

Woelk: BCS title game stirs memories for Johnson

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Boulder Daily Camera

Posted: 01/09/2010 11:56:48 PM MST

The question came from reader John Ellis:

How did Texas get caught in a situation in which its backup quarterback -- in a national title game, no less -- was a true freshman?

Good question. As Ellis put it, "the Texas staff had not put much time or effort into the doomsday scenario."

Doomsday indeed.

Nobody can say for certain whether the outcome of Thursday night's BCS title game would have been any different had Texas quarterback Colt McCoy not been injured on the Longhorns' first series.

No doubt, UT fans would love to find out. Alabama folks, meanwhile, will say it wouldn't have mattered.

But either way, the situation raised some interesting questions -- and for long-time Colorado fans, it also stirred some memories.

Quick rewind: In the 1991 Orange Bowl, Colorado quarterback Darian Hagan suffered a knee injury late in the first half with the Buffs trailing Notre Dame, 6-3.

But instead of a true freshman to replace Hagan, the Buffs had the luxury of calling upon veteran Charles Johnson. The CU junior completed five of six passes in the second half, guided the Buffs to a second-half touchdown, and was named the Colorado MVP of the game as CU claimed its first -- and to date, only -- national title with a 10-9 win.

Johnson, now an assistant A.D. at Colorado and colorcommentator for Buff football and basketball games, chuckled when asked if Thursday's game sparked any memories.

"Oh yes," he said. "When McCoy went out, I wondered what would happen next."

What happened is that Texas freshman Garrett Gilbert threw four interceptions -- one returned for a touchdown -- and two touchdown passes, as well as coughing up a key fumble late in the fourth quarter. It was good, bad and ugly all in the same game.

But Johnson said anyone blaming Gilbert for UT's problems is sorely misguided. Rather, he said, UT's troubles were self-inflicted, stemming in great part from the Longhorns' inability to run the football effectively.

"My heart went out to the kid," Johnson said. "One, he was a freshman playing in a national championship game without much experience.

"But two, he was on a team that couldn't protect him by scheme. He was naked. He was exposed out there and it wasn't his fault. He was a victim of his own program."

Johnson contrasted Gilbert's situation with his own in the 1991 Orange Bowl.

"I had protection," Johnson said. "When I went into the game, my first job was to hand off. (Eric) Bienenmy left, Bienenmy right and George (Hemingway) up the middle. Then I might throw a pass. I wasn't left out there alone. I was the most-protected backup in college football.

"But Gilbert didn't have that protection. Texas couldn't run the ball and he was all alone out there. When McCoy got hurt,

they lost 60, 70 percent of their offense. The Alabama quarterback (Greg McElroy) is less talented than the Texas kid, and his stats weren't anywhere close, but his team dominated."

Indeed, McElroy threw for only 58 yards while Gilbert tossed for 186.

But the Crimson Tide, behind Heisman Trophy running back Mark Ingram, hammered out 205 yards on the ground while Texas managed just 81 yards rushing.

Thus, it's reasonable to assume that had the tables been turned -- i.e. had the Tide lost McElroy -- Alabama's fortunes would not have changed much.

CU's experiences support that assumption.

When Johnson led the Buffs past Notre Dame, he threw for only 80 yards. But he had the luxury of playing behind an offense that ran for 186. That included 86 yards from Bieniemy and 76 from Hemingway.

Now, Johnson believes Thursday's game may signal the beginning of a significant shift in college football.

"I hope it's a lesson to the Big 12," Johnson said. "You are what you practice, and too many teams in the Big 12 have become spread teams -- and as a result, their defenses are spread defenses.

"Then when someone like Alabama smacks them in the mouth, they don't know how to react. Alabama just lined up on Texas and got yards. They were getting 6, 8 yards a pop on third-down running plays. Let me tell you -- an 8-yard run on third-and-7 is a heck of a lot more demoralizing for a defense than a 20-yard out. It sends a signal that, 'you can't stop us.'"

That signal, Johnson said, is already being heard in the SEC.

"SEC teams are saying, 'We're going to line up and smash you,'" Johnson said. "The spread offense, in a sense, is a willful disrespect of that type of football -- and that's why I say that freshman was a victim of his own program. That's too much on one guy."

Closer to home, Johnson said he'd like to see the day when Colorado returned to more of a power running game.

"To be honest, I hope we can get back to that," Johnson said. "I'd really like to see us rediscover that type of attack. You're starting to see that shift back in a couple of other places, like Kansas State and Nebraska. I think people are catching up to the spread by smacking it in the mouth."

There are, of course, other reasons that Texas was left with a freshman backup. When McCoy was ordained the starter at UT after his freshman season, it resulted in Jevan Sneed transferring to Ole Miss. Had Sneed stayed, UT would have had an experienced backup.

"Today, kids are quick to transfer," Johnson allowed. "What happens is that you recruit a kid and promise him he'll be the guy after his freshman season. The flip side of that is that you chase your experienced guys off."

But, Johnson maintains, Texas' biggest problem Thursday wasn't a freshman quarterback. Rather, it was an offense that was too dependent upon one person and a defense unaccustomed to seeing a power running game.

"It almost got them beat in the Big 12 championship game," Johnson said. "It caught up to them in a big way against Alabama."

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Ex-CU linebacker Jones making most of opportunity with Packers

By Lindsay H. Jones
The Denver Post

Posted: 01/10/2010 01:00:00 AM MST

It was the news Brad Jones had always wanted to hear, but when his coaches with the Green Bay Packers told Jones in mid-November he would be starting at outside linebacker, Jones could only sit, stunned.

"It was a shock for about five minutes," Jones said. "I was just like, 'Wow. This is my shot. This is my chance to do it.' "

Jones made seven solo tackles in that first start against Dallas, and with veteran Aaron Kampman now on injured reserve, Jones, a rookie from the University of Colorado, has emerged as one of the Packers' best pass rushers in the second half of the season. He has four sacks in Green Bay's last five games and will start today for the Packers in their NFC wild-card game at Arizona.

"He's making the most of the opportunity he has," Colorado linebackers coach Brian Cabral said. "We always felt when he left here that his best ball was ahead of him."

It wasn't that Jones didn't excel in Boulder. He was a starter for three seasons, with an increasingly diverse role over his last two years as a hybrid linebacker-defensive end.

Despite finishing his college career with 252 total tackles and 9 1/2 sacks — including seven in 2008 as a senior — Jones hadn't come close to reaching his potential, in part because he never had substantial competition at his position in Boulder.

Jones was not among the college players invited to the NFL combine in Indianapolis last February, but he performed well enough at CU's pro day last spring, with a time of 4.54 seconds in the 40-yard dash, to earn some draft buzz. Jones was told he was a likely second-day pick, possibly in the fourth or fifth rounds.

Instead, he lasted until the seventh round, when Packers coach Mike McCarthy called to tell Jones he would be drafted at No. 218 overall with Green Bay's final selection.

"Draft day didn't play out exactly how I wanted, how I was told it was going to. But I think a lot of people don't get drafted in

the spots they think they're going to," Jones said.

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"I was disappointed, but I wasn't thinking about draft position. I just wanted to get a shot, really."

Jones said he was "ecstatic" to be joining a team like the Packers that played a 3-4 defensive scheme, giving him the chance to be a pass-rushing defensive end, while also using his natural athleticism to drop back in coverage.

Jones missed nearly three weeks of training camp with a back injury but had shown Green Bay coaches enough that they gave him a spot on the 53-man roster, with the chance to begin to prove himself as a special-teams player and a reserve linebacker.

He did not play a snap of defense until that game against Dallas, when he was tapped to start in place of Kampman, who was sidelined

that week with a concussion.

A week after Jones' debut, Kampman, who had a team-high 10 sacks, suffered a season-ending knee injury, giving Jones yet another chance to start, this time for the rest of the season.

In his seven games as a starter, Jones has made 31 total tackles, including 23 solo stops, to go along with his four sacks, which are tied for third-most on the team.

"I just figured that once Brad made a squad, I knew he would blossom. That's not a surprise," Cabral said. "He made it through, and the opportunity to start and to play, that doesn't always happen."

Jones, who grew up in NFC North country in East Lansing, Mich., said he understands the gravity of making the playoffs, especially as a rookie. The Packers beat the Cardinals 33-7 last week in the final game of the regular season.

"It's everything you think it would be. It's exciting," Jones said. "It's cool — not going to lie."

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