

Bufs Halt Runnin' Bulldogs 87-78, Advance In CBI

BOULDER – Colorado expected to be playing basketball well into March this year. It didn't expect that its year would end with the College Basketball Invitational. It didn't expect that it would play out the postseason with Dustin Thomas in street clothes and Askia Booker watching from home.

But that's where the Bufs are, caught in limbo between the nightmare that was their regular season and the future that they feel is bright. Wednesday night was the first glimpse at that future, and it looks good — Colorado beat Gardner-Webb 87-78 in the first round of the CBI at the Coors Events Center.

"This tournament is about an investment in our future, the future of Colorado basketball," Bufs coach Tad Boyle said. "We have some good players in that locker room. This tournament is an opportunity for them to learn and grow."

This, not senior night, was the Coors Event Center's swan song for 2015, and it came in front of a pitiful crowd of barely 1,200; the C-Unit was empty past the first three rows. But the Bufs (16-17) weren't here for the crowd, they were here for each other, they were here to learn, and they were here to win.

Colorado executed its half-court offense to perfection — perhaps the first time that has been said all year — and played unselfish, free-flowing basketball. The Bufs dished 20 assists and five Bufs scored in double figures.

Josh Scott led the way with 23 points and 15 rebounds. Colorado also got 12 points and six boards from Tory Miller, a career-high 11 points from Eli Stalzer on 4-of-4 shooting, and 10 points each from Xavier Johnson and Tre'Shaun Fletcher.

Gardner-Webb's Tyrell Nelson led all scorers with 27 points on 10-of-10 shooting, but the rest of his team shot just 39 percent.

Gardner-Webb (20-15) came out in a matchup zone, which is what many of Colorado's opponents have used lately to mitigate the Bufs' athleticism and exploit frequently subpar passing and outside shooting. It didn't work on Wednesday, though — Colorado moved the ball and moved off of it as well as it had all season.

"Honestly, I think we have been playing well against the zone for the past four or five games," Scott said. "I don't think the zone really has us worried. The goal is to force you to roll into taking three-pointers and I don't think we allowed ourselves to do that tonight."

The Bufs and the Bulldogs couldn't be more diametrically opposite; Gardner-Webb doesn't have a rotation player taller than 6-foot-7 and it shoots 23 threes a game. Colorado is big and its outside shooting comes and goes. The Bulldogs were snipers, the Bufs bullies. Gardner-Webb's shooting was a matchup problem for Colorado, though — the Bufs struggle to defend the three-point line, and, because the Bulldogs are small and play four shooters at all times, Colorado's bigs had to defend on the perimeter.

They didn't do that very well in the first half; Gardner-Webb hit seven 3-pointers and took an early lead. Nelson was the catalyst for much of that, and he was shockingly effective. The 6-7 center was pure force. He backed down whomever he posted up against — Scott, Gordon, Miller, didn't matter. Butt out, shoulder in chest. The Bufs couldn't handle his power. Colorado had to help on Nelson's post-ups, and the Bufs couldn't do that without leaving a shooter open. Sometimes they recovered quickly enough when Nelson passed out of the double-team; sometimes they didn't. When they didn't, the Bulldogs drained a three.

Eventually, though, Colorado's size became overwhelming. The Bufs out-rebounded Gardner-Webb 43-18. They scored 66 points in the paint and 22 off of offensive rebounds. Scott pulled nine off the offensive glass, and Colorado carried a 44-36 lead into halftime.

Boyle also experimented with different lineups; he played Miller and Scott together for the first time this year and gave significant minutes to Stalzer and fan-favorite walk-on Brett Brady.

"When it comes to the starting lineup of this team, outside of Josh Scott and maybe Wesley Gordon, the rest you can throw darts at a dartboard," Boyle said. "Hopefully we can see some separation as we go through this as well."

Dom Collier will be a big part of that rotation next year, and the few who attended Wednesday expected him to start. So did Boyle, until Collier was late to shoot-around.

"I think that's number eight this year for being late to something," Boyle said. "I planned on playing him and planned on starting him, but sometimes our guys can't get out of their own way."

Collier eventually played, and he led the Buffs with five dimes. Gardner-Webb's treys stopped falling in the second half, but Colorado never stopped moving and never stopped sharing. When Johnson posterized Nelson with a violent left-handed slam, it was over. When Miller threw down from just inside the free-throw line on the next possession, there was no doubt.

The Buffs accomplished everything they could have hoped for — they experimented, learned and improved, and they extended their season by one more game. It continues on Monday at Seattle, which disposed of Pepperdine 62-45 Wednesday night. The CBI isn't the tournament that Colorado wanted but perhaps it is the tournament that the Buffs need.

“One of our problems this year was that we pick and choose our spots as far as when we want to compete,” Boyle said. “We have to learn to relish competitive opportunities. I couldn't have lived with myself, slept at night, looked at myself in the mirror, espousing to compete and then pass on the opportunity [to play in the CBI].”

So the Buffs will compete for one more game. They don't know what the future holds beyond Monday, but that's OK. They're still playing.