



2010 OUTLOOK



It's year five of the Dan Hawkins Era at Colorado, and the road back to national and even regional prominence has been slower than hoped and/or expected.

CU fans are hungry; the school's last major title came in 2001 when the Buffs won the Big 12 Conference crown, and that was a full decade from Colorado's three-peat in the old Big 8 (1989-91) though the Buffs were one of the perennial national powers most of the 1990s. CU did claim three other Big 12 North titles (2002-04-05), but struggled in all three league championship games and was 1-4 in bowl games in the 2000s decade after ending the 1990s with six straight postseason wins.

Rest assured the coaching staff is just as impatient; as Hawkins has said on multiple occasions, they would have liked to have contended for the league title (or more) in his first season back in 2006. But the rebuilding process has been arduous; called on the carpet by some for saying the program had been burnt to the ground, what Hawkins was really referring to was an inordinate amount of new people in place at the university, both in and out of athletics, and not the cupboard being bare in the football program itself (though most were definitely rattled when CU was outscored 130-22 in the last three regular season games in 2005 before battling Clemson in the Champs Sports Bowl).

But the Buffaloes have a long history from rising from the ashes, most recently that 2001 team that went 10-3 after going 3-8 the year before; teams in the late 1960s, mid-1970s and late 1980s did the same. Hawkins & Co. are hopeful that the 2010 team can add to that list.

Colorado returns 53 lettermen, including 15 starters (and 11 others with significant starting experience) from its 2009 team. Now that team did go 3-9, but definitely would qualify for the season's national list of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde performers. The Buffs held on dearly at the end of two wins, yet on at least five other occasions, were just a handful of plays away victory.

The offense struggled to find its identity, partly due to an offensive line that never fully melded as hoped, one that had no seniors, the first at CU since 1982. The defense performed like the '85 Chicago Bears over 80 percent of the time: 663 of 805 plays netted 1,329 yards, or 2.0 per; but the other 142 the Buffs were gashed for 3,027 yards (21.3 per), one of the most out-of-whack statistics one will ever see. And yet, CU was still seventh in the nation in red zone defense, 11th in forcing the opponent into three-and-outs and allowed just 12 touchdowns in 21 opponent goal-to-go situations (and only eight TDs in 29 drives started in CU territory), all solid numbers.

Colorado had one of the younger teams in the country when combing through the season-ending standard offense/defense two-deeps across the nation. The Buffs had 23 freshmen, redshirt freshmen or sophomores in their final two-deep of the fall, including nine starters; the 23 tied for the 13th most nationally. In 2009, upperclassmen — juniors and seniors — started just 55.7 percent of CU's 12 games; the lowest figure at Colorado in 28 years.

It does appear that many things are in place for Hawkins to bust through for that first winning season. Positions in the past that have struggled with depth, mainly wide receiver, the offensive line and safety are now fairly well stocked. CU is deep at corner and linebacker, and while youthful when including incoming recruits, running back and tight end should develop nicely. The main questions will center around quarterback, as the annual battle will once again carry into August drills, and the defensive line, and although while improving, still is short in the depth department.

As stated last year, the solid foundation built off the field now

waits for one on the field to catch up, and 2009 was deemed vital for the progress of the program in its return to national prominence. But there was no one single reason why last year's team didn't play as well as forecast, but Hawkins and his staff worked overtime during the offseason to figure out how to correct things within their control that could make a difference.

That list includes the usual for many programs, cut down on turnovers and penalties, for more turnovers, win the special teams battle, etc. The turnover margin for a 3-9 team wasn't terrible, only minus-6, but CU had 31 turnovers, the fifth-most in the NCAA. CU was flagged 107 times, but only 28 came on defense, 13 on special teams and one on the bench, all acceptable numbers, but 65 called on the offense was not.

Hawkins for his part remains optimistic, and committed to building his program the right way without any shortcuts.

"We are that far away," he says, holding his thumb and forefinger about a half-inch apart. "Look, I know nobody wants to be close to winning football games. We've just got to build a little confidence, build a little momentum. We had a good spring. We are faster than we've been in my five years here ... everyone is posting lower numbers while our strength numbers continue to go up. I think our guys are very poised but we still have to have a great summer."

While some outside the program are thriving on saying negative things like Hawkins is on the hot seat, the defense won't be that good, the offense sputters because of the quarterback situation, special teams is a mess, etc., they probably need to look a little bit closer at the program.

Let's look at the defense first. It would be freakish for the opponent to post the same number of long plays as in 2009 (seven of 56 or more yards, a dozen 45 yards or longer) that added up to the numbers listed above. The defensive front is a year older, so players like tackles **Curtis Cunningham**, **Will Pericak** and **Nate Bonsu** and end **Forrest West** will be better at shutting down the run. End **Marquez Herrod** came into his own last year and might be one of the better rushing ends in the conference. Plus the group



DT Will Pericak



will regain the services of **Nick Kasa**, the state's top recruit in 2008 who decided to stay home to play for the Buffaloes; he missed most of his frosh year with a knee injury and then illness.

Linebacker is once again looking strong, with **Michael Sipili** coming off a good spring and looking like the player CU expected when he signed with the Buffs four years ago. Next to him will be a healthy **Jon Major**, the state's top recruit in '07 who injured a knee in his first training camp and slowly returned to form over the course of last season; he too had a solid spring. **Patrick Mahnke** (a former safety) and **Doug Rippy** (former OLB) have moved inside and along with **Derrick Webb** give linebacker coach **Brian Cabral** plenty to work with in his 21st year with the program. At outside linebacker, **B.J. Beatty** is primed for a big senior year, and solid backups and/or heirs apparent are emerging in **Tyler Ahles** and **Liloa Nobriga**.

The secondary is likely the strongest unit on the defense, if not the entire team. **Jimmy Smith** is an All-American candidate at (right) cornerback, while his colleague **Jalil Brown** on the left side has made his fair share of big plays as a Buffalo. Freshman redshirts **Deji Olatoye** and **Paul Vigo** along with freshman **Josh Moten** will learn from two of the best playing behind the J&J (Jalil and Jimmy) combo. **Anthony Perkins** and **Ray Polk** are solid performers at the safety positions, but it will be hard to keep redshirt frosh **Parker Orms**, among others, off the field as he was all over the field during spring ball.

On offense, the driving force to any success will once again rest with the offensive line. For assorted reasons, the group just hasn't melded the way as hoped, which has hurt the running game (4.2 yards per true rushing attempt, 11-of-19 on 3rd/4th-&1) while offering limited protection on passing plays (44 sacks allowed). Everyone returns, however, as 2009 marked the first time since 1982 that a senior did not make a single start on the offensive line. **OT Nate Solder** (*Playboy* Preseason All-American), **OG Ryan Miller** and **C Keenan Stevens** (Rimington Award candidate) figure to be the anchors of the unit.

The quarterback battle in the spring ended with **Tyler Hansen** a shade ahead of **Cody Hawkins**, so they'll duel it out in August. The two bring different styles to the table, the main reason one hasn't been able to separate from the other. Both had good springs, and as is the case in most camps, the coaches know they'll need to identify a starter about midway through when they start to install plays for the front end of the season.

Rodney Stewart returns at tailback, and he seems to be a bit under the radar nationally. Fifth in the Big 12 in rushing last year (73.1 yards per game), he has the second most rushing yards in Colorado history (1,426) for a player entering his junior season. He's one of just four running backs on the roster at present, though two solid recruits join the fray come fall.

The receiving corps should be the best in Hawkins' tenure, led



TE Ryan Deehan

by senior **Scotty McKnight**, who is poised to set many of CU's reception records, and junior transfer **Toney Clemons**. The group will lose the services of **Markques Simas**, who was suspended for violating team rules; he came on at the end of '09 to post some staggering numbers, but has indicated he will transfer back home to the San Diego area. The coaches still have other options in his absence. **Ryan Deehan** is the top tight end entering the fall, with two freshmen redshirts, **Clark Evans** (a converted quarterback) and **DaVaughn Thornton** in position for some significant playing time.

The Buffs switch up the rotation of South Division teams in conference, with Baylor and Texas Tech set to visit Boulder with a road trip to Oklahoma on the docket. The Colorado State game is back in Denver for the first of 10 consecutive games at Invesco Field at Mile High, then CU hits the road to California before Hawai'i and Georgia will travel to Boulder and Folsom Field to complete CU's annual challenging non-conference schedule. With the

impending move to the Pacific-10 Conference in either 2011 or 2012, some have slammed CU for not contributing much to the Big 12 Conference of late; quite a comical reference when 31 of its last 35 non-conference games have been televised while the vast majority of the other 11 schools traditionally schedule cupcakes to the point where the league started moving conference games into third week of September. That philosophy does not exist in the Pac-10.

The success of special teams is almost always perceived to be good or bad depending most on the placekickers and punters. **Aric Goodman** has struggled in games on his field goals (15-of-32), though he's hit an upright seven times in those 17 misses. He may get some competition from incoming frosh **Justin Castor** as well as sophomore **Zach Grossnickle**, who has a leg up (pun intended) for the punting job that was handled the last four years by **Matt DiLallo**. CU's team net punting average was 31.9 last year (113th in the NCAA), four yards worse than a pedestrian 35.8 figure in 2008. Yet, opponents had only three returns over 20 yards out of 37 tries in 2009, the problem was all three went for touchdowns and covered some 200 yards; the other 34 returns averaged 5.9 yards per.

The Buffs were 21st in kickoff returns (23.9 average), a figure that dropped only when some opponents short-kicked to the up men for several returns under 10 yards; CU's average field position after an opponent kickoff was the 31, a full six yards *better* than the opponent, who started on average at its 25 after Goodman's kickoffs and unit that limited the enemy to 20.2 yards per kick return, 27th best in the nation (just 10 of 37 returns went for 20 yards or longer). While the Buffs averaged just 3.3 yards per punt return, just three from the bottom nationally, the main objective was to catch the ball, often without a fair catch signal, to save potential yardage if the ball wasn't fielded; the opponents' 36.6 net average ranked 61st in the country.