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college football

CU Buffs' expectations don't flag even when team fortunes sag

By John Henderson
The Denver Post

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"One of the great things about being here is the national championship banner up there, and I really believe you've got to have those expectations to strive for." - Dan Hawkins, Colorado football coach (Doug Pensinger, Getty Images)

BOULDER — As this train wreck of a season careens into the scrapheap of Colorado football history, ending the worst four-year period in 25 years, a hero from the Buffaloes' greatest season picks at his breakfast.

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Charles Johnson hasn't completely lost his appetite for Colorado football. You can't be among the select few who wear the school's only football national championship ring and no longer have the hunger.

What bothers the quarterback who came off the bench in the Orange Bowl to beat Notre Dame for the 1990 national title is a word that's getting as much play this month as "buyout."

Expectations.

"Based on tradition and history, Colorado is a top 25 program," said Johnson, biting into a hard-boiled



Nebraska snatched a bowl season away from CU in 2008 on a school-record field goal late in the game. The Buffs and Cornhuskers each have won four of the past eight games in the day-after-Thanksgiving series. (Nati Harnik, The Associated Press)

egg. "I believe that. I will always believe that."

So do many others, locally and nationally. To those inside the program, outside expectations don't always match reality. Fans don't see the increasingly difficult academics and increasingly inferior facilities.

Yet the undisputed reality is that Colorado is 3-8, 2-5 in the Big 12, and not within a Concorde flight of the top 25.

When athletic director Mike Bohn analyzes the data this week to determine coach Dan Hawkins' fate, he'll weigh a little of everything. Standing out will be Hawkins' 16-32 overall record and the 2-20 road mark, including the lone bowl game, in four years.

Bohn will examine the recruiting trend, staff effectiveness, statistics, academic progress and off-field behavior. But he'll also consider the word that keeps bugging the Buff they call C.J. After all, Johnson isn't just a Buffs hero. He's also Bohn's assistant athletic director.

Is it too much to ask for Colorado to play in a bowl and compete for a top 25 spot every year?

"That's what everybody thinks," Hawkins said with a laugh. "One of the great things about being here is the national championship banner up there, and I really believe you've got to have those expectations to strive for."

Everyone strives. But can everyone grab the ring — even if it's a Champs Sports Bowl ring — every season without falling into a four-year abyss?

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Many Buffs fans say they should. Their voices are getting louder.

Colorado grad. "The Big 12 North is right there for the taking. That's what's disappointing."

"We've never done that (gone to a bowl game every year) in our history," said Bohn, a graduate of Boulder High School who then played at Kansas. "However, certainly our goal is to be consistently in the top half of the Big 12 Conference and periodically challenge for not only, obviously, the Northern Division championship but a conference championship from time to time.

"But look at our history."

From 1967-76, Colorado played in seven bowl games in 10 years and finished in the top 20 six times. From 1988-2005, the Buffs made a bowl all but three times in 18 years and finished in the top 20 10 times.

Since 1989, the Buffs have won a national title, two outright Big Eight titles, a Big Eight co-title, a Big 12 championship and four division crowns. Oh, yes. One Heisman Trophy. Over time, CU's glory is spread among the likes of Dal Ward, Eddie Crowder, Bill Mallory, Bill McCartney, Rick Neuheisel and Gary Barnett.

The record has swooned, but that image hasn't.

"Nationally, people see Colorado as having enough positives that it's not unreasonable to think they should be in the top 25 and competing for bowl bids, certainly every year," said ESPN "College GameDay" co-host Chris Fowler, a

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1980s

Starts decade with seven consecutive losses and 1-10 season, but ends the 1980s with 11-1 run in 1989 and No. 4 in the polls. Makes it to No. 1 in AP poll for first time in school history. Goes to four bowl games, including loss to Notre Dame in Orange Bowl after 1989 season.



1990s

Opens 1990 season No. 5 in pre-season polls and spends 7½ consecutive seasons in top 25 (88 games in a row). Two 10-win seasons and two 11-win seasons. Makes it to nine bowl games, seven in a row.



2000s

Ranked No. 23 in 2000 pre-season poll, but quickly drops out. Spends only 25 weeks in the top 25 in the decade. Wins one Big 12 title game (2001 vs. Texas) and four North Division titles. One 10-win season but six losing seasons.

AP and Denver Post file photos

If a ranking and a bowl game are not rites of passage at Colorado, they're at least expectations. Remember, when Ward, Crowder, Mallory and even Neuheisel coached here, there was no International Bowl. The 34 bowls make up 68 teams, more than half the 120 in the Football Bowl Subdivision. In today's college football, nearly everyone wins a ribbon.

"I think that's a fair expectation," said Barnett, who spans the country as a college radio analyst. "It depends on who's producing that expectation. The expectations of the university aren't the same as the expectations of the fans. Until those two are the same, there's always going to be a problem."

Faded glory Keep in mind when the Big Eight and the Southwest conferences merged into the Big 12 in 1996, they kept Nebraska and Colorado in the same division to help ensure a marquee showdown every year. Friday's finale against Nebraska won't register a blip on any radar east of Council Bluffs, Iowa.

"The program has status," said Bob Simmons, a McCartney assistant who became head coach at Oklahoma State. "Look around the country and talk about the University of Colorado and the football program, people tell you it's an elite program. That's one of the reasons Coach Hawkins came here."

Inside the program, they say the landscape has changed beyond bowl games in Albuquerque and Toronto. No longer is the university accepting

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players who don't meet minimum university requirements. There was no Academic Progress Report that penalized programs whose players don't progress toward a degree.

They also say the facilities arms race has left them in the recruiting dust. There is a contrast. Walk into Kansas' Anderson Family Football Complex and you say, "This is a football school." Walk into Colorado's Dal Ward Center and you say, "This is a bed-and-breakfast."

Dal Ward was named new sports facility of the year when it was built in 1991 and didn't have an upgrade for 17 years.

"You get kids who say, 'I went to Nebraska and I've seen the facilities and they're out of this world,' " said CU running backs coach Darian Hagan, whom, ironically, Johnson replaced after an injury in that Orange Bowl. "I can understand that. You got a friend who has a rich family and you go to their house, and you want to go there all the time because they have all the bells and whistles."

Overcoming facilities

Colorado has been losing the facilities arms race going on 10 years. However, the Buffaloes rarely won it. In their 1990 championship year, the team house was a shack right out of "Tom Sawyer."

"When we were preparing for the Orange Bowl, it was snowing and we were in Balch Fieldhouse,"

Johnson said. "I don't think Byron 'Whizzer' White (1937) used that locker room, but I think Joe Romig (1961) certainly used it."

Added Larry Zimmer, who has done Buffs radio broadcasts for 36 years: "There's a really decent weight room. Maybe it's not fancy, but there are good training facilities. They just redid the locker room. They have an indoor practice facility. What more do you need?"

Colorado's \$10.5 million football budget is superior to five of the current top 25 teams. Fowler seemingly has been to every FBS campus and may be the best comparison study.

"I don't think CU has among the worst facilities I've seen," he said. "The Dal Ward Center is not an eyesore."

Neither are the academics. Then again, the university has made athletes achieve a higher standard. In the late 1980s, then-Colorado president Gordon Gee allowed McCartney, if he presented good cases, a few players under the school minimum through the CU Opportunity Program. While most of those "at risk" players graduated, that program is gone.

"It's gotten tougher," said Brian Cabral, in his 21st year as a Buffs assistant. "The academic standards, what we're recruiting against in terms of facilities. I think we've had our issues in the early '90s, but these issues are a little bit bigger than they were before."

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In the Opportunity Program's place is the NCAA-mandated APR. CU, insiders say, is much tougher on players it doesn't feel can maintain a steady course toward graduation.

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"It's hard to get kids in school here," Hagan said. "We lose more than half that could get in other Big 12 schools."

Added Hawkins: "We don't have PE. We don't transfer PE classes or D's. But those things over time can be positives for you too."

Joel Klatt quarterbacked Colorado's last division-championship team in 2005, the year before Hawkins arrived. Now a talk show co-host on KCKK 1510 AM, he's a steady critic of Hawkins and has tired of hearing academics as an excuse.

"I know that it is tougher than most of the schools," Klatt said, "but I also know that (third-ranked) Texas is also a little tougher than the average in the Big 12."

If Hawkins goes away, will he be a victim of his own limitations or the program's? It doesn't really matter, for as Colorado football marches on through the 21st century, the expectations won't go away.

"I'm afraid with those excuses continuing to percolate, we'll establish our program as a permanently mediocre program," Johnson said. "And I just refuse to go there."

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