

Rocky Mountain News

Women's college basketball: Preview of Colorado-area schools

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Area Division I women's preview

The prospects of women's Division I basketball programs along the Front Range as they prepare for regular-season openers next week.

Air Force

* **Coach:** Ardie McInelly (50-138 in seven seasons at Air Force; 127-210 overall in 12 seasons as a coach).

* **Last season:** 10-19, 4-12 (seventh place) in Mountain West Conference.

* **Opener:** Nov. 14 vs. Northern Colorado.

* **Returning starters (3):** G Raimee Beck (9.0 points, 2.4 assists), G Brooke Cultra (7.5 points, 4.5 rebounds), C Kim Kreke (5.4 points, 1.1 blocked shots).

* **Impact newcomer:** Anna Gault, 5-foot-3 freshman. A pure point guard, she has uncommon assertiveness and floor leadership for a freshman.

* **Glass half-full:** With three starters returning and with the development of sophomore Stevie Puentes and freshman Gault at the point, it should allow Beck to move to two-guard and increase her scoring. The Falcons must play stellar defense and take care of the ball to have success.

* **Glass half-empty:** Losing All-Mountain West Conference selections Alecia Steele and Pamela Findlay to graduation is a big blow. Steele is Air Force's all-time leading scorer and rebounder in the Division I era. With only 13 players on the roster, depth could be an issue.

* **McInelly's view:** "For us to be successful this year, we have to play really good half-court defense. We also have to do a great job of controlling the boards and also must take care of the ball. Obviously, losing players like Pamela Findlay and Alecia Steele is tough. But we've got a good mix of returners and a promising group of freshmen."

Colorado State

* **Coach:** Kristen Holt (first season at CSU; 11-16 overall in one season as a head coach).

* **Last season:** 4-28 overall, 0-16 (ninth place) in Mountain West Conference.

* **Opener:** Nov. 15 at Wichita State.

* **Returning starters (3):** F Juanise Cornell (7.5 points, 6.7 rebounds), F Britney Minor (5.4 points, three rebounds), G Kandy Beemer (4.7 points, 39

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three-pointers).

Impact newcomer: Meghan Heimstra, 6-foot-1 freshman forward. The post player from Silver Creek High School is used to winning - her team went 25-3 and was Class 4A state runner-up last season - and gives the Rams needed height in the paint.

* **Glass half-full:** Morale seems to be better under Holt, as the team has adopted a forward-thinking mentality. Keeping up with an emerging trend in college hoops, the Rams have added three international players - Devran Tanacan (Turkey), Kim Mestdagh (Belgium) and Chatilla van Grinsven (Netherlands) - to join returning Australian Carine Reimink.

* **Glass half-empty:** The top scorer has graduated, another starter transferred and the Rams are perhaps greener than last season's four-win squad. They will undoubtedly take their lumps in a rebuilding season.

* **Holt's view:** "I think that you have to have proper perspective on what's happened and where we want to go, and that it can't be built overnight. Anytime you build anything, you have to build a solid foundation where you don't have a lot of cracks and problems."

Colorado

* **Coach:** Kathy McConnell-Miller (41-53 in three seasons at CU; 132-141 overall in nine seasons as a coach).

* **Last season:** 19-15 overall, 5-11 (ninth place) in Big 12 Conference.

* **Openers:** Sunday vs. Regis (exhibition); Nov. 16 vs. Central Florida.

* **Returning starters (3):** F Brittany Spears (13.9 points, 7.6 rebounds), G Bianca Smith (9.8 points, 80 three-pointers), G Hannah Skildum (3.1 points).

* **Impact newcomer:** Alyssa Fressle, 5-foot-10 freshman guard. The reigning All-Colorado player of the year from Highlands Ranch High School has made an immediate impression and figures to begin the season as a key player in the rotation.

* **Glass half-full:** Spears' freshman season indicated she could become a marquee player in the conference, and the addition of Fressle gives the Buffaloes needed scoring punch. Also ready for regular minutes is Kelly Jo Mullaney, who sat out last season after transferring. Kara Richards could be a force in the post.

* **Glass half-empty:** With Jackie McFarland's graduation and forward Aija Putnina having returned home to Latvia, two-thirds of the Buffaloes' front court (25.4 points, 14.8 rebounds last season) has departed. Point guard Whitney Houston suffered a season-ending injury last month.

McConnell-Miller's view: "I feel like we are embarking on a season coming off a summer as strong as any summer I have been a part of. From

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a chemistry standpoint, you could see it in their eyes. They've bonded."

Denver

* **Coach:** Erik Johnson (first season at DU and first season as a head coach).

* **Last season:** 11-19 overall, 6-12 (sixth in West Division) in Sun Belt Conference.

* **Openers:** Saturday vs. Adams State (exhibition); Nov. 14 vs. Wyoming.

* **Returning starters (2):** F Sara Bents (4.4 points, 4.4 rebounds), F Nnenna Akotaobi (11.1 points, 4.5 rebounds).

* **Impact newcomer:** Jenny Vaughan, 5-9 freshman guard. A native of Dundas, Ontario, plays on the Canadian junior national team and is expected to contribute immediately.

* **Glass half-full:** Akotaobi is one of the most athletic and versatile players in the Sun Belt and will be a force at both ends of the floor. Bents provides a solid post presence, and the Pioneers should receive a boost from the return of Brianna Culberson, who played in all 31 games two years ago but missed last season because of a torn knee ligament.

* **Glass half-empty:** There are certain to be growing pains in Johnson's first season, and DU lost about 27 points and 13 rebounds a game with the graduation of Sara Benham, Alisha Godette and Brooke Meyer.

* **Johnson's view:** "I think there are two things we want to take advantage of that are natural advantages for us. One, we play at altitude. So making people work, making people run . . . there is never an excuse for us not to sprint. The other one, and this might be hard for the fans to see, but Denver is a great academic school. We don't have to be more athletic than North Carolina and Maryland. We have to be better at what we do. We have to outsmart them."

Northern Colorado

* **Coach:** Jaime White (21-40 in two seasons at Northern Colorado and overall).

* **Last season:** 14-16 overall, 8-8 (fifth) in Big Sky Conference.

* **Opener:** Nov. 14 at Air Force.

* **Returning starters (4):** G Jamie Schroeder (13.4 points, 6.3 rebounds), G Courtney Stoermer (10.0 points, four rebounds), G Chelsie Luhning (five points, 3.5 rebounds), G Lizzie Cooper (3.2 points, 1.5 assists).

* **Impact newcomer:** G Kaisha Brown, 5-10 freshman guard. She is one of several freshmen expected to contribute immediately.

* **Glass half-full:** The Bears return four starters, including Schroeder, the Big Sky newcomer of the year last season. UNC will receive a boost from the return of junior guard Whitley Cox, who was averaging a little more than 20 points through the first eight games when she was sidelined for

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the rest of the season because of a knee injury. Brown, Lauren Oosdyke, and Golden High School graduate Cassie Lambrecht highlight a promising freshman class.

* **Glass half-empty:** The Bears lost leading rebounder Danielle Hagen and will need Schroeder to pick up some of the slack. UNC remains young, as Schroeder is the only senior on the roster. The Bears improved from five wins to 14, but making that next step from a .500-level club to a league contender is always more difficult.

* **White's view:** "To improve on last year's record . . . we'd like to have a winning season, we'd like to be in the top three in the conference at the end. Those things are really important. At our level and our stage in building in our team, we have to make these smaller goals."

Wyoming

* **Coach:** Joe Legerski (99-55 in five seasons at Wyoming and overall).

* **Last season:** 24-7 overall, 12-4 (third) in Mountain West Conference.

* **Opener:** Nov. 14 at Denver.

* **Returning starters (1):** F Rebecca Vanderjagt (3.5 points, 3.4 rebounds).

* **Impact newcomer:** Randi Richardson, 5-7 sophomore guard. The transfer from San Francisco could have helped push Wyoming

deeper into both postseason tournaments if she had been eligible, expanding what was a short rotation in the backcourt.

* **Glass half-full:** Legerski has built a program virtually from scratch and taken it to the NCAA Tournament, and there's no reason to doubt he won't keep it there. The Cowgirls are the most successful program at the school at the moment, which should help them continue to bring in exciting recruiting classes such as the one that just arrived.

* **Glass half-empty:** The players the newcomers are replacing likely will go down as the most important in school history. There likely will be bumps in the road, with only one starter and four significant contributors back from Wyoming's first NCAA Tournament team. The Cowgirls will have to grow up quickly.

* **Legerski's view:** "It definitely feels like it's a continuation with new players. When I say that eight of our 14 players are freshmen and sophomores, six are juniors and seniors, that splits almost down the middle. That's why it seems like it's almost a new start, and yet we've got players that have already played a tremendous part of our success."

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