



There are always challenges when a new head coach takes over most football programs, as more often than not, they are replacing someone else who for whatever reason couldn't get the job done.

The last time a new head coach took over the Colorado football program, when Dan Hawkins came on board in 2006, the program was only five years removed from winning the Big 12 Championship, one that had also gone on to win three more North Division titles. But the program had basically been decimated from within due to strict recruiting limitations that had been placed on then-head coach Gary Barnett and his staff. But after five seasons under Hawkins, and while he managed to rebuild several parts of the program, the wins on the field just weren't there, and a change needed to be made.

The change was historic; when **Jon Embree** was named CU's 24th full-time head coach (26 counting two interim) last December 6, it marked just the third time in school history that a former player has been called upon to lead the Buffaloes. The previous two coached one season, CU's first coach, Harry Heller, all the way back in 1895, and then a stopgap move for the 1962 season, when Bud Davis took over and coached that year in righting the program after NCAA sanctions hit the school hard.

While the cupboard isn't bare and there is some solid talent at several positions, overall depth and team speed aren't what Embree was accustomed to by the time his senior year rolled around in 1986, nor when he served as an assistant under three head coaches between 1993 and 2002 and was a part of 81 victories and seven bowl wins.

Throw in the fact that the Buffaloes play 13 games this fall, all in a row without an off week, and also while Colorado transitions as one of two new members of the Pac-12 Conference. That would be quite the daunting task for anybody, not to mention a first-time head coach.

But Embree is up for the challenge, and he is embracing it.

He knows all about returning a program to glory; he committed to CU after the Buffaloes had won just nine games during his four-year prep career at Englewood's Cherry Creek High School. He was part of class that featured several of Colorado's top high school performers which decided as a group to come to Boulder in Bill McCartney's first recruiting class with the idea of helping to turn things around.

By the time Embree would end his four year Buffalo career, he had played an integral role in helping CU to its first winning season in nine years (7-5 in 1985), two bowl berths, and the first win over rival Nebraska since 1967, a 20-10 triumph on Oct. 25, 1986 that many at the time prophetically called, "the turning point."

The thing about a turning point is that you can only really identify it years later. Games that had the appearance of being such didn't pan out that way under Hawkins, most notably a 27-24 come-from-behind win over No. 3 Oklahoma in 2007, a 65-51 verdict over Nebraska later that same season that earned the Buffaloes their lone bowl berth in Hawk's five years, and then a 17-14 overtime win over West Virginia, on national television on a Thursday night with all eyes on CU – giving the team a 3-0 mark and the impetus for the school to extend Hawkins' contract.

So while Colorado sporadically tasted some success here and there, including a 29-27 win over Georgia last year in Boulder, things never truly came together. Now it's up to Embree to put all the pieces back in place.

He started by assembling perhaps the most unique football staff ever at CU, if not the country. It includes three iconic Buffalo alumni, a fourth as recruiting coordinator, three others who know the state intimately, five including Embree with NFL experience and all with a flair for recruiting.

Offensive coordinator and running backs coach **Eric Bienenmy** came with Embree as a package deal, one of the key hires. The fiery Bienenmy, the school's all-time leading rusher, was the heart and soul of CU's glory days from 1987-1990 that produced two Big 8 titles and a national championship. Embree also retained one of the most popular assistants to ever walk the Folsom Field sidelines, keeping **Brian Cabral** on staff after he quieted the storm as interim coach the last three games of the 2010 season after Hawkins was relieved of his duties

in early November. Embree also brought back **Kanavis McGhee**, an All-American in 1988, and shifted **Darian Hagan** from running backs coach to recruiting coordinator.

In addition, his selection for defensive coordinator, **Greg Brown**, has returned for a third tour of duty at the school, having coached under McCartney from 1991-93 and then again under Hawkins from 2006-09 before leaving for a year to serve as co-defensive boss at Arizona.



Tyler Hansen

So what does the new staff have to work with in their first season? An 83-man roster at the end of spring practice, with just 60 on scholarship, but with 19 more on the way when the freshmen arrive August 3, that's what. Embree has already said many of the freshmen will get a long, hard look and filling in spots in the two-deep, some likely to compete for starting positions. Only one is solidified, as he named **Tyler Hansen** the starting quarterback for the 2011 season following the completion of spring drills.

A number of injuries at several positions complicated the new staff's spring evaluation of returning

players, but their absence did offer opportunities for others, which Embree viewed as a positive. "We had the chance to look at some guys who we might not have seen otherwise. And like I said, when these freshmen come in, we're plugging them in. Guys can't say they didn't get their chance. They had 15 practices, the off-season workouts, all the opportunities to show what they can do. We'll plug the freshmen in, evaluate them and see what they can do."

The smaller-than-usual returning group includes 49 lettermen (15 starters) from the 2010 squad, along with 18 others that have significant starting or game experience. The team posted a 5-7 record (after a 3-1 start), but most feel should have had at least three more wins after losing significant leads against Baylor, Texas Tech and Kansas, dropping those contests by a combined 16 points.

The Buffaloes will have to replace four likely future NFL performers in offensive tackle Nate Solder, cornerbacks Jimmy Smith and Jalil Brown, and wide receiver Scotty McKnight. Solder and Smith were first round draft picks, with Brown (fourth) and McKnight (seventh) also being selected. McKnight along with quarterback Cody Hawkins graduated from CU holding numerous passing and receiving records between them.

The offense appears to be in better shape coming out of spring drills, what with the defense decimated by injuries combined with the loss of Smith and Brown, two of the best cornerbacks in the nation last fall.

Hansen will be CU's starter on opening day for the second straight year, though his junior season was cut short in the seventh game when he suffered a ruptured spleen against Texas Tech. He's already 11th in all-time passing yards (2,822) at Colorado, and before he was injured, set a school mark for completion percentage for minimums of 100 and 150 passes in a season (68.3 percent). He picked up where he left off, completing 74 percent of his throws in the three spring scrimmages, but more importantly, came along fast in picking up the nuances of CU's new pro-style offense, including returning to under center with less shotgun formations.



He'll have a familiar player to hand the ball off to in senior tailback **Rodney Stewart**, who ran for 1,318 yards last fall with his 2,744 for his career ranking him fifth – and in hot pursuit of his new position coach's all-time school mark of 3,940. Top targets will include senior tight end **Ryan Deehan**, a John Mackey Award candidate last year, senior receiver **Toney Clemons** and sophomore sensation **Paul Richardson**, who set numerous school freshman receiving marks in 2010.

Senior guard and All-America candidate **Ryan Miller** will anchor the line, which was unsettled due to injuries after spring drills. Sophomore **David Bakhtiari** is likely a lock at tackle, and senior **Ethan Adkins** the same at the guard spot opposite Miller. **Jack Harris** and **Sione Tau** will continue battle at the right tackle spot in August drills, and center is up for grabs though freshman redshirt **Daniel Munyer** had an outstanding spring and is atop the depth at present.

Defensively, with Smith and Brown gone at cornerback, that's the position of the most concern, especially headed into the pass-happy Pac-12. Most of the lettermen returning have had the bulk of their playing time on special teams, not from scrimmage, thus incoming freshmen will get a serious look by the coaches. The secondary is bolstered by strength at the safety position, with junior **Ray Polk** ready for a breakout season and senior **Anthony Perkins** returning from a knee injury. Sophomore **Terrel Smith** gained valuable experience filling in for Perkins, foregoing his redshirt for the second half of the year, and senior **Travis Sandersfeld**, when he returned from a leg injury, was steady at nickel back.

The defensive line has the most returning experience, and the group did lead a defense last year that registered the most quarterback sacks (34) at Colorado since the 1995 season. And that was before senior **Conrad Obi** had a monster spring at nose tackle; he is now a projected starter after seeing action for just 99 snaps from scrimmage in his first three seasons. Senior **Curtis Cunningham** and junior **Will Pericak**, along with a healthy **Nate Bonsu** (who missed '10 with a knee injury) along with Obi give CU some solid depth at tackle, while senior **Josh Hartigan** (team-high seven sacks), junior **Nick Kasa** and sophomore **Chidera Uzo-Diribe** are a solid trio at end.

Cabral always has CU ready at linebacker, where junior **Jon Major** moved from inside to the "sam" position, with senior **Patrick Mahnke**, a converted safety now with a year of practice and some game action at the position, and revitalized junior **Douglas Rippy** the likely starters on the inside.

Special teams play was a bit erratic, as the team's misfortunes have overshadowed what it has done well on those units. The Buffs have struggled with inconsistency in the field goal department the last three seasons, after being spoiled from 2003-07 with Mason Crosby and Kevin Eberhart, the duo making 81-of-111 tries, with most of the misses outside of 50 yards. Sophomore **Justin Castor** improved dramatically during the spring and has as strong a leg as his predecessors. Punting also hasn't been up to CU's standards, where most recently the school had a Ray Guy winner (Mark Mariscal in 2002) and runner-up (John Torp in 2005). Sophomore **Zach Grossnickle** has also shown massive improvement, and has exhibited that he, too, has a very strong leg.

The Buffs have been a solid kickoff return team, the average only slipping in the second half of the last two seasons after opponents started to kick short to reduce the length of the returns but still allowing CU good starting field position. The punt return average has been

low due to the previous staff's coaching to catch the ball and have little or no return yards in lieu of the ball going unfielded and then rolling back downfield; however, when there was a chance for a decent return, the Buffs seldom seemed to spring anyone (sans a 45-yard return by Travon Patterson in last year's season opener, CU had 48 punt returns for 186 yards the last two seasons, less than four yards per). Coverage units generally have been good, but the coaches would like to see more aggression against opponent kicks, as CU has just seven blocks over the last five years (with four of those coming in 2009).

CU's new football staff does have a familiarity with the school's new conference, as seven members have had experience coaching in the league. Embree and Bieniemy both served as assistant coaches under another former CU assistant, Karl Dorrell, at UCLA between from 2003-05. Brown was at Arizona last season and was accompanied to Boulder by **Mike Tuiaosopo**, who spent seven years with the Wildcats, while assistant head coach **Rip Scherer** also logged three years in Tucson from 1988-90. Receivers coach **Bobby Kennedy** also spent a year at Arizona (2001) before spending the next two on the staff at Washington, with offensive line boss **Steve Marshall** coaching the last two seasons at California and was at UCLA for one in 1996. And defensive technical intern **Bert Watts** is a Cal alum who also worked two years as a grad assistant for the Bears.

"The players went above and beyond what we asked them to do in the off-season (leading up to spring drills)," Embree said. "Once we got into practicing, it was evident that some guys just didn't know how, or want, to practice. We have to create an identity for ourselves, and a big part of that is how we train and our mental toughness. We don't have a lot of depth, but we have some playmakers. We'll have a better feel for it when we start competing and see what we do against other teams. Being in the NFL for five years, I have to see what these guys can do in games. Once we start playing other people, we'll have a better feel for where we are, but I know our depth and speed have to improve."

"We're physical," Embree continued. "The way we practiced without pads, the way we started chasing the ball, guys were getting after each other. So it was a very good spring from that standpoint. I know that they understand how to practice. I know it was pretty grueling. We did a lot of hitting. We were on them; they were coached very hard and 95 percent of the guys responded. I'm very happy about that."

The entire athletic program is excited, to say the least, about the school's impending move to the Pac-12 this summer, and there no doubt will be some growing pains as the Buffs are joining the premier conference in the nation, with member schools dwarfing all others in the number of national championships won across the board.

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Thus, Embree knows all about the league and what lies ahead for the Buffs.

"Having coached in this conference before really opened up my eyes to the strength of the Pac-12," Embree said. "There are especially some creative and high-powered offenses. From top to bottom, there aren't going to be any weeks off."



Anthony Perkins