

CU Buffs quarterbacks see experience as factor in '10

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While sitting on the hot seat during a press conference on Nov. 23, 2009, Dan Hawkins the football coach opened up a little bit as a father.

The Buffs were nearing the end of another bitter season and preparing for the annual post-Thanksgiving grudge match with Nebraska.

During the embattled head coach's Monday press conference, Hawkins was asked if he would recruit his son -- quarterback Cody Hawkins -- to CU again if given the chance to rewrite history.

"If I had it to do over again, I wouldn't do it. Because I tell you what, it's not fair to him. It's not," Dan Hawkins said. "It's like this around the country -- when you win everything is good, when you lose everything is wrong. That just becomes an even bigger lightning bolt, a bigger lightning rod. He's handled it great, and he's been awesome with the thing. That guy has been great for our team and great for us.

"I'm a glass half-full guy. When I came to Colorado there were a lot of guys tell-ing me, 'Don't go there, man. Are you kidding me? Don't go there.' But you know what, I believed in this place, I still believe in this place, and I believe in me."

No regrets for Cody

Despite a 16-33 record through four consecutive losing seasons, Dan Hawkins was not fired in the aftermath of the emotional 28-20 loss to the Cornhuskers, which put the Buffs out of their misery as a 3-9 campaign ended at Folsom Field in disappointing fashion just as it had started with a stunning loss to Colorado State.

Dealing with an outraged fan base and media speculation about a possible coaching change were clearly difficult for Cody Hawkins -- who had been benched in favor of Tyler Hansen in each of the last two seasons -- to shake entering spring drills.

The usually affable senior-to-be turned down interview requests from newspaper beat writers who cover the program on a daily basis for the better part of eight months until a recent chat with the Camera.

Despite his dad's feelings during the worst of times last fall, Cody Hawkins would do it all over again.

"Totally," Cody Hawkins said after a spirited offseason workout this week at the Dal Ward Center. "I think CU has been a great experience for me. Even though the wins haven't come quite as often as I would have liked them to or have been accustomed to most of my life, I think I've learned so much about myself. And I've made some unbelievable friends.

"It has tested me, but I've had a great time. I've learned a lot about myself, a lot about life, a lot about football ... it's been a heck of a ride."

Ride not over

The seemingly everlasting battle between Cody Hawkins and Hansen for the starting quarterback job will rage on into fall camp as the Buffs prepare for a critical 2010 season. The program is desperate for some on-field success as CU prepares to make the move from the Big 12 to the Pac-10, perhaps as early as the 2011 season.

"We've talked about maybe being the last Big 12 winners and being the first Pac-12 winners," Hansen said. "That would be kind of cool."

The always upbeat Hansen -- who passed for 1,440 yards with eight touchdowns and seven interceptions last season -- walked off Folsom Field after the spring game as the No. 1 QB on the depth chart. The junior from Murrieta, Calif.,

completed 17 of 22 passes for 170 yards and three touchdowns to lead the Gold to a 37-27 win over Hawkins' Black team.

"It does get a little bit old, but you embrace competition," Hansen said when asked about the three-year tug-of-war with his friend. "Competition brings the best out of you. Cody is out there battling with me, and I feel like he makes me a better player."

Cody Hawkins completed 20 of 26 passes for 220 yards and two touchdowns in the spring game. During the 2009 campaign, in which he was replaced by Hansen after throwing a couple of costly interceptions in the Oct. 10 loss at Texas, Hawkins passed for 1,277 yards with 10 touchdowns and 11 interceptions.

The Buffs got off to a 1-4 start with Hawkins under center but were just 2-5 down the stretch after Hansen became the starter.

"Last year we probably had too high of expectations and we didn't reach them, which was disappointing," Hansen said. "I feel this year we're going to be realistic with our goals. Our team is real opportunistic and we're going to surprise some people this year."

Experience helps

As expected, both quarterbacks have taken leadership roles on the team during players-only workouts this summer.

"I definitely see a difference. We're a lot older, and I know we've said this in years prior, but we're real close," Hansen said. "We joke around a lot and we're doing a lot more team activities like team barbeques and stuff like that. There's a lot more unity in this group. With the veteran guys our workouts are a lot more serious and a lot of work gets done. I feel like our summer is going to be better."

CU finally has an experienced roster that includes a solid nucleus on defense (led by Marquez Herrod up front, B.J. Beatty at linebacker and cornerback Jimmy Smith), two Outland Trophy candidates (tackle Nate Solder and guard Ryan Miller) on the offensive line, a dynamic weapon at running back (Rodney Stewart), and one of the nation's most reliable wide receivers (Scotty McKnight).

"We've had so many young teams and now I think with the plethora of juniors and seniors that we have you're seeing a lot more leadership out there on the field, which is something that I think we've lacked in the past," Cody Hawkins said. "Especially at key positions, when you have younger guys who are playing and trying to be leaders it just doesn't quite have as much credibility as somebody who has put in four or five years worth of time."

Is this the year when the Buffs finally exceed expectations and silence the critics?

"I'm not going to put a number of wins out there, but I feel we can definitely make a bowl game. That would be a good start for us going into the Pac-10 eventually," Hansen said. "If we get a good start in the non-conference games, I feel like we can make a run at the Big 12. We have some good non-conference teams coming in here like Georgia. If we can get a win against Georgia and go to Cal and beat Cal, I feel like we can really get a jump start on the Big 12."

Looking ahead

Of course, it all begins on Sept. 4 against CSU at Invesco Field in Denver. The 23-17 loss to the Rams -- a team that went 0-8 in the Mountain West Conference in 2009 -- set an ominous tone for a terrible CU season.

Steve Fairchild will likely start a freshman quarterback. Advantage Buffs?

"We do kind of have a murderer's row non-conference schedule, so we're going to have to come out and play well," Cody Hawkins said. "If we protect our home field and win the majority of our home games we should be in position, not just to get to a bowl game, but to get to a good bowl game to send the (seniors) out on."

Cody Hawkins is already CU's career leader in touchdown passes and interceptions. Whether he starts as a senior or is signaling the plays into Hansen, the good son's focus is to leave Boulder on a high note.

"I'd definitely like to make a run in the Big 12 North this year and get a shot in that Big 12 championship game," Cody Hawkins said when asked what the senior class has in mind for an exit strategy. "I think just with how things kind of shook

down in our conference and with our old team, we're definitely going to have a chance as long as we can protect our home field. We should be able to take care of things on the road better. With the older guys on our team, we've all been to all of these places. So we should come out and step it up."

Cody Hawkins redshirted during CU's 2-10 season in 2006 and led the Buffs to a bowl game and wins over Oklahoma and Nebraska in 2007. The QB carousel during the last two campaigns resulted in eight wins and 16 losses for the Buffs.

The 2010 season could either cement an agonizing legacy of losing for Dan Hawkins at CU, or perhaps allow Cody Hawkins to experience the thrill of a winning season before moving on with the rest of his life.

"It has been a heck of a journey for me," Cody Hawkins said. "There has been a lot of ups and downs, but it seems like I just showed up here."

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