

Conference conundrum: Football driving force behind Pac-10 talk

Divisions could play key role in expansion decisions

By Kyle Ringo Camera Sports Writer
Boulder Daily Camera

Posted: 03/09/2010 11:39:13 PM MST

Two of college football's greatest traditions could come together if the Pac-10 Conference chooses to expand and invites the Colorado Buffaloes.

Imagine Colorado's live buffalo mascot, Ralphie V, storming down the sidelines in the Rose Bowl covered with a blanket of roses like a Kentucky Derby winner and a sign reading "Beat Ohio State" one New Year's Day in the future.

Maybe it's Michigan or Penn State or Iowa instead.

Such imagery is appropriate in considering expansion because football is the driving force behind the idea. College basketball has its month of madness and other sports have their niches, too, but nothing generates revenue for athletic departments and universities like three hours of television time and packed stadiums on Saturday afternoons and evenings in the fall.

Expansion to 12 teams would create a league championship game for the Pac-10 in early December that would bring an estimated \$10-15 million in revenue to the league in its first year. A new television package negotiated with two additional schools and television markets in the mix also would significantly add to the \$100 million the Pac-10 paid out to its members for the 2008-09 school year.

That new revenue would help close a widening gap between the Pac-10 and other leagues such as the Big Ten, the Southeastern Conference and the Big 12, which would be weakened by losing the Buffs and Denver, the 18th largest television market in the nation.

The 2009 Big 12 and SEC conference championship games attracted large television audiences. The SEC game produced an 11.8 over-night rating, which was better than the Daytona 500, the final round of the Masters, the Kentucky Derby and every game of the 2009 NBA finals.

Adding Colorado and Utah would put the Pac-12 in nearly a quarter of the nation's television homes and could lead to similar interest.

Pac-10 associate commissioner Jim Muldoon said Pac-10 presidents and chancellors will discuss conference expansion for the first time on Saturday at their regularly scheduled meeting in Los Angeles in conjunction with the conference basketball tournament.

No decisions are expected on the issue so soon, but it's safe to say the meat of the discussion surrounding whether to expand or not will involve football. One possible development could be whether the Pac-10 opts to hire a firm to study the expansion issue and report back to the league.

Muldoon said the league has not hired anyone at this point, but it is a possibility in the coming weeks and months as the process moves forward. The Big Ten has sought outside advice as it also considers expansion and the creation of a championship game.

Colorado administrators and Pac-10 commissioner Larry Scott have turned down opportunities to talk about expansion with the Camera.

Boulder-based consultant Chuck Neinas has worked in an around college athletics for more than 50 years, starting with the NCAA and moving on to become Big Eight commissioner in the 1970s and executive director of the College Football Association from 1980 to 1997. He has helped schools hire athletic directors and football and basketball coaches for more than a decade and also serves as a consultant for conferences.

Neinas said he would expect that the Pac-10 and any schools it ultimately invited would each study expansion and realignment carefully before making the jump. Neinas said from the Colorado perspective, it might not lead to better financial footing for the Buffs, at least not immediately.

"This will be a lasting decision," he said. "You better make sure it's the right one and that you're comfortable with it."

Neinas said realignment could lead to the Buffs being more competitive for conference championships in football depending on how divisions were aligned in the new Pac-12. He said if CU was in a division with Utah and the four northwest schools -- Oregon, Oregon State, Washington and Washington State -- the Buffs could be very competitive on an annual basis.

Winning conference championships would be a tougher task if CU found itself in the same division with USC.

Since the Big 12 began play in 1996, three different teams from the conference have won national championships in football. The Pac-10 has won two titles during the same period, both captured by USC.

Only once in the past five years has the Pac-10 finished a football season with more teams ranked in the Associated Press top-25 than the Big 12. Forecasting the Buffs' ability to compete in the future, regardless of the conference they play in, is difficult.

"I think that's hard to say," Neinas said. "I mean, the Big 12 has Texas and Oklahoma and the Pac-10 has USC. Those are three teams that are national contenders every year and everybody else chases them. I guess from a competitive standpoint, it's probably a push."

Perhaps the biggest football issue other than the decision on expansion itself would be how best to align teams in divisions.

The northwest voting block already is concerned about being shutout of Southern California recruiting hotbed in some years if the league adopted a north-south model in the mold of the Big 12.

The Pac-10 currently uses a scheduling model in which every team in the league plays every other team each year. Teams play Southern Cal and UCLA home and away in cycles that allow every team into the Southern California area at least once each season. Colorado also would want access to the Southern California area each year.

One scenario that might work would involve splitting traditional rivals such as USC and UCLA into different divisions but allowing them to play every year by maintaining a nine-game conference schedule.

Proposals already exist across the Internet, including the idea of splitting the conference like a zipper into east and west or coastal and mountain divisions.

Colorado coach Dan Hawkins shrugged his shoulders matter-of-factly this week when asked about the Buffs switching from the Big 12 to the Pac-10. Hawkins said he isn't expecting any changes, but if it occurred, "You play it how it lays," he said.

Hawkins said he hasn't given a possible switch much thought. He said he loves the Big 12 and he isn't sure what if any recruiting advantages a possible move would give his program.

Colorado running backs coach and former quarterback Darian Hagan grew up in Pac-10 territory in Los Angeles before coming to CU in the late-1980s and leading the Buffs to the 1990 national title. He grew to love the annual rivalry with Nebraska and facing teams in the old Big Eight Conference, many of whom are members of the Big 12.

Hagan said he likes the idea of CU moving to the Pac-10 and believes it could help the Buffs recruit the West Coast with even more success than they do now. There are 24 players on the roster this spring from states with Pac-10 schools and eight more are scheduled to join the program this summer.

Some CU fans are concerned that a move to the Pac-10 would kill recruiting in Texas in the future because the Buffs wouldn't play in the state each year, but many of those fans are under the erroneous impression that CU once held a stronger recruiting foothold in the Lone Star state.

Colorado has averaged three or four recruits from Texas per year since 1973 according to official recruiting numbers provided by CU sports information director Dave Plati. The best two-year total of recruits signed in Texas came in 2002 and 2003 when former coach Gary Barnett signed 18 players from Texas.

Barnett recently told the Camera via e-mail that he has been a supporter of the idea of the Buffs moving to the Pac-10 for years because the school has more of "a western or Pac-10 feel than a Midwest or Southern, Big 12 feel."

"I think it is a very logical and good move for CU," he said.

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CU Buffs` Miller to miss rest of spring

Offensive lineman broke plate in arm during practice

By Kyle Ringo Camera Sports Writer
Boulder Daily Camera

Posted: 03/09/2010 06:48:13 PM MST

Colorado offensive lineman Ryan Miller will miss the rest of spring ball after breaking a plate in his arm during the first session of spring practices Saturday.

Coach Dan Hawkins said Miller, CU's right guard, had the plate installed in his forearm after last season. Hawkins said Miller is expected to be healed and ready to go by the beginning of training camp in August.

This was the first year in Hawkins' tenure that the five regular starters on the offensive line at the end of the season returned for the start of spring ball, but the continuity lasted only one day.

It's a setback for an offensive line that must improve for the offense to be more successful in 2010, but Hawkins said Miller's injury presents an opportunity for other players.

"Obviously he's a guy you expect to be in there and you'd love to have him getsome spring reps," Hawkins said. "...The blessing of the whole thing is that other guys get more reps."

Miller will be a fourth-year junior in the fall. He has played in each of his three years in Boulder but had his 2008 season cut short in the fourth game when he suffered a broken leg. The NCAA granted him a medical redshirt waiver for that season, giving him a year of eligibility back.

Penalty prone

The Buffs are working with officials in practice during every session this spring to help solve their penalty problem from last season. They finished 2009 with 107 penalties, one of the highest totals in the program's history.

"I think a lot of it is confidence, I really do," Hawkins said. "And I think a lot of it is experience. I think that's it, just working on it, focusing on it and concentrating on it and getting guys to understand the nature of it."

Staff shakeup

Hawkins announced several changes Tuesday to the football support staff.

Robert Tucker was hired as the assistant head coach at the University of Sioux Falls in South Dakota. Tucker has served as the director of football operations that past three years. He came to CU from Boise State where he coached under Hawkins.

Hawkins said a search is underway for Tucker's replacement, and that person could come from the current staff.

Offensive graduate assistant Skyler Fulton has left the program to go into private business. He has been replaced by Ben Steele, who has been with the program in the operations staff since 2008.

Steele played his college ball at Mesa State in Grand Junction and spent seven years in the NFL.

Anthony Tucker has been added to the staff as an offensive technical intern. Tucker is a former Fresno State wide receiver, who played briefly in the NFL with the New York Giants and St. Louis Rams. He had been working at Lakewood High School in Lakewood, Calif.

Notable

Wide receiver Andre Simmons returned to practice Tuesday after missing the first session this spring because of a personal matter. ... The Buffs return to the practice fields on Thursday for the first day in pads this spring. Colorado will host its annual pro timing day for members of last year's senior class today. Players such as tight end Riar Geer and cornerback Cha`pelle Brown will likely participate in drills evaluated by pro scouts. Colorado and Colorado State are each holding separate pro timing days on the same day for the first time ever so scouts can attend two events in one day.

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Longmont, Colorado
 Wednesday, March 17,
 2010

Publish Date: 3/10/2010

CU's Miller out for spring

By Patrick Ridgell
 © 2010 Longmont Times-Call

BOULDER — Ryan Miller's spring football drills are over before they had much chance to start.

Colorado football coach Dan Hawkins said Tuesday that Miller broke a plate in his arm that he had inserted following the 2009 season. Hawkins said the plate is being repaired. Miller got to participate in one practice — Saturday's — before the injury ended his spring. He was not at practice Tuesday.

"He'll be all right," Hawkins said. "Obviously, he's a guy you expect him to be in there and you'd love for him to have some spring reps. The benefit is we have a lot of guys, and that's great. We have guys like Eric Richter, and we're trying to get Max (Tuioti-Mariner) back into the equation. So the blessing is the whole thing is other guys get more reps.

"Ryan still needs to improve, and can, but seeing those other guys some more pops and seeing where they shake out in the mix is a pretty good deal."

Miller missed most of 2008, what would have been his sophomore season, when he broke his leg against Florida State in Jacksonville. He received a medical hardship following the season.

He played 851 snaps in 2009, the most among all of CU's linemen. He played right guard and filled in for Bryce Givens at right tackle when Givens missed four games.

Richter is a junior college transfer who enrolled in January. Tuioti-Mariner suffered two torn ACLs and missed 2009. Ethan Adkins, Mike Iltis, Blake Behrens and Shawn Daniels are other interior linemen who'll get more snaps this spring with Miller out.

SOLDER'S NUMBERS: Left tackle Nate Solder participated in 850 snaps in 2009, one shy of Miller's high. He's entering his senior season after earning first-team all-Big 12 honors as a junior. While CU maintains all positions are open in spring, Solder might be as close to entrenched at one as the Buffs have on offense.

"He just continues to get better," offensive coordinator Eric Kiesau said. "I know it sounds crazy, but his max numbers were through the roof (during winter conditioning). Physically, the guy is unbelievable.

"I think now, going into his third year of playing tackle, he could have a big jump in performance and comfort level."

Today's CU Game

Texas Tech (16-14) vs. Colorado men (15-15)

When/Where: 10:30 a.m. today at the Sprint Center in Kansas City, Mo.

TV/Radio: Altitude/KKZN 760 AM

The series: CU leads 17-12. CU beat Texas Tech 101-90 on Saturday in Boulder. The win snapped CU's four-game losing streak to Texas Tech.

Leading scorers: Texas Tech — Mike Singletary (14.9 points per game); CU — Cory Higgins (19 points per game)

Notes: CU enters on a three-game winning streak, and Texas Tech on a seven-game losing streak. The winner plays No. 1 Kansas, the Big 12's regular-season champion, on Thursday. ... The NIT requires its teams have a .500 record or better, so CU must win today or it will not be eligible. ... At eighth, CU is seeded higher than it has been since it was No. 5 in 2006. ... Today's game marks the fifth time two teams who met in the regular-season finale meet in the Big 12 Tournament's opening round. In the previous four, the loser of the regular-season finale won the rematch. ... While Saturday's meeting was high-scoring, history suggests today's game won't be. Only once in Big 12 Tournament history has a team topped 100 points. Seven teams have topped 90, once in double overtime. ... Texas Tech beat the Buffs in the 2004 and 2007 Big 12 tournaments. CU is 7-13 in the tournament. It never has advanced past the second round. ... CU lists forward Austin Dufault as a starter. Casey Crawford started Saturday's game in Dufault's spot. ... Texas Tech's Nik Okorie scored 34 points in Saturday's meeting. CU's Cory Higgins, who was named third-team all-Big 12 by coaches this week but

Asked Tuesday what those numbers are, Solder deferred to Jeff Pitman, the program's director of strength and conditioning. According to Pitman, Solder has power-cleaned 414 pounds, hang-cleaned 473 pounds and squatted more than 600 pounds, and he has recorded a 32-inch vertical leap. Listed at 6-foot-9 and 300 pounds, Solder has body fat of 8 percent, according to Pitman.

omitted from The Associated Press' all-Big 12 team, had 30.

Patrick Ridgell

STAFF CHANGES: CU announced Robert Tucker, the program's director of football operations for the past three seasons, has left to become the assistant head coach/co-defensive coordinator at the University of Sioux Falls (S.D.).

Tucker, 36, played for Hawkins at Willamette University and was on Hawkins' staffs at Willamette and Boise State. The position will not be immediately filled. Hawkins said in a release there are "viable candidates" working within the football operations department to replace Tucker, and CU is conducting an outside search.

Former CU and Denver Broncos linebacker Jashon Sykes is currently listed as the program's assistant director of football operations.

CU has hired former Fresno State receiver Anthony Tucker to serve as an offensive technical intern. Tucker will assume some of the responsibilities of Brad Bedell, who, as reported Sunday, has vacated CU's offensive technical intern job he held the past three seasons to become the offensive line coach at Northern Colorado.

And Ben Steele, a member of the program's offensive staff since March 2008, has become an offensive graduate assistant. Steele, 31, played in the NFL for seven seasons. He'll assist offensive line coach Denver Johnson and special teams coach Kent Riddle.

CU still is seeking a new defensive technical intern, the position Ashley Ambrose left when he succeeded Greg Brown as secondary coach. Brown left for Arizona in December. In a release, Hawkins said he is close to filling the position.

EXTRA POINTS: Hawkins said the offense was better Tuesday than Saturday. ... Asked about officials working all of CU's spring practices, Hawkins said, "I think the officials need to practice getting yelled at. It's good." CU was 118th out of 120 Division I teams last season in penalties, with 8.92 per game. ... CU is listing Patrick Mahnke at safety, but asked about him moving to linebacker, Hawkins said, "I think his body type and speed and all of that probably lends him to playing more down there (at linebacker)." Mahnke began 2009 as a starting safety but lost his spot by the fourth game and then played mainly on special teams. ... CU will be in pads in its next practice Thursday. Hawkins said there will be "a little bit" of contact.

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