



Bzdelik impressed by Aggies

Bufs open Big 12 at Texas A&M on Saturday

Thursday, January 10, 2008

Nothing like starting off the Big 12 schedule with an easy road game.

Right, coach?

"There are no easy games in the Big 12," first-year Colorado head coach Jeff Bzdelik, not exactly in the mood for a reporter's attempt at humor on Thursday morning, said moments before watching some frightening film of No. 11 Texas A&M.

The Buffs (8-6), picked to finish in the conference basement for the second consecutive season, will play the Aggies (14-1) on Saturday in College Station, Texas. The game will start at 2 p.m. and Altitude will air the ESPN Plus broadcast.

Thanks to the efforts of Billy Gillispie, now in charge of some little program in Kentucky, first-year A&M head coach Mark Turgeon inherited a much different situation from the mess Bzdelik is trying to clean up.

The Aggies' roster is loaded with college stars and prize recruits, including Josh Carter, Joseph Jones, Dominique Kirk and DeAndre Jordan. Richard Roby might be the only CU player capable of playing any minutes in the A&M rotation if Turgeon could make a trade for a Buff.

"They'd be in the middle of the pack in the NBA," Bzdelik said. "When I was watching them that's what I thought. I thought I was watching an NBA team."

The coaches picked the Aggies to finish third in the Big 12 before the season started. That appears to be a safe bet entering conference play as A&M races Kansas (15-0) and Texas (13-2) for the regular-season title.

"It has been easy because we have good players," Turgeon said at the Big 12 media days when asked about making the program's transition from Gillispie's style to his. "And that was the whole reason that I took the job."

Marcus Hall, a Houston native who once scored 58 points in a high school game, might have to run the CU offense perfectly for the visitors to escape with a road win.

"I'm not sure," the senior point guard said when asked if the Buffs were ready for Big 12 play. "Sometimes it seems like we're ready and sometimes it doesn't. We have to take a big step physically."

Dwight Thorne has been practicing this week and could provide CU with some much-needed help off the bench. Bzdelik said the sophomore guard from Arlington, Texas will be a game-time decision.



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Colorado men will use charters for Big 12 trips

Bzdelik says biggest benefit is class time

By Ryan Thorburn

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The road through the Big 12 is probably not going to be kind to the Colorado men's basketball program this season.

The other 11 teams in the conference put together a combined home record of 99-8 (.925) against nonconference opponents. The rebuilding Buffs, who are a weak 3-4 at the Coors Events Center, haven't won a Big 12 game on the road since Jan. 21, 2006.

But there is one piece of positive news for CU this year: The skies will be friendlier.

Jeff Bzdelik's team will use charter flights for all eight Big 12 road games, starting Friday when the Buffs travel to College Station, Texas, for Saturday's conference opener against No. 11 Texas A&M.

"There's a tremendous benefit to that," Bzdelik said recently. "First and foremost is less class time missed."

For example, when the Buffs play at Iowa State on Tuesday, Jan. 29, they will depart for Ames on Monday after classes are over and return to Boulder following the game, which will allow the players to attend classes on Wednesday.

In the past, CU would often depart early the day before a game and return the day after the game using commercial flights. That meant the possibility of missing three days of class for one game.

"Throughout the course of the year that multiplies into a huge number," Bzdelik said. "So chartering is more of a benefit to class time than anything else. People, I think, sometimes have this misconception that it's a luxury. It's not a luxury, it's an efficient way for them to get through school as a student-athlete."

For the past two seasons, Bzdelik's Air Force teams flew on military planes that were anything but luxurious.

"We had no heat," Bzdelik said. "That was always interesting at 30,000 feet with no heat. I hope the charters here have heat. I didn't ask that question during the interview."

Bzdelik had hoped CU would have the locker room renovation at the Coors Events Center completed before Big 12 play started. The money and plans are in place but the project is not on schedule. Meanwhile, the home team continues to dress in a cramped auxiliary locker room.

Construction of the new basketball operations center, however, is in its final stages.

"We're starting from scratch," Bzdelik said. "So there is a lot of pride in taking something that's really on the bottom and building it up."

Happy trails? Well, the Aggies are already 12-0 at home this season.



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Seeking support

Perennially lacking, interest in the CU men's basketball program appears to be on the upswing

*By Patrick Ridgell
Longmont Times-Call*

BOULDER — It's not a new problem.

The Colorado men's basketball program opens Big 12 play this weekend, and as usual, it trails all league rivals in attendance. If things stay the same, CU will finish last in the conference in average attendance for the fourth straight year.

In the Big 12's 11 seasons, CU men's basketball attendance has never ranked higher than 10th.

Again, disinterest in the program is hardly new, and athletic director Mike Bohn stresses CU's need to pay it greater heed.

As new coach Jeff Bzdelik assume all challenges the tall task of building a program offers, the raw data suggests CU has a ways to go.

Still, progress is coming, and fans like Jerry Carroll, a season-ticket holder since 1980, see a difference.

"I can remember in years past on a Sunday afternoon, you'd be lucky to have 2,000 people here," Carroll said during a Sunday game last month. "But you have more excitement in the program now."

While CU's average of 4,137 through the first seven home dates of 2007-08 is paltry compared to some Division I programs it's an improvement. According to attendance figures the school provided, this season's non-conference average is CU's highest since 2002-03 (4,416), and it's only the second time since 1992 that the figure exceeds 4,000.

According to CU athletic department officials, total season-ticket sales have increased from last season's total. They've gone from 5,488 to 6,594, a jump of 1,106 or about 20 percent.

In October, Bohn said he expected an increase of about 1,000 in men's hoops season tickets. Also, at that time, he said students had bought 4,200 season-ticket packages. CU did not provide an updated figure this week.

CU has donated some tickets and given others away to fans. It's unclear exactly how many are given away.

The Buffs drew 8,372 for the Nov. 9 season opener against New Mexico. On Dec. 2, when they faced Stanford for an afternoon tipoff that directly conflicted with the Denver Broncos' game at Oakland, 6,175 showed.

Tickets to the Feb. 2 home Kansas game are currently only being sold as part of a three-game package. That means all those Jayhawk fans who want tickets from CU for the annual Boulder matchup between the programs must also pay for two other Buffs dates.

"I think that's great," Carroll said. "You'd come here for Kansas or Missouri in the past, and you'd have a third or half



A crowd of 2,031 looks on Monday night at the Coors Events Center as Colorado's Levi Knutson defends Tulsa's Rod Earls. Through seven home games this season, CU has averaged 4,137 fans per game, a figure which ranks last in the Big 12. **Jill P. Mott/Times-Call**

the arena for the other team.”

Single-game tickets for the Kansas game will go on sale next Tuesday, if any remain. As of Wednesday, only about 1,000 were left, CU reported.

This year, Carroll moved his seats from the south end of the arena to the north, where new bleachers have been placed. The band and student sections moved from the north side to its south end.

Carroll describes himself as someone who used to get splinters in his rear end watching games at old Balch Fieldhouse, before the Coors Events Center opened.

He buys five season tickets a year and, in previous seasons, struggled to find people to give them to. He said some ask to use them now.

Carroll lauded the administration’s efforts to reach out to fans, and its work to help the basketball program.

“This school never supported basketball,” Carroll said. “I could go on a big rant about how they shorted basketball over the years. It was an always an afterthought. The only thing the school cared about was football and taking care of that.

“I’m ready to give some money to athletics. The previous administration, it was football and that’s it. I love football, but I love basketball, too. ... I liked Ricardo (Patton, Bzdelik’s predecessor), but they screwed him.”

Bohn said basketball was included with more football season-ticket packages this year, and the department took greater care to make sure basketball was presented as an option in all sales materials.

Bohn said the new north-end seats are sold out. CU also has tried to draw graduate students, a market it previously didn’t try to tap, Bohn said.

But Bohn said marketing the program obviously begins with the team and Bzdelik, whose team might be in for a rough ride in Big 12 play.

Asked what problems arise with being last in league attendance, Bohn didn’t provide a direct answer.

“Obviously, and most importantly, it’s up to our coaches and to our players, who create a great environment,” he said. “If you look back two years ago, when we won seven of eight home conference meetings, a lot of that had to do with our crowd. I really believe that. It started with our students.”

CU averaged 7,840 for its eight Big 12 games in 2005-06. It won seven of them. It averaged 2,098 in non-league play that year.

Bzdelik’s contract includes a clause that cancels his buyout if CU hasn’t broken ground on a practice facility within his first three years. Offices and locker-room renovations at the Coors Events Center are nearing completion, but if CU doesn’t continue to upgrade support for the program with a practice facility, Bzdelik will have an easy way out if another suitor calls.

For now, the first-year coach e-mails students, seeking their support.

“Probably the most important role I have is to have a team people want to come see and cheer for,” Bzdelik said. “That’s the most important thing I can do. But whatever marketing the school wants me to do, I’ll do.

“We’re trying hard to create an environment conducive to winning ... and then to create an environment that’s conducive to winning with the fans. That also is extremely important.”

Bzdelik knew of the apathy toward the program he inherited last spring, but said he did not discuss any marketing role when he accepted the job.

"I felt that people will support you if you show a competitive team that plays with great passions and great intelligence," Bzdelik said. "And, of course, winning helps."

The players agree.

"I think if you win, then people will come," CU sophomore guard Xavier Silas said. "So it was pretty much our fault because we weren't winning. I wouldn't expect someone to come and support a losing team."

Still, it's not easy when the Buffs travel and see the support programs like Kansas and Oklahoma State receive.

"It was hard to go other places last year where it was so hard to play there, and then we come home and it was not hard at all for them," Silas said. "It was frustrating."

"But I think this year, if we can have turnouts like the New Mexico game, it's hard to play in an atmosphere like that for the opposing team. So it's looking up right now."

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