



Woelk: Buff booters again aim at postseason

By Neill Woelk

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It started early last spring, when Colorado's returning players began reporting for strength and conditioning workouts at 6:30 a.m., four days a week.

It continued when the team started spring practices, which often came on the heels of those conditioning workouts -- and before a full day of classes.

It kept up through the summer and fall, and now, the Colorado soccer team, picked to finish fifth in the preseason coaches' poll, is battling for a Big 12 championship.

It's been a ride that's put a smile on coach Bill Hempen's face, in large part because of the work his team has put in to get to this point.

"Being a Division-I athlete is not easy," Hempen said. "It's hard. Incredibly difficult. Classes, practices, workouts -- it's a tremendous amount of time and effort these kids have to dedicate.

"I remember looking in on some of those spring conditioning workouts, and I can tell you, it was not pretty what they were having to do."

The Buffs lost a few players after those workouts. Some, Hempen said, "just decided it wasn't for them."

But for those who stayed, the work paid off.

"When our players showed up in the fall, you could tell they were not going to let what they'd done in the spring go to waste," Hempen said. "There was a sense of responsibility there, and they imparted that to the freshmen." "It's just carried on all season."

When the Buffs reported for the fall, 22 of CU's 24 players passed the team's fitness standard -- a healthy improvement over even a year ago.

"We knew they had paid attention, and we knew they had paid the price," Hempen said. "That's why we were able to hit the ground running this year."

This wasn't supposed to be one of Hempen's best teams. With a good portion of last year's starters lost to graduation, this was supposed to be a transition year.

But with the standout play of junior Nikki Marshall, some solid goalkeeping from Kirstin Radlinski, some rapid growth from some freshmen and a defense that's improved as the year has progressed, the Buffs are in position for at least a top-two finish in the Big 12.

With a little help, they could still win the title outright.

"Consistency," is how Hempen explained his team's effort this year. "A year ago, our lineup changed almost every game. This year, we've been able to put the same lineup out there just about every game. There have been some tweaks here and there, but overall, it's virtually stayed the same."

Barring a major meltdown in the last two regular season games (at Drake today, A&M at home on Sunday) and in the Big 12 Tournament, the Buffs are likely headed to the NCAA Tournament.

That won't be a surprise to anyone who pays even casual attention to CU soccer -- and that itself is a statement as to how far Hempen has taken the program.

When Hempen arrived in 2001, the Buffs had never been to the tournament.

This year would mark their sixth consecutive appearance. CU soccer has reached the point that it's a shock when the Buffs don't go to the tournament, rather than a surprise when they do.

"Those expectations are certainly there," Hempen said.

The Buffs' lineup this year has been a mixture of experience and youth. There is Radlinski, a senior keeper who has taken over the No. 1 spot with authority. There is junior Marshall, the program's all-time leader in goals scored and one of the best players in the country. (So good, in fact, that she won't be with the team if the Buffs go to the NCAA Tournament. She'll instead be playing with the U.S. Under-20 national team.).

There's also been steady senior leadership from Alex Cousins, Michelle Wenino and Nikki Keller; and a big boost from freshmen Caroline Dannenberg, Kelly Butler and Kate Russell, each of whom has played in all 17 games for the Buffs thus far.

"It's been fun," Hempen said. "This is just one of those years that you look back and will remember because the kids worked hard, they had great chemistry and we kept improving."

In short, it's been business as usual for the CU soccer program. Play well, contend for the upper division in the Big 12 and get ready for the NCAA Tournament.

That's the kind of business CU officials can only hope spreads to some of their other programs.



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