



Smith might be key to Buffs' upset bid

CU women face Kansas State in tourney opener

By Ryan Thorburn
Thursday, March 12, 2009

OKLAHOMA CITY -- The stars need to align for the Colorado women to make a run here at the Big 12 Tournament.

Brittany Spears will have to play at her usual all-conference level. Kara Richards must make her presence felt in the paint. Alyssa Fressle has to play the best defense of her young career.

But if the 12th-seeded Buffs -- who finished the regular season 11-17 overall and 3-13 in the Big 12 -- upset No. 5 Kansas State today at the Cox Convention Center (10 a.m., KKZN 760), role player Bianca Smith will likely be the one stealing the headlines and spotlight from the Wildcats' stars.

"I think the player we would call our 'X factor' would be Bianca," a very relaxed and confident Kathy McConnell-Miller said before Wednesday's shoot-around. "If she's going to be on the floor, she needs to score."

The head coach says there are other players on the bench who can do the dirty work at the small forward position for CU. But Smith is the only one capable of changing the game with her shooting touch.

The problem is the junior doesn't show off those skills nearly enough.

In the Buffs' three conference wins, Smith averaged 21.3 points. In the 13 losses, she averaged 5.2 points.

During the two losses to the Wildcats (23-6), Smith scored a total of 11 points on 3-for-9 shooting. She will probably have to score twice as many points today for the Buffs' season to continue.

"I'm excited to see K-state again on a neutral court and beat them," Smith said. "The third time is the charm they say."

Last Saturday in Boulder, Shalee Lehning led the Wildcats to a 71-61 victory with 16 points, 12 assists and 11 rebounds. It was the All-American candidate's fifth career triple-double (her first in Big 12 play).

And a wake-up call for Fressle, a member of the Big 12's All-Rookie team who was taken to school by the senior.

"I knew she was a good player, but I didn't expect her to be as good as she was," Fressle said of Lehning. "I know what to expect now."

The game film showed Fressle wasting too much energy guarding, chasing and denying Lehning beyond the arc when she actually does most of her scoring in the paint or kicking the ball out to K-State's deadly perimeter shooters.

"This time I think Alyssa has a better sense and is more at peace with what's to come," McConnell-Miller said. "(Lehning) is one of the best that I've been around. I wouldn't say she's the greatest shooter or the quickest player, but she's one of the best point guards that I've seen."

Marlies Gipson, a center with guard skills, is another tough matchup for CU. She scored 37 points in the two meetings to help offset Spears' 43.

"Whenever you look at the games we've won, we've played hard for 40 minutes. I think that's going to happen this game," Smith said. "We've played them for 80 minutes and there is nothing they can possibly change in this short of time."

The winner of the CU-Kansas State game will advance to play No. 4 Texas A&M at 12:30 p.m. on Friday.



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CU women's preview: March 12

TODAY -- No. 12 Colorado plays No. 5 Kansas State at 10 a.m. at the Cox Convention Center in Oklahoma City.

BROADCAST -- Television: none; Radio: KKZN (760 AM) with Mike Rice (play-by-play) and Carol Callan (color).

STORYLINES -- The Buffs (11-17) have lost eight of their last nine games, including a 71-61 loss to Kansas State in the regular-season finale at the Coors Events Center last Saturday. ... Brittany Spears was named second-team All-Big 12 after averaging 18.1 points and 7.8 rebounds. ... CU won the inaugural Big 12 Tournament in 1997 as the No. 3 seed, defeating No. 5 K-State, 55-54, in the championship game. ... The Wildcats (23-6) are led by Shalee Lehning, who registered her fifth career triple-double in Boulder last Saturday with 16 points, 11 rebounds and 12 assists. ... Marlies Gipson blocked a program record 83 shots this season. ... This will be the Wildcats' first game on a neutral court all season. They were 13-3 at home and 4-9 on the road during the regular season.

KEY STAT -- Bianca Smith averaged 21.3 points in CU's three conference wins and 5.2 points during the 13 conference losses in the regular season.

COACHES -- Kathy McConnell-Miller is 52-70 in her fourth season at CU. Deb Patterson is 263-144 in her 14th year at Kansas State.

PROBABLE STARTERS

CU -- G Kelly Jo Mullaney, 5-8, sophomore, 5.4 ppg, 2.3 rpg, G Bianca Smith, 5-9, junior, 9.5 ppg, 4.1 rpg, G Alyssa Fressle, 5-10, freshman, 8.0 ppg, 2.6 rpg, F Brittany Spears, 6-1, sophomore, 18.1 ppg, 7.8 rpg, C Kara Richards, 13.2 ppg, 7.3 rpg.

KSU -- G Shalee Lehning, 5-9, senior, 10.8 ppg, 7.3 rpg, G Kari Kincaid, 5-10, junior, 7.9 ppg, 2.3 rpg, G/F Danielle Zanotti, 6-2, senior, 2.7 ppg, 2.8 rpg, F Ashley Sweat, 6-2, junior, 16.5 ppg, 5.2 rpg, F Marlies Gipson, 6-0, senior, 12.8 ppg, 6.7 rpg.

SERIES -- Colorado leads the all-time series 32-31.

UP NEXT -- If the Buffs pull off the upset today they will play No. 4 Texas A&M at 12:30 p.m. on Friday at the Cox Convention Center.



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Buffs get ready for familiar foe

By Patrick Ridgell
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BOULDER — The Colorado women's basketball team hopes familiarity can breed a victory.

The Buffs face Kansas State today (10 a.m., no TV) in the first round of the Big 12 Tournament in Oklahoma City. It'll be the third time they've played the Wildcats since Feb. 21, and the second time since Saturday. Kansas State won the previous meetings by margins of 12 and 10 points.

The thinking on CU's side, as it has been in many of its 17 losses this year, is if it can avoid those three- or four-minute lapses of bad play the Buffs frequently suffer, they'll be OK. It's during those lapses opponents have taken comfortable leads in what were close games. It's a problem the Buffs haven't solved.

"We know what they're going to do," CU guard Bianca Smith said. "We know each other well. I think there should be no reason for those three-minute lapses at all because we know what's going to happen. There should be nothing they can throw in in this short amount of time (to prepare for today) that'll surprise us.

"I think if we just stay focused, we should get them."

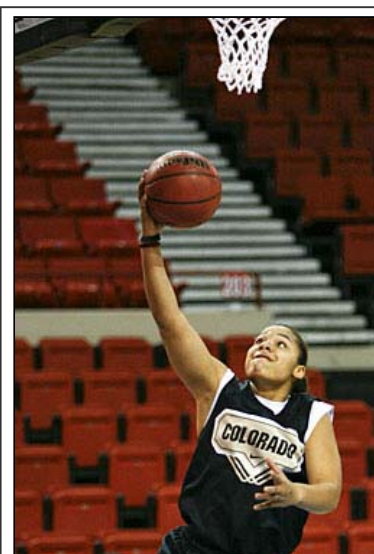
Last Saturday, for example, two bad stints burdened CU. It saw the Wildcats start fast and build a 14-point lead. After the Buffs fought back and tied it at halftime, Kansas State again went on a quick run to start the second half. CU could not answer a second time.

Coach Kathy McConnell-Miller has cited rebounding, turnovers and shot selection as consistent causes for most of the team's problems, and the primary culprit for those lapses. But the Buffs have others.

They enter today losers of five in a row and eight of their past nine. They yielded more points and a higher shooting percentage to their opponents during the regular season than anyone in the Big 12. CU has the league's worst rebounding margin, minus-5.5, its second-worst turnover margin, minus-1.48, and its worst assist/turnover ratio, 11.7 to 17.5 per game.

Yet confidence, said McConnell-Miller, is not an issue.

"I will tell you they will be ready to go," McConnell-Miller said. "Crazy as it sounds, they just don't have it in them to get down and not feel they can accomplish what they want to accomplish.



Colorado's Bianca Smith goes to the basket Wednesday during practice for the Big 12 Conference tournament in Oklahoma City.

Alonzo Adams/AP

Today's Game

Colorado women (11-17) vs. Kansas State (23-6)

When/Where: 10 a.m. today at the Cox Convention Center in Oklahoma City.

TV/Radio: No TV/KKZN 760 AM.

The series: CU leads 32-31. Kansas State beat CU twice during the regular season, including 71-61 Saturday in Boulder.

Leading scorers: Kansas State: Ashley Sweat (16.5 points per game); CU — Brittany Spears (18.1 points per game).

Notes: CU is seeded 12th for the second time in the Big 12 Tournament's 13 years. The other came in 2005. The 12 seed is 1-12 in

“We didn’t have that last year. We needed time to get to that from the Big 12 to the WNIT, because at the end of the year it was getting tough to keep them together and keep them believing. But this group has it.”

CU is running out of chances to prove it. Improvement has been difficult to see, and its last-place finish in the Big 12 means there will be no WNIT in Boulder this spring.

Players echo their coach, saying their confidence needs no boost as they enter the conference tournament. Smith said that stems from the team’s youth.

“We’re getting there,” Smith said. “We’ll be a team to be reckoned with in this league. That’s what keeps us motivated. We see stretches in games where we play amazing, and then there are some where we have lapses. We always seem to come back and just run out of time.”

the Big 12 Tournament. Missouri in 2008 is the only 12 seed to win a game ... CU is 8-11 in the Big 12 Tournament. ... Kansas State point guard Shalee Lehning is second in the nation with 7.7 assists per game. She had a triple double Saturday. The Buffs say they need more pressure today on Lehning, whom CU coach Kathy McConnell-Miller calls one of the nation's best point guards. ... The Wildcats' defense allows the nation's third-smallest total, 52.6 points per game.

—Patrick Ridgell

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