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jim armstrong

Armstrong: Underclassmen provide bulk of CU's grit

By Jim Armstrong
The Denver Post

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BOULDER — When Colorado revs up its rivalry with Nebraska this afternoon, the Buffs' lineup could include fewer upperclassmen than at any other point in school history.

Juniors and seniors have accounted for just 55.8 percent of CU's starts this season, the lowest figure in at least 25 years, according to the CU's sports information department, which began detailed accounting of such numbers in 1984. (The next lowest figure was 58.3 percent in 2003).

If it seems strange, Dan Hawkins counting on so many freshmen — they've accounted for 26 starts, half as many as the seniors — and sophomores in his fourth season on the job, it

shouldn't. They ought to have a bumper sticker in Division I football that reads "Attrition Happens."

CU tight end Riar Geer, a fifth-year senior, knows all about attrition. He has seen many would-be upperclassmen come and go. It all started in December 2005 in the days after Gary Barnett was fired.

"I remember starting winter conditioning," Geer said. "Hardly anybody was there, and everybody was talking about leaving. Everybody was bad-mouthing the coaching staff. It was a tough deal, for sure. Team unity was bad."

They didn't just talk the talk. Several walked the walk, leaving CU and their college football careers behind them. Of the 23 players in Barnett's final recruiting class of 2005, seven left the program and two more, including former Mullen High tailback Maurice Greer, didn't qualify academically.

Two players, defensive tackle George Hypolite and defensive end Maurice Lucas, didn't redshirt as freshmen and went on to be big contributors before leaving after four years. A handful of others, most notably Geer, Ben Burney, Marcus Burton, Jake Behrens and Patrick Devenny, will be on the field today.

"We've been through a lot," said Geer, when asked about the last remnants of Barnett's recruiting efforts. "The whole experience has been maturing. From our perspective, it's a little disappointing we've had so many guys leave. But

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with coaching changes, that's to be expected."

Said Burton: "You think about the amount of guys I came in with compared to the amount still here, it just shows there are a lot of challenges that go with playing football. When those challenges come, you've got to pick and choose. Either you stay or you go on with your life."

Player attrition has left CU painfully inexperienced at several key positions, including the offensive and defensive lines and wide receiver. How inexperienced? Consider this: The Buffs went into the season with one wideout, Scotty McKnight, who had caught a pass in a CU uniform. Or this: 2009 marks the first season since 1982 in which the Buffs haven't started a senior on the offensive line.

Barnett's 2005 recruiting class included five offensive linemen. One, junior-college transfer Bryce MacMartin, was on the roster for two years before his eligibility expired. The other four have come and gone, including Paul Backowski and Devin Head, each of whom could have played significant roles, according to Geer.

Hawkins, meanwhile, signed five offensive linemen in his first class in 2006. Of the five, one remains: Eric Lawson, who has been moved to defensive tackle.

Such are the casualties of recruiting, said Hawkins, particularly when you have only a few weeks to try to retain some recruits from the previous regime while attracting a class of your

own.

"There's no doubt, that hurts you," Hawkins said. "You're starting from ground zero on one end and trying to catch up on the other end. . . . That's never an easy process. You have to jump on board in January and try to rally in a month what usually takes a year to cultivate."

CU will bid farewell to 18 seniors today, 11 of whom were his recruits. If that figures sounds low, it isn't. A reality of life in Division I is that players scatter when a new coaching staff arrives.

That's one reason CU athletic director Mike Bohn decided to retain Hawkins on Thursday. He wants to give his coach every chance to see his young players develop under the coach who recruited them.

CU has 12 players remaining in the program from the 21 recruits in Hawkins' first class. A year later, in 2007, Hawkins brought in 27 recruits, 16 remain. That's 28 out of 48 in a two-year span. A high attrition rate? Not particularly. To put those numbers in perspective, Nebraska, according to Rivals.com, totaled 49 recruits in that two-year span, 27 of whom remain in the program.

Hawkins believes his team's inexperience and lack of depth have caught up to them.

"You'd love for the balance of your roster to be those fourth- and fifth-year seniors and juniors,"

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he said. "I was talking to the guys about Oklahoma State and their running game, and they've got four seniors out of their five offensive linemen. And nine of their defensive guys are seniors. Those things help you. At one point, we had our defense out there (against OSU) and 10 of our 11 guys were freshmen or sophomores."

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Road ahead appears daunting for Buffaloes

By Tom Kensler
The Denver Post

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BOULDER — Considering that Colorado's bowl chances disappeared weeks ago, several players said this week they consider today's home battle against Nebraska to be a jump on the 2010 season. Better start stepping up their game.

And that goes for coach Dan Hawkins, who will be given at least one more year, and his staff. A rougher road lies ahead.

"You wonder what chance Hawkins has to keep his job next year against that schedule?" asked Buff Club member Mike Novick, owner of Buffalo River Clothing Co. in Boulder.

In addition to the annual season opener against Colorado State (which returns to Invesco Field at Mile High), Colorado's 2010 nonconference schedule includes a trip to California and home

games against Hawaii and Georgia. That early-season stretch appears more demanding than the 2009 trio of Toledo, Wyoming and West

Colorado Football

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Virginia.

The conference draw for next season also looks to be more challenging. This season, the top picks to contend in the Big 12 North (Nebraska, Kansas, Missouri) were slotted to play in Boulder. Those will be road foes for CU in 2010.

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A new two-year, home-and-home cycle against Big 12 South teams begins next year. Texas, Oklahoma State and Texas A&M will be replaced by Oklahoma, Texas Tech and Baylor. Consider that a push.

"We've got to find a way to win some road games, although next year's schedule will be tough," CU junior wide receiver Scotty McKnight said this week. "But we'll be better."

Under Hawkins, CU is 2-20 on the road.

The bulk of Colorado's two-deep returns in 2010. Departing seniors on offense are tight ends Riar Geer and Patrick Devenny and fullback Jake Behrens. On defense, the Buffs must replace linebackers Marcus Burton, Jeff Smart and Shaun Mohler and defensive backs Cha'pelle Brown and Ben Burney.

Fortunately, talent awaits at linebacker, with Jon Major, Doug Rippey, Derrick Webb and Liloa Nobriga, and in the secondary, with Deji Olatoye and Parker Orms.

Among the redshirting freshmen, Hawkins is especially high on Webb, Olatoye and tight end DaVaughn Thornton, a Denver East graduate.

"Webb will flat-out smoke you, he's a big-time hitter," Hawkins said of the 6-foot, 235-pounder from Memphis, Tenn. "We had to tell him on the scout team to back off, 'cause he'd knock guys out."

Quarterback Tyler Hansen and tailback Rodney "Speedy" Stewart will be juniors next season, and the offensive and defensive lines return intact "and will grow up," Hawkins said.

And the addition of Michigan transfer Toney Clemons at wide receiver figures to make that position, which has been a weak link for years, a team strength. Clemons, who has two years of eligibility, will team with McKnight and Markques Simas for a potent trio. Hawkins believes Clemons (6-2, 205) could become one of the Big 12's best.

"I salivate over the thought of those three guys playing together," Hawkins said of the wideouts.

Colorado's defense has improved steadily this season since a rocky beginning. But if the Buffs are to make some noise next season in the Big 12 North — and keep Hawkins from returning to the hot seat — the CU offense must make a huge leap in production.

Entering today's season finale, Colorado ranks 10th among Big 12 teams in scoring (22.5) and is 12th in total offense (306.3).

"We're going to get better because our young guys are getting more adapted (to the college game)," Stewart said. "I think we can be a good offense if we take advantage of our opportunities. We have to do a better job of that. We have to do a better job in a lot of things."

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Three questions for CU

1. Will Colorado players be inspired by the announcement that coach Dan Hawkins will return next year or will they come out flat?

Although there is no bowl game for Colorado, coaches and players say the importance of carrying some momentum into offseason conditioning and spring drills cannot be overvalued. "It's about time we get a win in a game like this," CU sophomore tailback Rodney Stewart said. "It would be so big for the university, for fans, for recruiting, for everything."

2. How will Colorado sophomore guard Ryan Miller fare in his one-on-one battle with Nebraska senior defensive tackle Ndamukong Suh?

The 300-pound Suh is a surefire All-American and high 2010 NFL draft pick, while Miller (6-8, 320) is still trying to make a name for himself. CU offensive line coach Denver Johnson isn't afraid to challenge Miller. "Ryan is a guy that came in here highly touted," Johnson said. "He's not a veteran player, but he's not a rookie player anymore. It's time for him to step up and measure himself against maybe the best one in the country."

3. Can Colorado's defense hold Nebraska I-

back Roy Helu Jr., right, to fewer than 100 yards?

Nebraska is 8-2 in two seasons under coach Bo Pelini when a Huskers running back rushes for 100 yards. Helu, a 6-2, 215-pound junior, has the size to bust tackles and the speed and quickness to avoid them. He seems to play his best football in November, averaging 128.4 yards in seven games. That includes a 25-carry, 166-yard effort in last year's game against Colorado in Lincoln.

Tom Kensler, The Denver Post

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