



CU's McConnell-Miller on hot seat

Bufs finish last in Big 12 in her fourth year

By Kyle Ringo
Sunday, March 15, 2009

BOULDER, Colo. — Coach Kathy McConnell-Miller's tenure as women's basketball coach at Colorado could come to an end as early as the conclusion of next season if the team she coaches doesn't make significant improvement.

If the Buffs do take some big steps forward by the time the 2010 postseason arrives, the question then might be why anyone ever doubted her.

There is no question now the heat is on a coaching staff in its fifth year. Expectations are for McConnell-Miller to climb out of the conference cellar and put some distance between Boulder and the Big 12 basement.

"It's always dangerous to speculate," athletic director Mike Bohn said this week when asked about what McConnell-Miller must do to keep her job. "Our investment in basketball is one we have to continue to grow. It's not all about the coach. It's a lot of things."

Fittingly, the team and the program will be a reflection of McConnell-Miller and her assistants next season without any holdovers from her predecessor. Seniors Kara Richards and Hannah Skildum on this year's team were the final players on the roster who were recruited to CU by former coach Ceal Barry.

The Buffs have gone 52-71 in four seasons under McConnell-Miller, whom Bohn hired from Tulsa in the spring of 2005 to replace Barry, a legend in the women's college game. CU lost six in a row to finish this season and nine of its final 10 and is 17-47 in regular season conference games the past four years.

While the Buffs enjoyed stretches of success --- even a good half here and there --- they never sustained it and failed to play a complete game in 29 outings, finishing 11-18 overall and 3-17 in Big 12 Conference contests.

Coaches were unable to solve the team's turnover and rebounding problems, turnovers being an issue that has been a constant throughout her tenure. Coaches also failed to find solutions to long, cold stretches that plagued the team on the offensive end all year.

The Buffs were young this season with a lineup dominated by freshmen and sophomores playing in what is easily the toughest conference from top to bottom in the nation. The loss of point guard Whitney Houston to a knee injury before the season ever started was a serious setback with repercussions that resonated throughout the year.

Losing players such as Aija Putnina, Caley Dow and Candace Rucker, who transferred in the offseason

or in previous years, also hurt depth.

"If they were all here as juniors, contributing, I think it's a different year," McConnell-Miller said. "We just don't have the depth to sustain an injury. We just don't have the depth to sustain a late transfer, and that's on me. That's how I feel about it.

"I feel like they are developing as players. I feel like every year they are getting better, but I really feel like our best years are ahead."

The obvious highlight of McConnell-Miller's tenure thus far was the team's run to the semifinals of the Women's National Invitation Tournament last season after playing .500 ball throughout the regular season. The Buffs also have beaten three ranked opponents in McConnell-Miller's time in Boulder.

Bohn awarded McConnell-Miller a contract extension after the WNIT run and following news last spring that she was a finalist for the head coaching job at UCLA. Her contract pays her more than \$350,000 this year, including a base salary of \$177,984. The deal runs through April 30, 2013, but there is wiggle room in it for the athletic department.

The contract contains a clause allowing the athletic department to reassign the coach to another position at her base rate of pay. Her base pay is the only part of her salary guaranteed in the deal, and it is only guaranteed for the next two years of the contract.

Bohn said he continues to believe McConnell-Miller and her assistants will turn things around. He said the athletic department, the school, students and fans can do much more to help.

"I don't think we've seen the full development of her team," he said. "It hasn't materialized to the point where I'm sure she is satisfied, and her staff and her fan base and team. We recognize that we've got to find a way this upcoming offseason to build their confidence and build strength in their program because they are young."

McConnell-Miller isn't worried about her job. She believes the program is on the right track and will begin to blossom next year when a strong recruiting class is added to a mix of returning players, who gained experience this year and last.

"They're just going to be, I think, more prepared for this," McConnell-Miller said. "There are some of them who are going to have to have great summers to be able to get out there next year."

McConnell-Miller hasn't accomplished what she hoped to when she took the job, but she hasn't been working with all the tools many of her counterparts in the Big 12 and around the nation have at their disposal.

Some of the most obvious and glaring deficiencies have started to be addressed with the addition of new coaches' offices and a new playing surface in the Coors Events Center. The construction of an in-house weight room also was vital so basketball players no longer have to trudge across campus to the Dal Ward Center after practices to lift.

However, McConnell-Miller and her staff do not have a full-time staffer to break down film. They spend countless hours each year that could be dedicated to other tasks, just organizing film for themselves and players.

If McConnell-Miller wants to see a recruit play during the season, she often has to miss a practice to make it work. She has not been afforded the luxury of chartering a plane for a recruiting trip since being hired.

The planned addition of a practice facility to the events center is vital not just to McConnell-Miller and her players, but also to the men's program and the volleyball program now headed by recently hired coach Liz Kritza.

All three teams must share one court during the fall semester, a court, by the way, that featured only two baskets for much of this season because the older portable baskets were too heavy. Players often stood in lines to shoot free throws.

There are scheduling problems that sometimes can't be worked out in the fall, which forces one or two of the three programs to use Carlson Gymnasium, the campus recreation center or even local high schools for practice. It's an embarrassment Bohn has sought to fix since he was hired.

Bohn acknowledges all those issues are valid, fundamental problems for any basketball coach trying to be successful in the Big 12. He said many of them are rooted in a flawed approach to basketball decades old. McConnell-Miller took the high road when asked recently to detail the size and scope of the rebuilding project she took on when she came to Boulder.

"I can't answer that," she said. "I don't know that I would go on record and talk about that. That's probably something, a conversation we should have had in my first year, not now. "But I will tell you it's not easy to make a huge jump in this league."

Barry took the program to the NCAA tournament in three of the final four years of her tenure, including an Elite Eight appearance. However, many of the state's best recruits chose not to go to CU during those years, opting instead for programs such as Connecticut and Duke.

McConnell-Miller's program seems to be mirroring coach Dan Hawkins' football program in that many of the best in-state prospects are once again deciding to become Buffs. She believes recruits that will arrive in Boulder this summer will make an impact next season, especially Boulder twins Brenna and Meagan Malcolm-Peck and Colorado Springs point guard Janeesa "Chucky" Jeffery.

"We get better fast with Whitney and Chucky and the Malcolm-Pecks," she said. "We're still, today, missing that four player and we're actively trying secure that player."

There have been plenty of hard times for the Buffs under McConnell-Miller and some of them aren't over.

Sore spots are not limited to lackluster results on the floor. The university is being sued in Denver District Court by a former player, RyAnne Ridge, who claims she was promised a scholarship at CU if she followed McConnell-Miller from Tulsa to Boulder. The scholarship never materialized and Ridge was dismissed from the team last season for unspecified reasons.

Other players have grown unhappy in the program and decided to leave. Dow, a prospect recruited and signed from Arapahoe High School by Barry, counts herself in that group. Dow decided to quit basketball before this season because she no longer believed women's basketball was respected at CU.

"It's almost like it's not reciprocated," she said. "It's like the level of commitment isn't there from the top

down.

"There is definitely, I almost want to say, like a lack of professionalism. One of my biggest issues with leaving the team was the issue of respect, like if I felt I could respect the coaching staff and the administration and stuff like that."

Dow said she respects every member of the current coaching staff and believes they want what is best for the program, but she disagrees with their methods at times. She said there were different standards for different players when she was in the program and not enough attention paid to the here and now.

"I think instead of trying to continue tradition, it's almost like we tried to make our own tradition, which hasn't worked out so well," Dow said. "It's like there isn't a sense of urgency among the staff to keep that sense of connection to the past and to the history of the program."

"It's almost like, 'We're living in the present. That's all that matters and it's all about the future. It's what's coming next year. It's the recruit I have coming two years from now.'"

"I think a focus on player development would be really key. I think the coaching staff that is in place right now does a fantastic job of recruiting, like bar none, but there is also the component of what you do with the players when they get here."

McConnell-Miller said she has never turned her back on a player at CU in an age when coaches running players out of programs has become much too common. McConnell-Miller said any player who has left CU prior to exhausting their eligibility has made the decision to do so.

She said the program is also developing players, some of whom think they know the game when they arrive as former prep stars but find out they have much to learn to succeed in the Big 12.

"If (Brittany) Spears is any indication, she goes from, as a freshman, averaging 13, 14 points a game and being a set shooter where it was either layups or a 3-point set-shooter," McConnell-Miller said. "Now she has evolved into a player that can now go off the bounce, a player who can use screens and be effective in the offense."

One of the big projects for next year is replacing senior post player Kara Richards. McConnell-Miller said she believes post players such as Courtney Dunn and Julie Seabrook deferred to Richards this year and still have plenty of potential, which is how she views the entire program.

So what if those players don't improve? What if the turnovers are still a problem next year when more young players will be breaking in? What if the program endures another mediocre season in 2009-2010?

"I can't see that happening," McConnell-Miller said.



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