely guard-oriented."

If CU hopes to exceed expectations it's obvious that the promising backcourt of true freshman Alyssa Fressle and sophomore transfer Kelly Jo Mullaney will have to meet the great expectations their coach has for them.

Fressle led Highlands Ranch to three consecutive Class 5A state titles and is McConnell-Miller's most important recruit to date because other top prospects want to join her in Boulder. Per NCAA rules, the coaching staff can't discuss its 2009 class until the players sign letters of intent beginning Nov. 12, but it includes verbal commitments from three more highly touted in-state prospects in Sierra point guard Janeesa Jeffry and Boulder twin forwards Brenna and Meagan Malcolm-Peck.

When the new floor was being installed at the Coors Events Center over the summer, Fressle was getting restless waiting to get her shots up.

"She texted me and asked when her court was going to be put back down," McConnell-Miller said. "And she truly means that. She will wear the nets out and she will make it evident why she should be a starter

or why she should play 35 minutes a game or why she should be a go-to player."

Mullaney sat out last season after leaving Colorado State for CU. She started 12 games for the Rams as a freshman and averaged a team-high 14.5 points per game, including 17 in a loss to the Buffs.

"I feel like I haven't played in a game forever," said Mullaney, who played point guard in high school and will likely return to that role while Houston sits out this season recovering from a torn anterior cruciate ligament suffered during a recent practice. "Whitney is a huge part of our team, she still is, and it was a hard loss. But me and Alyssa and all of the other guards definitely need to step it up. We can do it."

Brittany Spears, a 6-1 guard, will have to play more in the post this season and rebound at a high level. Kara Richards, a 6-4 senior, is going to be counted on to step out of McFarland's shadow and emerge as a consistent player inside.

Julie Seabrook, a 6-3 freshman, will have to be a versatile scorer like Putnina was at times. Bianca Smith, Britney Blythe and Hannah Skildum add depth and/or some experience at guard.

And all of the above need to come together in order for Big 12 foes not to be circling the Buffs this season.

"It is a time in our program where these players step on the floor and their expectation is to win," McConnell-Miller said.

The Buffs host Regis for an exhibition game on Nov. 9 and open the season against Central Florida on Nov. 16 at the Coors Events Center.

"I just can't wait to get started," Fressle said.



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Strong start key for Bzdelik's Buffs

Bzdelik likely will start three freshmen this year

By Ryan Thorburn
Friday, October 10, 2008

There have been a lot of positive changes in the Colorado men's basketball program since Jeff Bzdelik was hired.

New facilities have been constructed, grades are going up and the staff is making progress out on the recruiting trail.

But this year's non-conference schedule -- especially at home -- has a Ricardo Patton feel to it.

Arkansas-Pine Bluff. Lafayette. Prairie View A&M. Western State.

Not exactly a group anyone will have in the Final Four of their bracket this March.

"Their non-conference basketball schedule is designed the same as everybody else in the conference," CU athletic director Mike Bohn said this week. "Let's win some games, get some momentum and make it happen."

Bzdelik reminded the media during Thursday's basketball media day that next year the Buffs will be playing in the Maui Classic among a field that includes Arizona, Gonzaga, Louisville, Maryland and Wisconsin.

Jody Bailey, the program's director of operations, has been working the phones trying to set up some home-and-home dates with other BCS programs in the years to come.

Obviously this year's schedule was set up to give a very young and inexperienced team a chance to have some success early.

CU's roster has five freshmen, three sophomores, one junior and one senior on scholarship. There is a good chance the starting lineup will consist of three freshmen and two sophomores.

"You look at this team and it's important to give yourself a chance to get off to a good start," said Bzdelik, who also noted that his team will not miss a single day of class during the fall semester.

Instead of playing two exhibition games in front of a bunch of empty seats at the Coors Events Center, CU is going to conduct closed-door scrimmages against Utah in Boulder and Northern Colorado in Greeley.

Davidson, last year's NCAA Tournament darling, scrimmaged Texas prior to last season. When Bzdelik

was at Air Force the Falcons scrimmaged at USC.

“Early success is the key,” junior guard Dwight Thorne said. “If you’re getting beat down and beat down and beat down, sooner or later you’re going to think you’re not worth anything. If you can win you get more confidence and you feel better in your abilities.”

The Buffs will play eight of their first nine games at home with a road trip against Stanford on Nov. 29 sandwiched between a pair of four-game home stands. They will also play at SMU on Jan. 5.

When Bzdelik originally signed up for the Rainbow Classic in Honolulu this Dec. 28-30, Clemson was supposed to be in the field, but the ACC program bought its way out of the tournament. CU is on the same side of the bracket as Coppin State, Buffalo and Pepperdine opposite Colorado State, George Washington, Hawaii and Vermont.

“I think confidence is going to be a huge factor for us,” sophomore guard Cory Higgins said. “These home games should help us out a lot. We have a good chance to get some early confidence.”

If the Buffs are able to simply take care of business at home and only win one non-conference game outside of Boulder they would have 10 wins before Big 12 play tips off. During Bzdelik’s first season CU was 8-6 entering conference play, including blowout losses to NCAA tournament-bound Wisconsin and Stanford, and finished with another 20-loss season.

“If we have nine or 10 wins under our belt before we go into conference, I hope we don’t have any numbers less than that, I think the confidence that we can win will be there and that is incomparable to anything else,” sophomore forward Casey Crawford said.

There is no question Bzdelik is making some progress in building the program, but how many fans are really going to come see the Buffs play the Montana States and Louisiana-Monroes of the world?

“In the basketball sense you’ve got to build some success and get something going,” Bohn said. “I think obviously there are some teams in our league that do that and we inspire to want to get our fan base to say, ‘Regardless if we’re playing Boulder High School or not, we’re going to come and support the Buffs and have some fun with it.’”



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Woelk: Young Buffs should be worth a look

By Neill Woelk
Friday, October 10, 2008

Question of the day:

Why is Jeff Bzdelik smiling?

It can't be the recent Big 12 basketball coaches' poll. Bzdelik, whose Colorado team finished dead last a year ago in conference play, was a near-unanimous pick to repeat the feat this year.

It can't be that he has a wealth of returning production. CU's top three scorers from a year ago are gone, representing roughly 72 percent of CU's points from last season. As for rebounding, same thing. Four of the Buffs' top six in that department last year are no longer in a CU uniform.

Experience? That cupboard is bare. A quick perusal of this year's Buff lineup shows exactly one scholarship senior, one scholarship junior and a whole raft of underclassmen. In fact, of the 13 players currently on CU's roster, six have never played as much as a second for the Buffs.

As one CU freshman noted Thursday afternoon, "Cory (Higgins, a sophomore) is one of the old guys."

But despite the obvious, Bzdelik sat in front of the cameras and notebooks at CU's media day on Thursday and smiled. Grinned. Acted almost giddy about the upcoming season.

Why?

Simple. The worst is past. Because the Buffs are so young, because the team is now comprised almost completely of players Bzdelik and his staff recruited, there is no residual hangover from the previous regime.

This is Bzdelik's team, the foundation for what he believes will be a very successful program in the very near future. These players wanted to be here and play for him. They came because they believed in Bzdelik, believed in his system — and they turned down some quality schools in the process.

Simply, instead spending half of his time trying to break players of bad habits, Bzdelik can teach the game he loves.

"I feel great about the future," Bzdelik said. "Our young players are skilled, passionate, coachable, eager and talented."

Did he mention young? That's young as in CU's starting lineup this year could very easily consist of two sophomores — Higgins and transfer Casey Crawford — and three freshmen (take your pick). Young as in there's a reason the Buffs are picked to reside in the Big 12 basement one more time.

But young also means no bad habits. Young also means they will learn together, grow together, take their lumps together — and sooner than many may think, begin to dish out a few of those lumps to unsuspecting opponents.

“They want to be coached,” Bzdelik said. “They want to learn. They’ll play to win — and nobody gives them a chance to do that.”

Bzdelik has already taken some heat for a non-conference schedule that is, to put it delicately, loaded with teams you’ve never heard of. (Well, not completely true. The second home game is against Montana State, and we know another CU coach who won’t forget that name any time soon).

But it is a schedule that will give his young players a chance at success. For that reason, we’ll give him a pass on such a slate — just once (particularly because next year’s schedule will be dramatically different, starting with a berth in the Maui Invitational).

So what should fans expect from the Buffs this year?

A team that will be fun to watch, at least for those folks who appreciate the fundamentals of sound basketball. A team that will give some teams some fits, and will have its share of rough outings. A team whose inexperience will be evident, but a team whose talent will shine on occasion.

But most of all, it will be a team that is actually establishing a foundation for the future.

It will be worth a look — and a couple of years from now, when Bzdelik’s Buffs are looking at an NCAA Tournament berth, you’ll remember how it started.



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Rocky Mountain News

CU basketball report: Time for the next step

By **Paul Willis**, Rocky Mountain News ([Contact](#))

Published October 9, 2008 at 11:59 p.m.



Brian Lehmann / The Rocky

Jermyl Jackson-Wilson, left, is the only senior on a young University of Colorado team that includes sophomore Cory Higgins, center, and Dwight Thorne II, the lone junior on scholarship.



Brian Lehmann / The Rocky

Alyssa Fressle is the only Coloradan on the CU women's team.

Forget the NCAA Tournament, hopes at a Big 12 Conference title and a shot at cracking the Top 25. For now, anyway.

Using this season as a key steppingstone? That's definitely in the picture for the University of Colorado men's basketball team.

"We are going to be a very young basketball team and very inexperienced," **Jeff Bzdelik**, the Buffaloes' second-year coach, said Thursday during media day for CU's men's and women's basketball teams. "But we're right where we want to be in this rebuilding process."

Bzdelik describes the team as "one senior (**Jermyl Jackson-Wilson**), one junior on scholarship (**Dwight Thorne II**) and a bunch of young players."

Many of the young players are his own, though, and he handpicked them to execute his Princeton-style offense. He says they are players who can "shoot, pass and dribble and have a high basketball IQ."

He said it

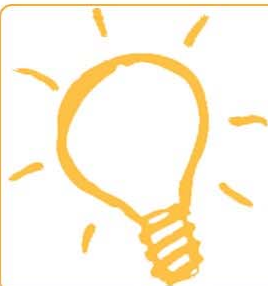
"I'm not going to mention names because then guys will get comfortable. And I don't want anyone getting comfortable with me."

Bzdelik, on who's in the mix for the starting five.

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pointers, the sophomore guard listens. That's because many of them have NBA pedigrees.

Higgins' father, **Rod**, is general manager of the Charlotte Bobcats and a 13-year NBA veteran, so players always lurk nearby. Higgins worked out this summer with such Bobcats players as **Adam Morrison** and **Nazr Mohammed**

"They know so much more than I do," Higgins said. "They've been around the block, so anything they say, I just listen."

He also receives advice, usually off the court, from a former NBA player: **Michael Jordan**

"He doesn't work out that much anymore but he's always around," Higgins said of Jordan, the Bobcats' managing member of basketball operations. "He's seen me play a lot. We've had a relationship since I was little."

Women picked 11th

Despite an improving record in each of coach **Kathy McConnell-Miller's** three seasons and a march to the semifinals in the Women's National Invitation Tournament last season, the CU women were picked to finish next to last in the preseason Big 12 coaches poll.

No big whoop, McConnell-Miller said.

"These type of polls motivate the weaker athletes," said McConnell-Miller, whose team went 19-15 last season. "The stronger athletes don't need that type of bulletin-board material

to get motivated. There was little to no reaction (Wednesday) when it was announced."

Coaches ranking the Buffaloes likely considered the graduation of post player **Jackie McFarland**, the return to Latvia of forward **Aija Putnina** and the season-ending knee injury to prospective starting point guard **Whitney Houston**

Another extension

CU football coach **Dan Hawkins** isn't the only Buffaloes coach who recently received a contract extension. A new deal for McConnell-Miller was approved by university regents in June - the same time Hawkins' was approved - and she says she'll sign the paperwork at the next opportunity.

McConnell-Miller's deal is for four years and 10 months and is retroactive to July 1. Hawkins signed a similarly structured deal last week.

Numbers game

player from Colorado on the women's roster, freshman guard **Alyssa Fressle** of Highlands Ranch. McConnell-Miller is hoping Fressle persuades more of the state's marquee high school talent to stay in-state. "Hopefully, Alyssa breaks that trend," McConnell-Miller said. "She's a player who could have gone almost anywhere she wanted to go."

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colorado basketball

Bzdelik wants "best-shooting team" in America

By Tom Kensler
The Denver Post

Article Last Updated: 10/10/2008 12:59:31 AM MDT

BOULDER — If nothing else, the Colorado men's basketball team probably would win a Big 12 title in H-O-R-S-E this year.

"We'd be tough to beat," 6-foot-9 sophomore Casey Crawford said Thursday during CU's media day.

Short-term expectations are low for Jeff Bzdelik's second Colorado team. It's younger than his first, with five freshmen and only one senior (Jermey Jackson-Wilson) and one junior (Dwight Thorne) on scholarship. Big 12 coaches picked the Buffaloes to finish last. Bzdelik, though, is optimistic about the future. With new offices, a remodeled locker room, a new basketball floor and weight machines ready to be installed in another renovated room at the Coors Events Center, recruiting and spirits are looking up.

Bzdelik also has an eye on the lengthened 3-point line. For the men's game, the arc has been moved back a foot to 20 feet, 9 inches. The women's will remain at 19-9, so most college floors will have two 3-point lines.

"One of my goals in recruiting," Bzdelik said, "is to put together the best-shooting team in the country."

Crawford won't have to look down to see which line is which. Even the NBA's 3-point arc, 23-9 at its apex, would not faze the former Kansas prep player of the year who sat out last season at CU after transferring from Wake Forest.

Austin Dufault, a 6-9 freshman, felt comfortable shooting jumpers from beyond the lines painted for volleyball on his court in Killdeer, N.D.

"But I don't think I have Casey's range," he added.

CU's new point guard, Aussie freshman Nate Tomlinson, also can drill it from deep.

"That's how we're taught in Australia," he said. So can 6-9 Trey Eckloff from Cherry Creek High and returnees Cory Higgins and Levi Knutson.

The buzz about the CU women's program focuses around the addition of two guards with feisty spirits: Alyssa Fressle, a 5-10 freshman from Highlands Ranch and 5-8 Kelly Jo Mullaney, a sophomore transfer from Colorado State.

Fressle, a fourth-team Parade All-America selection last year, has said that she would play football if women were allowed.

"Alyssa can't stand to lose — even in pickup games," sophomore Brittany Spears said.

Mullaney averaged a team-best 14.5 points for CSU in 2006-07.

"Nobody could guard her in practice last year," CU senior center Kara Richards said Thursday.

CU may put four guards on the floor at times, Buffs

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coach Kathy McConnell-Miller said. "The best teams in the Big 12 are the ones with the best guards," she said.

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