



# Buff vets aim to be competitive in Big 12

## Numbers don't favor CU in stacked league

By Ryan Thorburn  
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In a couple of years, Jeff Bzdelik expects the Colorado men's basketball team to be competitive in the Big 12.

Cory Higgins will be a senior star. Nate Tomlinson and Austin Dufault will be quality veteran players. Toby Veal, Trey Eckloff and Ryan Kelley will have developed into solid contributors.

And the Buffs will have depth with a couple more solid recruiting classes signed, sealed and delivering.

At least that's the plan as Bzdelik and his staff build the program from the bottom of the conference up.

But after back-to-back 20-loss seasons and a disappointing 8-6 record against meager non-conference competition this season, some of the older players are running out of time and patience.

"I don't know why it can't be this year," junior guard Dwight Thorne told the Camera recently. "We've taken our share of lumps already."

Since Thorne -- the only member of his seven-man class recruited by Ricardo Patton who is still in the program -- arrived on campus, CU has compiled a 27-46 overall record, including a pathetic 6-26 mark in Big 12 play.

The Buffs have lost 12 games in the last 2½ seasons by five points or less, including games against Montana State (85-82), Buffalo (62-60) and SMU (70-67) this season.

"As soon as we figure out what we need to do to consistently win games and close out games, we'll be OK," Thorne said.

CU is second in the Big 12 in field goal percentage (.487), third in free throw percentage (.727) and sixth in scoring defense (63.6 ppg).

The glaring weakness, especially in close games, is rebounding. The Buffs are last in the conference in that department, averaging 28.9 boards per game in a league where 10 of the teams average at least 35.

Bzdelik's team is also last in the Big 12 in blocks (1.93 bpg) and assists (13.14 apg). CU ranks 11th in steals (5.14 spg) and 10th in turnover margin (+1.00).

All of these numbers are expected to add up to a last-place finish in the Big 12 for the Buffs. That would make three consecutive seasons in the basement for this program.

"We're as confident as we can be," Higgins said after scoring 24 points and grabbing 10 rebounds to lead CU to a 65-52 victory over Western State in the non-conference finale. "I'm sure nobody expects anything from us. We're all we have. And we're confident in each other."

Big 12 play began on Saturday without the Buffs, who open at Missouri on Wednesday. All of the other 11 teams in the conference compiled at least 10 wins during non-conference play.

Oklahoma (No. 6), Texas (No. 7) and Baylor (No. 23) are currently ranked in the Associated Press top 25 with Kansas, Texas A&M and Missouri all receiving votes.

The Big 12 preseason coaches poll tabbed the Buffs last behind Missouri (7), Kansas State (8), Nebraska (9), Texas Tech (10) and Iowa State (11) in the lower half. Oklahoma State was picked sixth behind Oklahoma (1), Texas (2), Baylor (3), Kansas (4) and Texas A&M (5).

"I'm personally going into the Big 12 ready and with a lot of confidence knowing we can take some teams out," Jermyn Jackson-Wilson, CU's only senior, said. "We've done it in past years when no one expected us to win any games in the Big 12. Teams better look out. It's the Big 12, we're a Big 12 team, we have Big 12 players. People might write us off, but we're the University of Colorado. We have a lot of confidence."

Bzdelik, an extremely competitive coach, has remained patient throughout this process. He would like to win in the Big 12 this season as much as Thorne or Jackson-Wilson, but the reality is ...

"It's about where we're headed," Bzdelik said.



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