



Bzdelik pleased with opener

Buff boss optimistic after first game

By Ryan Thorburn

Sunday, November 16, 2008

For openers, the Colorado men's basketball team looks to be much improved from the past two seasons, when the Buffs were a combined 19-40.

Jeff Bzdelik has some very solid pieces in place with freshman point guard Nate Tomlinson, sophomore shooting guard Cory Higgins, freshman forward Austin Dufault and sophomore forward/center Casey Crawford.

The foursome combined for 51 points on 19-for-34 shooting during CU's 76-56 victory over Arkansas-Pine on Friday at the Coors Events Center in front of 5,689 seemingly satisfied customers.

Dwight Thorne, the only junior on scholarship, was the other starter and added eight points on a 3-for-5 night from the field.

Overall, Bzdelik was pleased to open the season with an easy victory. The second-year CU head coach will have a couple of things to bark about at practice tonight with the Golden Lions winning the rebounding battle 38-31 and the otherwise smooth-shooting Buffs only converting a head-scratching 60 percent (12-for-20) at the free throw line.

The Buffs will have a few days to work on those deficiencies before hosting Montana State on Tuesday night at the Coors Events Center (7 p.m., no television).

Bzdelik, a longtime NBA scout, wants fans to enjoy watching this young team grow up together this season while also projecting how the puzzle will be solved when the roster is dominated by seniors and juniors.

"I just feel real good about where we're headed," Bzdelik said. "I think what people have to do is think of these players in another year, in two years, in three years from now, coupled with the players we just signed. And you can see how we're trying to build this team."

Trey Eckloff, the youngest of the five CU true freshmen, added four points and two rebounds in 14 minutes off the bench. Ryan Kelley and Toby Veal only played the final two minutes of the game and appear to have some more maturing to do before becoming a part of the rotation at this level.

Bzdelik signed three intriguing high school prospects -- Aleks Burks, Keegan Hornbuckle and Shane Harris-Yunks -- to national letters of intent last week. The coaching staff plans to add another player to the 2009 recruiting class during the spring.

Next season the Buffs play in the Maui Classic, joining a field that includes Arizona, Gonzaga, Louisville, Maryland, Vanderbilt and Wisconsin. CU is working on a deal to bring North Carolina to the Coors Events Center in 2010.

"We are going to be an extremely young basketball team and very inexperienced. That's the truth," Bzdelik said. "But we're exactly where we want to be at this stage of the rebuilding process."



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Young Buffs open season with win

By Ray Sobczyk

Longmont Times-Call

BOULDER — Take a good look down the University of Colorado men's basketball roster.

You'll see a plethora of freshmen, sophomores and inexperience on the court. There are 10 underclassmen, to be exact, and only two returning starters from last year's team.

Then there is freshman point guard Nate Tomlinson. Sure, he may be brand new to the collegiate level, but playing meaningful basketball is something he's been doing his entire life.

That was evident for the Buffaloes in their season-opening 76-56 win over Arkansas Pine-Bluff on Friday night at the Coors Event Center in Boulder. The freshman totaled 12 points, added three assists and even grabbed four rebounds.

"He did not turn the ball over," Colorado head coach Jeff Bzdelik said. "He also pushes the ball and gets rebounds. He's all over the court."

Tomlinson hails from Australia, where he was a member of the country's Under-19 national squad during the summer of 2007 at the World Championships in Serbia. He also played two seasons at Lee Academy in Maine.

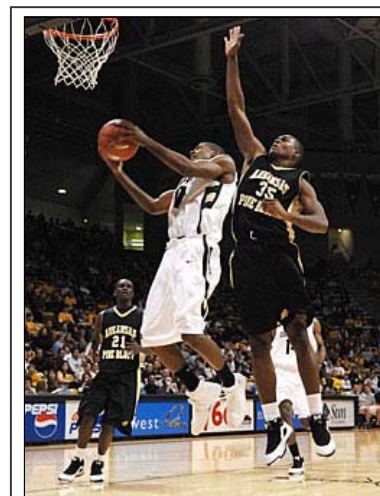
"I wasn't nervous but more anxious to get out there with the guys and mess around," Tomlinson said. "Getting the win, that's what it's about. Individual highlights are nothing."

Tomlinson led the Buffaloes' charge in the first half. He buried three 3-pointers in the opening 20 minutes, including one to give Colorado a 38-17 advantage with 3 minutes, 13 seconds remaining before intermission.

The Buffaloes converted 10 of 23 from beyond the arc for the game, including a team-high four from Tomlinson. They broke the game open with a 19-4 run late in the first half, highlighted by three 3s during that span.

"I felt good in the warm-ups," Tomlinson said. "I put a few up, and they went in."

Bzdelik liked the consistency his team played with on offense for much of the game. Colorado finished with four players in double digits and assisted on 18 of its 27 conversions from the field.



Colorado's Cory Higgins draws the foul and the bucket over Arkansas-Pine Bluff's Lebaron Weathers in the first half Friday in Boulder.

Joshua Buck/Times-Call

COLORADO 76, ARK.-PINE BLUFF 56

ARK.-PINE BLUFF (0-1)

Weathers 9-18 1-1 22, Barnett 1-7 1-3 3, Calvin 4-7 0-0 9, Washington 7-11 4-7 18, Townsend 0-2 0-1 0, Ootese 1-4 0-2 2, Davis 0-3 0-0 0, Livisay 0-0 0-0 0, Lasker 0-0 0-0 0, Montgomery 1-3 0-0 2, Norman 0-0 0-0 0, Kennedy 0-0 0-0 0. Totals 23-55 6-14 56.

COLORADO (1-0)

Dufault 5-11 3-4 13, Crawford 6-8 0-1 14, Tomlinson 4-5 0-0 12, Higgins 4-10 3-6 12, Thorne II 3-5 0-0 8, Favaro 0-0 2-2 2, Kelley 0-0 1-2 1, Coney 0-0 0-0 0, Veal 0-1 0-0 0, Knutson 1-5 0-0 3, Zehnder 1-1 0-0 2, Jackson-Wilson 2-3 1-3 5, Eckloff 1-3 2-2 4. Totals 27-52 12-20 76.

Halftime-Colorado 40-20. 3-Point Goals_Ark.-Pine Bluff 4-17 (Weathers

“When you have players that are willing passers, it makes the rest of the team cut harder and move faster because they know they can get the ball,” Bzdelik said. “Everyone is like that on our team, and it’s contagious, which is a good thing.”

Added junior Dwight Thorne II, “If you’re open, we’re going to get you the ball. That breeds confidence.”

After holding a 40-20 lead at halftime, the Buffaloes remained on the attack in the second half.

3-7, Calvin 1-2, Montgomery 0-1, Townsend 0-2, Ootese 0-2, Washington 0-3), Colorado 10-23 (Tomlinson 4-5, Crawford 2-3, Thorne II 2-4, Higgins 1-4, Knutson 1-5, Dufault 0-2). Fouled Out-Calvin, Washington. Rebounds-Ark.-Pine Bluff 38 (Weathers 10), Colorado 31 (Higgins 6). Assists-Ark.-Pine Bluff 9 (Calvin 3), Colorado 18 (Higgins 6). Total Fouls-Ark.-Pine Bluff 19, Colorado 15. A-5,689.

Redshirt sophomore Casey Crawford gave Colorado a then-game-high 49-26 lead when he converted a layup out of the post and then a 17-foot jumper. The transfer from Wake Forest finished with 14 points and connected on six of eight shot attempts.

“He can really shoot the ball,” Bzdelik said.

The Buffaloes enjoyed their biggest lead at 66-42 with 4:27 remaining in the game.

“It was good to get the first win under our belts,” sophomore guard Cory Higgins said. “It’s definitely going to be more of a team effort this year, so that was good to see.”

With youth up and down their roster, winning the early non-conference games is crucial for the Buffaloes. Seven of their next eight games are at home, including Tuesday night against Montana State (7 p.m.).

That’s why getting off on the right foot felt so good Friday.

“The win is the biggest thing. But also, we wanted to see what a game experience was like for the young guys,” Thorne said. “Wins and confidence are the biggest things we have to focus on right now. With wins come confidence for all the young guys, and that’s everything.”

But Bzdelik knows there will be much tougher competition down the road. After all, the Golden Lions were only 13-18 a year ago and haven’t been to the NCAA Tournament since 1967.

“They care, and they are passionate and they are coachable,” Bzdelik said. “They are extremely young, and we are going to be all over the map this year.”

Kind of like Tomlinson has been.