



2012 OUTLOOK



Year one in the Jon Embree Era is in the books. As competitive as Embree is, he expected victories week-in and week-out, not that he predicted a 13-0 record ahead of a season where all 13 games were back-to-back, with Colorado competing in a new conference, and overall, the Buffaloes played one of the nation's toughest schedules. Coaches just believe they are going to win every week, and that's the way it should be.

But Embree did see red on a few occasions over the course of the 3-10 season, from a negative standpoint in losing games late at home against California (in overtime) and Washington State, to the season finale, where CU ended a 23-game road losing streak with a 17-14 win over Utah before a sea of red in Rice-Eccles Stadium.

The Buffs did win two of their last three games, besting Arizona 48-29 in the final home game on Senior Day, and with the win at Utah two weeks later, gave CU a 2-2 record in November. As Embree stated in his final press conference after his first season, when future opponents see CU on their November schedules, he would like them to recognize that the Buffaloes "are playing their best football."

For just the second time since 1988, the entire Buffalo coaching staff will return intact; the last time a first-time CU head coach's staff were all in tow for a second season it's been even longer—Bill Mallory's 1974 group. But with so many young players in the program, now more than ever is consistency in the coaching ranks a welcome non-change.

The win at Utah was big in the sense that it also set a tone for the future. After the win, Embree told the team that "They're spring-boarding us into 2012. When you sit there and look at Washington and some of these other programs, they've played well at the end . . . it shows the young guys how to fight and compete on the road and win, shows them how to play with passion, emotion and energy and with focus on the road. This does a lot for our program; this is a program win."

Thus Embree's first season ended on a positive note, after some typical bumpy moments expected in a coach's first season taking over a program that had endured three straight losing seasons since the school's last bowl appearance. "I knew it would be a learning experience on many levels, even though going in I had a pretty good idea of what to expect," Embree said. "You just have to live through it as a head coach because there's always the unexpected. But the number one goal was to end that road losing streak and we accomplished that; just would have been nicer to do it earlier."

The makeup of Embree's first team turned out to be one of the strangest in school history: it was comprised of 28 seniors

(the most since there were 30 on the 1987 roster), 22 of whom were two-deep regulars. Yet 15 true freshmen saw action, the most at Colorado since the NCAA allowed freshmen to play again back in 1972, including starts in 23 games, tied for the third-most in school history. Including redshirts, 25 freshmen saw the field in 2011.



David Bakhtiari

His second-team stands to be another unique one, as there are only eight seniors on the roster, the second-fewest in CU annals to the seven on the 1995 roster (all of whom, incidentally, were invited to play in the Hula Bowl, an NCAA first to have all of one school's seniors in the same postseason All-Star game). Only Indiana with seven has fewer. And Embree has stated that most of the recruits in his second class will get a shot at earning playing time, so it is quite possible another record for true freshman participation could be on the horizon.

There are 45 returning lettermen in 2012, including 10 starters and three specialists, seven others with significant starting experience (three or more games), and 15 others with extensive game experience; the Buffs lost 30 lettermen to graduation.

The key to the entire offense, or who will be handed the keys to it, won't be known until well into August camp. An expected battle for the starting quarterback spot in the spring never materialized, as Connor Wood (transfer from Texas) took most of the first-team snaps after Nick Hirschman missed all of spring ball after breaking a bone in his foot the week before drills were set to begin. Hirschman is the only player on the roster to have taken a college snap at the position for the Buffaloes, and not all that many at that, as he threw 35 passes in five games last fall. Hirschman is now healthy and will join in the fray, as will Jordan Webb (Kansas transfer, taking advantage of the NCAA rule that allows graduates to move on to finish their career at a school that offers graduate programs not in the curriculum of their undergraduate institution). Redshirt frosh John Shrock and incoming recruit Shane Dillon will figure into the mix as well.

The last battle for the starting quarterback spot with such little previous CU experience occurred in 2007, when Cody Hawkins beat out Nick Nelson and Matt Ballenger for the job. The last time as many as four players were in the preseason mix was 20 years ago, when it was a four-way battle between a hero off the bench in junior Vance Joseph, an unknown sophomore named Kordell Stewart, the younger brother of a Heisman winner, Koy Detmer, and a transfer from Illinois, Duke Tobin. Stewart emerged as the winner and held the reins for three years, with Detmer the heir in 1995.



Whoever wins the job will be handing the ball off the majority of the time to a player not named Rodney Stewart for the first time in four years, and will be throwing to a receiving corps that caught just 61 of CU's 250 completions in 2011, not including the 39 by Paul Richardson, the junior wide receiver who tore his ACL in the final week of spring practice; he's not expected back until next spring.

Sophomore Tony Jones emerged as the heir apparent to Stewart with a fine spring, while junior Josh Ford had a second straight solid spring camp and thrust himself into the mix for playing time. They'll get a battle from several talented incoming recruits, and with a decent amount of experience returning on the offensive line, the running game figures to eventually blossom once the unit gains chemistry.

Wide receiver was going to be fairly wide open, but is much more so now with Richardson out; returning players at the position caught just 30 passes in 2011, the same number for their careers: 14 by Keenan Canty and 10 by Tyler McCulloch, both sophomores, while tight end-turned-receiver DaVaughn Thornton caught six. Freshman redshirt Nelson Spruce now enters the fray, as will several of the incoming frosh recruits. The situation at tight end is similar, with Nick Kasa, a converted defensive end, emerging at the top of the depth after developing nicely during the spring; he moved to offense for the last five games of the 2011 season but caught just one pass in minimal time at the position.

Junior left tackle David Bakhtiari, who has received more preseason accolades than any other Buff, is the anchor of the offensive line that also returns starting junior center Gus Handler. Both Bakhtiari (Lombardi, Outland) and Handler (Rimington) are on the official watch lists for the national awards that honor their positions. Junior Jack Harris was keyed up for a breakout season last fall, but was sidelined much of the year with a leg injury; he'll contend for the right tackle spot with senior Ryan Dannewitz, who likely will see time at both tackle and guard. Sophomores Alexander Lewis and Daniel Munyer ended the spring atop the depth at the guard positions, both having some starting experience as freshman in 2011.

Six starters return on the defensive side of the ball, where entering the season linebacker appears to be the strongest area, led by returning senior starters Jon Major and Doug Rippy. Several others also have starting and/or game experience at the position.

Playing a 4-3 base defense, how the players up front develop will be the biggest factor on if the unit, which allowed 439.3 yards per game last year, will improve. Just five scholarship players across the four positions were healthy for spring practices, which limited how much the team could scrimmage. That's the reason the coaching staff recruited and signed nine true freshmen defensive linemen, hoping to bolster the group which has been shy on overall numbers for the better part of the last decade.

(Speaking of the player count for spring, Embree had just 83 for his first year coaching the team – considered a bit low – but had just 75 the second time around, 57 on scholarship, with 10 of those players injured for most or all of the sessions. Thus for the second straight year, there's more to be taught and learned in August than usual.)

The secondary could be the most intriguing unit on the team, with starting free safety Ray Polk the only senior defensive back on the team; he played with at least three assorted injuries last year and still was second on the team in tackles despite missing the better part of three full games. The Buffs suffered a blow last year in losing Jered Bell for the season to a knee injury in August camp, and shuffled offensive players over to cornerback throughout the season to shore up the depth. Sophomore Greg Henderson played more snaps than any true freshman in school history, surviving his "being thrown to the wolves" considering the quarterbacks CU faced in 2011 (the likes of Andrew Luck, Matt Barkley, Brock Osweiler, Nick Foles, Keith Price, Bryant Moniz and Zach Maynard among the 13).



Ray Polk

The position should be bolstered if Bell, Parker Orms, Will Harlos and Sherrard Harrington can rebound from injuries, the addition of transfer Harrison Hunter, and the arrival of five heavily recruited defensive backs including two of the top cornerbacks in the nation.

Key players return on special teams, including sophomores Darragh O'Neill (punter) and Will Oliver (placekicker) and junior snapper Ryan Iverson. O'Neill and Oliver had solid seasons in their true freshman campaigns, with O'Neill averaging 42.6 yards per punt and Oliver leading the team in scoring with 62 points (converting 11-of-16 field goals, with a long of 52). The coaches are looking to shore up the return units, as CU averaged just 4.3 yards per punt return and 18.6 per kickoff runback (and the latter was for 69 returns).

The schedule is a little more forgiving for Embree's second Buffalo team, with one less game overall, new head coaches at six of the schools, five road games instead of seven, and a bye week the first Saturday in October, allowing CU to play just one game in a 20-day span instead of 13 back-to-back weeks as it did a year ago.