

Rocky Mountain News

Bzdelik puts his stamp on CU basketball

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Published October 15, 2008 at 1:38 p.m.



Photo by Mark Leffingwell/Daily Camera

With an upgrade in facilities, an influx of new players and an emphasis on doing things the right way, coach Jeff Bzdelik is changing the culture of the Colorado basketball program in his second season on the job.

If they don't want a coach's take on a particular issue relating to their collective well-being or the recent history of the program, players on the University of Colorado men's basketball team have established a consensus go-to guy.

He's Jermyl Jackson-Wilson, the team's lone senior and, at 23, he has become the Buffaloes' reference point. Younger teammates turn to him for sage advice, leadership and, when timely, a tale or two on how it was back in the day - circa B.B., before CU's ongoing cultural revolution

under second-year coach Jeff Bzdelik.

"A lot has changed since I've been here," Jackson-Wilson recalled last week at the team's annual media day. "People might think (the changes) are little - like the floor (at the Coors Events Center) being redone, the charter flights (to away games) . . .

"But it's part of a whole new attitude. Now you know people have your back - fans, staff, boosters, alumni. Now you want to go win for them as well as yourself."

Pitching the promise of a new era being cultivated in CU basketball, Bzdelik has landed promising freshmen such as Austin Dufault, a sharp-shooting 6-foot-8 forward from Killdeer, N.D., who made a stop at Jackson-Wilson's locker among his first for a condensed history lesson of Buffs basketball.

Seeing is believing, hearing provides reinforcement, and Dufault came away a believer: "What's going on makes you feel like you're in more of a big-time program."

Added sophomore forward Casey Crawford, a 2007 transfer from Wake Forest who sat out last season: "Basketball's always been on the back burner to football here. . . . We had the bottom rung of the Big 12 facilities.

"Jermyl went through all that mess. Now all this stuff is coming at the end of his career, but at least he's getting a taste."

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Big picture

CU's athletic administration believes it's a taste of success despite Bzdelik's transitional first season culminating in a 12-20 overall record and only three wins (13 losses) in the Big 12 Conference, which produced 2007-08 national champion Kansas.

Prospects of a Buffs breakthrough in Bzdelik's second season, which gets under way Friday when practice begins, are minimal considering the roster's overall youth and inexperience. But the groundwork is being laid, the culture overhauled in a program that lost seven players between Bzdelik's hiring in April 2007 and June 2008.

Only three players - Jackson-Wilson, junior Dwight Thorne and sophomore Levi Knutson - recruited by Bzdelik's predecessor, Ricardo Patton, remain.

CU's 2008-09 roster features five freshmen, five sophomores, two juniors and a senior - a mix that calls for patience from a community and a coach who concedes it isn't among his strong suits.

"I'm not (patient), but I have my eyes fixed on the big picture here," Bzdelik said. "I want the vision to be clear. Win, but do so without compromising."

In a tour of CU's new basketball offices in the Coors Events Center, the smartly renovated locker rooms and the new basketball weight

room, physical proof of a cultural change and a new commitment to basketball is obvious.

But, Bzdelik said, an overall transformation demands more than facilities upgrades: "There has to be a commitment to work, being on time, being a gentleman across the board, attending every class, being studious, accountable and responsible in all areas of life. It all carries over to the basketball court.

"My players will go to class. 'Please' and 'thank you' are nice words. You can have excellence without arrogance. Quick fixes don't equate into a solid foundation that will last for a long, long time."

Bzdelik believes all his current players and two already committed 2009 prospects - guard Alec Burks (Grandview, Mo.) and forward Keegan Hornbuckle (Los Angeles) - meet his standards.

"And it's important that we continue to meet them," he said. "I want the right fit for the program - on and off the court. We've been able to be involved with some very good players because of the commitment that's been made here, and also the way the culture has changed. In order to recruit the kind of player we want, they need to be able to sense that change."

Tangible signs

Bzdelik's first several recruiting classes must buy into the *probability* of improvement, which he admits is tantamount to a very large leap of faith considering the school's recent run of mediocrity

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in men's basketball.

"It's a lot easier to walk into something that's already established as opposed to a promise - there's no question about that," Bzdelik said. "But that's our job as coaches in recruiting - to do the best we can in selling that. And having (prospects) really believe in our vision."

The facilities upgrades offer tangible proof of something serious now under way.

Said senior associate athletic director Tom McGrath: "At least when he brought kids in (for on-campus visits), Jeff could say, 'It's happening. It's going to change.'"

But McGrath sees what's under way at CU through a different lens than most.

"I look at it in a way you may not see from the outside," he said. "Looking at our basketball players, you go up to them and engage with them and they smile. They feel like they belong. I'm not saying that wasn't the case before. I hadn't been here that much before."

"But there's not the sense that there's all the other sports, then there's basketball. . . . It's just not the same (now). With someone of Jeff's caliber and the players he's bringing in, that's changing the culture. Somebody cares about basketball here. Many people."

Building excitement

Crawford, the state of Kansas' Mr. Basketball in

2006, experienced that sort of caring during his brief stay at Wake Forest in 2006-07.

He's not predicting what happens at the Coors Events Center can ever duplicate the fervor of basketball on Tobacco Road, but he's hopeful the basketball appeal at CU "can approach that level of excitement one day, or least get to that point where fans live and breathe basketball like they do football here. I know they've got the passion for sports."

In football and basketball, athletic director Mike Bohn wants improvement to reach the point where fans stream into Folsom Field and the Coors Events Center, no matter the visiting team.

"Obviously, there are some teams in our league that do that, and we aspire to get our fans to say, 'Regardless if we're playing Boulder High School, we're going to come and support the Buffs.'"

"We recognize we have some room for improvement, in terms of game atmosphere and some of the amenities in the arena, but those are coming. So we're going to keep pushing hard on that."

Area Division I men's preview

The college basketball season tips off along the Front Range on Friday when teams begin practice. The prospects of area men's Division I programs.

Air Force

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* **Coach:** Jeff Reynolds (16-14 in one season at Air Force; 98-48 overall in five seasons as a coach).

* **Last season:** 16-14, 8-8 (fifth) in Mountain West Conference.

* **Opener:** Nov. 14, vs. Western State.

* **Returning starters (3):** G/F Anwar Johnson (7.6 points, 3.6 rebounds), F Matt Holland (six points, two assists), G Evan Washington (6.9 points, 3.9 rebounds).

* **Impact newcomer:** Jonathan Atkins, 6-foot-3 freshman guard. Played at the Air Force prep school last season and averaged nine points a game. The Trinity Christian High School graduate from Las Vegas set a state record for most points (46) in a Class A state championship game.

* **Glass half-full:** With three starters returning along with sixth man Andrew Henke, who led the team in rebounding and was second in scoring, the Falcons should be able to get off to a quick start and build confidence heading into the conference schedule. The Falcons should again be a good defensive team.

* **Glass half-empty:** The loss of the veteran leadership of Tim Anderson and Keith Maren will be noticed. Air Force will be young and inexperienced at center.

* **Reynolds' view:** "We will be a very young team that must develop and learn our system quickly. This is a rebuilding year for us. Having such a

young team will be tough because the conference will be the best it has been in the last three years."

Colorado

* **Coach:** Jeff Bzdelik (12-20 in one season at CU; 87-66 overall in five seasons as a coach).

* **Last season:** 12-20 overall, 3-13 (12th place) in Big 12 Conference.

* **Opener:** Nov. 14, vs. Arkansas-Pine Bluff.

* **Returning starters (2):** G Cory Higgins (8.3 points, 4.3 rebounds), F Jermyl Jackson-Wilson (4.7 points, 4.4 assists).

* **Impact newcomer:** Nate Tomlinson, 6-2 freshman guard. CU's first recruit from Australia, Tomlinson could become the Buffaloes' first freshman starting point guard since Antoine McGee in 2002-03. He is described as the prototype facilitator for Bzdelik's system.

* **Glass half-full:** Bzdelik's vision of transforming CU into a contender slowly is unfolding as he has recruited players that fit his Princeton system and team-concept ideals. Because Higgins started all 32 games as a freshman, he'll take on a leadership role despite his sophomore status.

* **Glass half-empty:** Big 12 teams generally aren't sympathetic to rebuilding projects, so the Buffaloes undoubtedly will take their lumps. CU graduated its top two players from last season, guards Richard Roby and Marcus Hall, so the

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roster has no player who has averaged double figures in a college season. CU is young, with five freshmen slated to see significant action.

*** Bzdelik's view:** "We have a bunch of young players, and how those players are going to react when the lights are turned on against great competition, we'll find out together."

Colorado State

*** Coach:** Tim Miles (7-25 in one season at CSU; 219-157 overall in 13 seasons as a coach).

*** Last season:** 7-25, 0-16 (ninth) in Mountain West Conference.

*** Openers:** Nov. 3, vs. Chadron State (exhibition); Nov. 14, vs. Montana.

*** Returning starters (3):** G Marcus Walker (17.1 points); G Willis Gardner (9.8 points, 3.2 rebounds, 2.9 assists); F Andre McFarland (8.3 points, 4.5 rebounds).

*** Impact newcomer:** Harvey Perry, 6-5 junior guard. Averaged 3.9 rebounds and 7.4 points a game at the College of Southern Idaho last season.

*** Glass half-full:** The Rams are closer to resembling a Mountain West Conference team with more talent and athleticism. The defense and rebounding should improve, and having senior Walker, the conference's second-leading scorer, back is a big plus for Colorado State.

*** Glass half-empty:** The Rams still lack quality depth, especially at center. Transfer players will need to step up if the team hopes to be successful.

*** Miles' view:** "We are moving in the right direction but still have many challenges ahead, including one of the most difficult nonconference and MWC schedules we have seen at CSU in recent years. We are excited about the opportunities we have this year and feel like we can make some significant strides."

Denver

*** Coach:** Joe Scott (11-19 in one season at DU; 100-127 overall in eight seasons as a coach).

*** Last season:** 11-19 overall, 7-11 (fifth in West Division) in Sun Belt Conference.

*** Opener:** Nov. 15, at Northern Iowa.

*** Returning starters (3):** F Rob Lewis (8.7 points, 4.4 rebounds), G Kyle Lewis (8.4 points, 1.4 assists); F Nate Rohnert (8.5 points, 3.9 rebounds).

*** Impact newcomer:** F Andrew Hooper. The redshirt freshman from D'Evelyn High School is the sort of skilled and versatile big man who typically thrives in Scott's precise offense.

*** Glass half-full:** With a year under their belt running Scott's offense, the Pioneers should be more comfortable and confident, particularly with the return of point guard Kyle Lewis. DU

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should be deeper and has already developed a swagger at home, going 9-3 in Denver last season.

* **Glass half-empty:** The Pioneers are extremely young, with no seniors and only two juniors on the roster. DU's depth is a concern and injuries could cause a significant handicap. DU must learn to win on the road, entering the season with 33 consecutive losses on opponents' home floors.

* **Scott's view:** "Obviously, we're way younger than we were even last year. That's bad, but on the other hand, it's good because we're going to have these guys three or four years. We're going to add another three or four guys from the next class. Then, that's it. This program is going to be built from here forward."

Northern Colorado

* **Coach:** Tad Boyle (17-40 overall and in two seasons at UNC).

* **Last season:** 13-16 overall, 6-10 (seventh) in Big Sky Conference.

* **Openers:** Nov. 1, vs. Black Hills State (exhibition); Nov. 14, at Oregon.

* **Returning starters (4):** F Jabril Banks (13.2 points, 5.8 rebounds), G Jefferson Mason (9.4 points, 5.5 rebounds), G Robert Palacios (5.8 points, 5.7 rebounds), F Taylor Montgomery (5.1 points, 3.8 rebounds).

* **Impact newcomer:** G John Pena. Along with fellow junior-college transfer Yahosh Bonner, Pena should provide a steady presence at guard and solidify the three-point shooting.

* **Glass half-full:** Injuries last season helped hasten the development of several players and led to a breakout season by Banks. UNC is healthier and will be deeper this season, allowing Boyle to unleash a more up-tempo style. UNC should be battle-hardened after early road dates against Oregon and Creighton and visits to state rivals Denver and Colorado State.

* **Glass half-empty:** A glut of newcomers might force Boyle to experiment with combinations early. The Bears will be undersized, with only one player, freshman forward Mike Proctor, listed at 6-foot-8. UNC has no proven go-to ballhandler after graduating guard Sean Taibi.

* **Boyle's view:** "The next step the program has to make, it's more a mental mind-set than physical. We went to San Diego State last year, when they were ranked about 30th in the RPI, and won on the road, then we go to Sacramento State and we lost on the road. The confidence and mental toughness is what we have to develop to take that next step."

Wyoming

* **Coach:** Heath Schroyer (12-18 in one season at Wyoming; 47-65 in four seasons overall as a coach).

* **Last season:** 12-18 overall, 5-11 (eighth) in

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Mountain West Conference.

will be big."

* **Openers:** Nov. 8, vs. Colorado School of Mines (exhibition); Nov. 14, vs. Cal State Bakersfield.

* **Returning starters (3):** G Brandon Ewing (17.2 points, four assists), F Ryan Dermody (9.3 points, 5.3 rebounds), C Mikhail Linskens (4.2 points, 3.1 rebounds).

* **Impact newcomer:** Sean Ogirri, 6-2 senior guard. The former Denver East player should be an instant upgrade from departed senior Brad Jones as a scorer, and the 40 percent career shooter from three-point range will allow Wyoming to stretch defenses.

* **Glass half-full:** The Cowboys are more athletic, though it might take some time for all the newcomers to adjust. A soft nonconference schedule will allow some room for error, with a team that brings back just four contributors. Center Adam Waddell could be counted as a fifth, but his season was cut short by injury and he was granted a redshirt. He could become Wyoming's breakout player.

* **Glass half-empty:** There's no guarantee the influx of athleticism will translate to a postseason appearance, and there's question whether Ewing can share the load with Ogirri.

* **Schroyer's view:** "This schedule should really benefit our RPI, with teams like UCLA, Loyola Marymount, Boise State and Utah State on there, plus our conference schedule. And for this team to be able to play our first six games at home

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