



CU defense faces challenge

But Marshall has helped keep opposing scorers in check

By Joshua Lindenstien
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The idea of moving forward Nikki Marshall to defense has been one Colorado soccer coach Bill Hempen has wrestled with all season.

Call him crazy. But moving last year's Big 12 Conference goal-scoring leader farther from the goal just hasn't always made sense.

Turns out, the move has been just what the up-and-down Buffs defense has needed to become impenetrable the last two matches.

The Buffs (10-7-4) are still kicking in the NCAA tournament and host third-ranked Portland at 1 p.m. today at Prentup Field (television on FSN).

"Marshall in the back, she's going to get challenged," Hempen said after the Buffs' 2-0 win over Hawaii in the first round of the NCAA tournament on Friday. "But she's almost unbeatable, almost."

After Marshall, a sophomore, gained experience playing defense with the U-20 national team at the Pan-Am Games over the summer, the Buffs experimented with putting her in the back at different points during this season. But with scoring woes up front, her presence was needed there as well.

Once Big 12 tournament time rolled around, though, Hempen figured he needed as tough a back row as possible — his thinking being that close, low-scoring games boded better for his team than high-scoring affairs.

With Marshall playing alongside CU defensive stalwarts Michelle Wenino and Kym Lowry, the Buffs have registered two shutouts in a row, one in a shootout loss against Texas and one on Friday.

"If the opportunities are still there, hopefully the (other) players are trained well enough that they can finish, and we did today," Hempen said Friday.

Marshall led the Buffs in scoring for the second straight season with nine goals. But never one to worry much about her own numbers, she has embraced her latest role.

"Wherever I need to play to get us wins — if I'm on the bench — as long as I'm here and I'm with my team it doesn't matter where I'm playing," Marshall said. "I just love playing and I'll do what I have to do."

Marshall and the Buffalo defense will certainly be tested today.

The Pilots (16-3-0) have outscored opponents 50-9 on the season and won nine straight, including the last seven by shutout.

Not to mention they might have a little chip on their collective shoulder about having to travel in the first two rounds of the tournament. The Pilots are annually one of the best teams in the country, having won two of the last five national titles. But they often have to travel in the early rounds of the tournament because of the regional emphasis placed on bracketing.

Asked Friday whether he uses that as a motivating factor with his squad, Pilots head coach Garrett Smith fought back a smirk.

"I don't know what we'd do if we were actually at home for the first two rounds of the playoffs, because we're always on the road," Smith said. "It doesn't matter. Every year we've done well and won a national championship we've been sent on the road for the first two rounds. So I guess this is where we belong to win a national championship."



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