



"The second season of a head coach's tenure at his new school is often the most challenging," opened CU's 2014 outlook, and it was, for a number of reasons. While there were no player issues as far buying into what the new staff was preaching, the frustration came with a season that could have played out much better than the 2-10 record showed: four conference losses by a combined 15 points were the most league setbacks by such a small margin that CU had experienced in 50 years (four by a dozen points in 1964).

But the team never folded and played up until the final gun in the final game. There are 51 lettermen, including 14 starters and several others with quality experience, back for year three of the **Mike MacIntyre** Era. While those players have yet to enjoy winning on a consistent basis, as the 2014 season progressed, confidence grew with each game as the Buffaloes showed dramatic improvement, especially on offense.

"I see a different look in their eyes, a look of determination and confidence, there is definitely more pep in their step," MacIntyre said ahead of his third spring practice in Boulder. "Our expectations (for this season) are that we will win more than we will lose. That gets Colorado back into the postseason. They now know that they can play with anybody. You never know how things will play out with injuries and other unforeseen factors, but with the team we have now, we should definitely put more numbers in the win column."

"It's a process, I wish I could wave a magic wand and guarantee we could win right now, but good things, and good things that last, take time. We're building a solid foundation, and from what I have seen, I truly believe that."

MacIntyre had the same full-time staff his first two seasons in Boulder, but there are two new faces for this third CU team: **Jim Leavitt**, a veteran defensive mind, takes over as defensive coordinator and linebackers coach, with **Joe Tumpkin** on board to coach the safeties. The two have over 50 years of coaching experience between them, mainly on the defensive side of the ball: Leavitt helped mastermind Kansas State's rise to a defensive powerhouse in the early 1990s before building the South Florida program from scratch; he spent the last four years coaching the linebackers for the San Francisco 49ers. Tumpkin spent five years as defensive coordinator at Central Michigan prior to joining the Buffaloes.

CU has been running the 4-3 on defense the last few seasons, or at least a 4-3 base defense. While it remains to be seen what defense Leavitt will employ, it's safe to say that with the offenses that exist in the Pac-12, multiple schemes are likely in the future for the Buffalo defense. It was evident in spring practice that CU was experimenting with several formations.

The offense made great strides in 2014, evident by the nearly 100 school records (individual and team) that were set or tied over the course of the season. CU's 342 points scored were its most in 12 seasons, and the Buffs scored 300-plus in back-to-back seasons for the first time since 2002-03. The Buffs had 42 offensive touchdowns, 27 coming on drives of 70 yards or longer, and averaged 439.2 yards per game, its most since 1996 and the first time over 400 since 2001.

There were plenty of other positives last fall, included among them:

**Point Differential:** CU was outscored overall by 126 points this year, down from 154 a year ago and far removed from the 556 difference over the 2011-12 seasons; in Pac-12 play, the Buffs were outscored by 124 points, down from 215 last year and the 468 their first two years in the league. CU lost four conference games by a total of 15 points, the smallest margin in conference play since 1964, when it lost four by 12 points; CU was 2-8 in 1964, but turned those close calls around to finish 6-2-2 a year later (1-6 to 4-2-1 in Big Eight play).

**Competitiveness.** In its 10 losses in 2014, Colorado was out of only two games; in fact, it held the lead six times in the second half of those games, and in the fourth quarter thrice. In CU's eight losses in 2013, it was in the game only twice in the fourth quarter, and in just three of 11 losses in 2012. The Buffs had a chance to win each of their first six games in 2014 (meaning the game was not yet decided entering the fourth quarter); that hadn't occurred since the 2006 season. The Buffs spent their most time in the lead (261:22) since the 2010 season (312:45).

**Pass Protection:** CU allowed 23 quarterback sacks on 474 pass plays this season, a sack percentage of 4.85, or one for every 20.6 passes; in two years under MacIntyre, the Buffs have surrendered 43 sacks on 905 called pass plays (one every 21 attempts, and a 4.75 percentage). Since data started being collected in 1957, this



CB Chidobe Awuzie



is the best two-year stretch in school history for protecting the quarterback; the 4.85 sack percentage is the 10th lowest in 58 seasons. The year prior to Mac's arrival, in 2012, CU allowed 52 sacks on 456 pass plays, an 11.4 percentage, or one every 8.8 attempts.

**Improvement:** CU improved in 33 major team statistical categories, after doing so in 29 following the 2013 season.

**Ball Security:** Colorado has set a record for the fewest fumbles in a season two straight years, first with just 14 in 2013 and then with only 12 this season; the 15 fumbles lost over the two seasons is a school historical low. The 26 fumbles over the two seasons in 1,960 touches (scrimmage plays plus returns) work to just one every 75.4 touches.

**Ball Control:** Colorado ran 151 more plays than the opponent, the second-largest plus differential in its history, and averaged 32:35 in possession time, its most since the 1975 season (32:55).

**Average Per Rush:** CU averaged 4.11 yards per rushing attempt; that's the first time over four yards per try since the 2006 season (4.50)

CU went the deepest into a season in its history (92 minutes, 28 seconds) before committing its first turnover.

**Red Zone Offense:** Colorado has 66 scores in 77 trips when penetrating the opponent 20-yard line (43 TD/23 FG) in two years under MacIntyre, including 40-of-45 in 2014 (or 88.9 percent, the best since 1997 (89.7, 35-of-39). The two-year scoring percentage of 85.7 is the best since the 1994-95 seasons (86.7, 91-of-105, 73 TDs).

Opponents scored on just four of 12 opening drives in 2014 (down from six a year earlier).

**Conditioning Edge:** as the Buffaloes continue to improve in strength and conditioning, toward the end of each half subliminally results are showing: in 2014, opponents gained nearly 500 fewer yards in the second quarter and exactly 300 less in the fourth quarter compared to a year ago; CU outscored the opponent in the second quarter, 130-112, the first time it held the edge in the period since 2003.

The defense is growing up: 57.1 percent of the plays in 2014 were by sophomores, redshirt freshmen or true frosh; sophomores played 3,734 of the snaps, most of any class, and they all return in 2015.

Almost all of the playmakers from last year return, headlined by quarterback **Sefo Liufau** and wide receiver **Nelson Spruce** on offense, with leaders on defense back like ends **Derek McCartney** and **Jimmie Gilbert**, linebackers **Addison Gillam** and **Kenneth Olugbode**, and safeties **Chidobe Awuzie** and **Tedric Thompson**.



**DE Derek McCartney**

Liufau set almost three dozen records himself, including the major passing marks like single-season yards (3,200) and touchdowns (28); in fact, he's thrown at least one TD pass in all 20 of his career games. Yet, he can still improve, as he is well aware he had too many interceptions (15), several which came at key junctures in a few of the close losses.

Spruce, a semifinalist for the Biletnikoff Award, tore up the record book as well, snaring a CU record 106 receptions for 1,198 yards and 12 touchdowns, the latter another record. He stands to wipe out many of the records he didn't set or tie in 2014 (which numbered 29). **Shay Fields** had a record-setting freshman year, making 50 receptions, or 11 more than the previous CU freshman high, and exhibited the kind of play that shows he has a great future ahead of him.

The Buffs lose two senior guards to graduation – **Daniel Munyer** and **Kaiwi Crabb** – a duo which had 62 career starts between them (39 by Munyer), and the competition will be fierce to replace them, with no less than four players expected to duke it out for the honors. **Jeromy Irwin** and **Stephane Nembot** return as experienced tackles, with **Alex Kelley** shining in his first year at center.

Look for the tight end to be more involved in the offense (the position had just 23 receptions a year ago), and it was essentially running back by committee, with four players all between 391 and 448 yards; no one had more than 94 carries. While ample, the preference is still to see someone emerge with a little bit more rhythm; three of those players return (**Christian Powell**, **Michael Adkins** and **Phillip Lindsay**), with three heralded recruits joining the stable come August.





The two biggest losses are likely in the kicking game – nothing against players like four-year cornerback **Greg Henderson**, just the 23rd position player to start for four seasons in CU history – but the rare instance that both the punter, **Darragh O'Neill**, and placekicker, **Will Oliver**, both were the mainstays each of the last four seasons as well. The competition for their replacements is wide open, and won't be settled until the fall when freshman recruit **Alex Kinney** arrives.

Gillam, a freshman sensation in 2013, was hampered by injuries and illness throughout most of last season, yet he still finished second on the team in tackles with 79; he saw limited action in the spring to further help his recovery. He is flanked at inside linebacker by another seasoned junior in Olugbode, who made 83 stops a year ago.

Tupou was a force in the middle, clogging up the run; the opponent got their yards elsewhere, but certainly not up the middle with Tupou patrolling the area. The defensive ends were essentially “green,” as of the top six on the depth chart, four were freshmen (one true) and the other two sophomores; they are expected to grow up from what MacIntyre often termed the youth on last year's squad as “the junior varsity.”

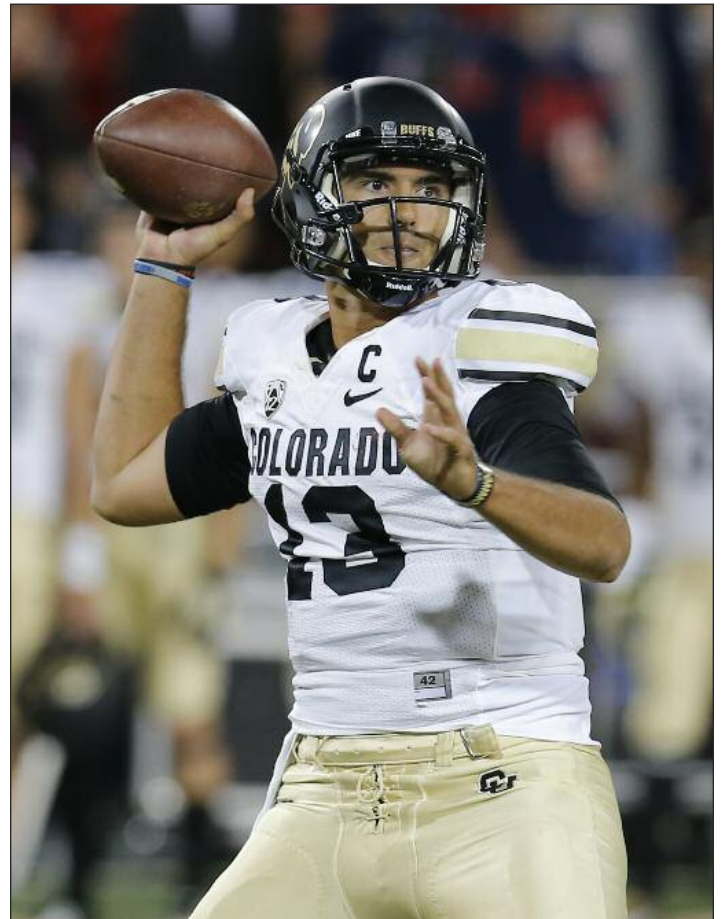
The secondary battled through injury at almost every turn, especially the latter third of the season when Awuzie and Thompson missed the last seven games between them – eight different players made starts at the four traditional defensive back positions. While among the nation's leaders in pass deflections (60, 49 by the secondary), the Buffs made just three interceptions (all by Thompson), and recovered only eight fumbles. Forcing turnovers definitely was stressed in spring practices. Awuzie and Thompson did participate fully in the spring, and the group will be bolstered by the return of senior safety **Jered Bell**, who was granted a sixth-year of eligibility by the NCAA after tearing an ACL late in camp last August.

MacIntyre moved up spring practice by one full month – it ended with the annual spring game on March 15; the only school to end earlier among the FBS ranks was Duke (March 6). By ending in mid-March, MacIntyre felt it would give any injured players that much more time to recover, and the staff could better institute the off-season conditioning program, also giving the players another month to get stronger.

With Colorado playing at Hawai'i this fall (the season opener on Thursday night, Sept. 3), the Buffaloes are allowed a 13th game; meaning seven wins are needed to qualify for the postseason. The schedule is essentially a wash from a year ago, with the three non-league opponents the same (UH, Massachusetts, Colorado State), and a fourth, Nicholls State, added as the 13th opponent. As far as the Pac-12 is concerned, Stanford and Washington State reappear on the schedule, replacing California and Washington. By some estimates, Colorado played the nation's fifth-toughest schedule in 2014.

The third year of the tenure of a CU head coach has often been met with success; **Fred Folsom** (1897 and again in 1910 in his third stint), **William Saunders** (1934), **Bunny Oakes** (1937), **Jim Yeager** (1943), **Bill Mallory** (1976) and **Gary Barnett** (2001) all won or shared conference titles, while **Dal Ward** (1950) and **Eddie Crowder** (1965) enjoyed their first winning marks in league play after having to rebuild the program. No one is saying CU will enjoy that kind of success in 2015, but it doesn't hurt to have history on your side.

“Our goal remains what it was a year ago, and that's to walk out there every time believing you can win,” MacIntyre said. “The wins will come, and it will be easier now that they can reflect on the close calls from a year ago. In some cases, we just needed to finish, in others, we needed to eliminate costly mistakes. But we're getting closer, I think everyone associated with the program can feel it.”



QB Sefo Liufau