



McConnell-Miller to look for her 'fave' 5

CU coach seeks best combination on floor

By Chris Shelton
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For Kathy McConnell-Miller, the next four weeks of practice leading up to the regular season will be a time for evaluating her players to see which combinations work best together.

Although the Buffs practiced together for two hours a week for the past four weeks, the schedule changes today with the start of daily practices. The regular season begins Nov. 16 with a home game against Central Florida. McConnell-Miller has three major holes to fill following the loss of All-Big 12 forward Jackie McFarland (graduation), starting forward Aija Putnina (quit the team to return to Latvia) and up-and-coming point guard Whitney Houston (torn ACL). The Buffs also lost a key reserve in forward Caley Dow, who also quit the team this offseason.

The Buffs will be much more guard-oriented this year, especially with the promising additions of true freshman guard Alyssa Fressle and sophomore guard Kelly Jo Mullaney, who sat out last year after transferring from Colorado State.

Colorado also returns junior guard Bianca Smith, last year's best outside scoring threat, and sophomore wing player Brittany Spears, who was a candidate for Big 12 rookie of the year a season ago. Senior center Kara Richards is expected to anchor the team inside.

So don't be surprised if the "first team" in practice today consists of Fressle, Mullaney, Smith, Spears and Richards. Mullaney is 5-foot-8, Smith is 5-9 and Fressle is 5-10, while Spears stands in at 6-1 and Richards at 6-4.

"After we lost Whitney Houston, we were no longer pin-pointing positions," McConnell-Miller said in a phone interview while on a recruiting trip this week in Los Angeles. "For us, we're going to put five players on the floor that can score and not focus on positions. We don't feel like we have to have a 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 on the floor. We can be good with our best five on the floor."

McConnell-Miller said no combination of players is set in stone. Forwards Hannah Skildum and Julie Seabrook must find their roles, and it will be interesting to see where center Courtney Dunn, who has a good outside shot, fits in with this team. Sophomore Britney Blythe, who came to CU as a promising point guard, also needs to be brought into the mix after spending much of last year on the end of the bench.

The loss of Houston changed McConnell-Miller's outlook for this season. Houston was expected to have first crack at the starting point guard job, which will now go to Fressle and Mullaney -- both of which were expected to be shooting guards in their CU careers.

And the losses of McFarland and Dow left a hole in CU's leadership department.

But McConnell-Miller said her team has the best camaraderie of any squad she's had in three seasons in Boulder.

"Our goal is to have that translate to on the floor," McConnell-Miller said. "I've watched players evolve into strong point guards and leaders on the floor. That's been exciting for us."

In addition to having a guard-oriented team, Fressle and Mullaney could change CU's look on offense in other ways. Both are aggressive players, as is Spears, so the Buffs will try to attack the basket more this year rather than just dump the ball inside or settle for outside shots.

"That's Kelly Jo's patent move -- put the ball on the floor and pull up for a jump shot," McConnell-Miller said. "This team, I don't think you'll ever be able to use the word stagnant."



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