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Buffaloes peer into future

By Patrick Ridgell
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BOULDER — It should be noted that Colorado used its sixth starting combination on the offensive line in Friday's season-ending loss to Nebraska. The line, like most of the Buffaloes, was constantly seeking the right mix in 2009.

Mike Iltis, the starting center in the opener who suffered an ankle injury and a concussion and eventually lost his job, started Friday at left guard. Given CU's output — 403 yards, more than anyone put on the Cornhuskers in 2009 — and the single sack it allowed, maybe it finally found it?

"I think we came together as a unit and learned to play together and fight and claw together and just became a lot more connected," Iltis said. "We also see who can play where and got a feel for who's best at what position."

The Buffs got a good feel for who can do what at lots of positions in 2009.

Attrition has been a problem at CU for years. But if it manages to minimize player defections this winter and spring, and the Buffs stay healthy in 2010, this will be an experienced bunch next fall.

Starting up front, they graduate no linemen, offensive or defensive, who played a lot in 2009. Barring attrition, they expect to return every starter on both lines.

Some might say that's not as encouraging as it sounds because CU's offense and defense ranked toward the bottom of the Big 12 in most statistical categories. But if success begins by controlling the line of scrimmage, the Buffs should be happy. They'll be loaded with experience and depth up front in 2009.

The offense loses its two top tight ends and the fullback, but every other skill position player returns. If his work in practice in 2009 as he redshirted is an indication, transfer receiver Toney Clemons will be one to watch in 2010.

Tailback Rodney Stewart finished with 804 yards in 11 games after starting the year slowly with a hamstring problem. The Buffs need depth at tailback. Running back commit Mister Jones could be an early favorite among the incoming recruits to play as a true freshman.

Quarterback Tyler Hansen now has nine career starts, seven in 2009. His confidence grew as the season passed. He'll have to win the starting job again. Freshman Clark Evans, who redshirted in 2009, will be interesting to watch in spring.

A glance at returning Buffs in 2010 who started Friday's finale

OFFENSE

WR Scotty McKnight, Sr.

WR Markques Simas, Jr.

LT Nate Solder, Sr.

LG Mike Iltis, Jr.

C Keenan Stevens, Sr.

RG Ryan Miller, Jr.

RT Bryce Givens, So.

QB Tyler Hansen, Jr.

TB Rodney Stewart, Jr.

DEFENSE

DE Marquez Herrod, Sr.

DT Curtis Cunningham, Jr.

NT Will Pericak, So.,

LB B.J. Beatty, Sr.

LB Michael Sipili, Sr.

CB Jimmy Smith, Sr.

CB Jalil Brown, Sr.

S Anthony Perkins, Jr.

SPECIALISTS

K Aric Goodman, Sr.

On defense, replacing strong safety Ben Burney could be difficult. He started the final 10 games and immediately injected speed, savvy and confidence to a group that needed it. CU will return two top cornerbacks in Jimmy Smith and Jalil Brown. Both will be fifth-year seniors who have played a lot.

KR Brian Lockridge, Jr.

PR Scotty McKnight, Sr.

H Scotty McKnight, Sr.

Starting linebacker Marcus Burton and Jeff Smart, plus top reserve Shaun Mohler, graduate. But B.J. Beatty and Michael Sipili return, and coaches believe the program has recruited well at linebacker. Jon Major, Doug Rippy, Tyler Ahles and others will get their chance.

Kicker Aric Goodman had a good season until missing his final four at the end, finishing 10-for-18. He was better in 2009 than 2008. He'll be counted upon to be better still in 2010.

The Buffs entered the final weekend ranked last in the Big 12 in punt returns and punting. Both areas must improve, and finding a replacement for punter Matt DiLallo is a priority.

The CU sports information department reported the program was among the nation's leaders in freshmen and sophomores among its two-deep or starting in 2009. CU had 23, nine starting.

The good news is they'll be older. The bad is Missouri and Colorado State, two 2010 opponents, are also among the nation's leaders in that statistic.

Expectations might be low entering 2010. That's due to a 16-33 mark the past four years, 3-9 in 2009, a brutal schedule in 2010 and a 12-game road losing streak. At least one departing senior insisted the future shouldn't be feared.

"I definitely think it's brighter than it (seems)," linebacker Marcus Burton said. "It's hard to de-prove on 3-9."

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cu football

Losing gets old, so Buffs turning eye to offseason

By Tom Kensler
The Denver Post

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Tailback Rodney Stewart supplies hope for next season after he had five 100-yard-plus rushing performances this season. (Daniel Petty, The Denver Post)

BOULDER — The best thing going for Colorado in 2010 other than returning nine starters on offense and seven on defense? CU players say they are flat sick of losing.

The 28-20 loss to Nebraska on Friday in the season finale left the Buffaloes with a 3-9

record, including 2-6 in the Big 12 Conference. After four years, newly retained coach Dan Hawkins is still looking for his first winning season.

"I'm pretty embarrassed with the number of games we've won," junior wide receiver Scotty McKnight said last week. "I know that the alumni, the fans, all those people that love Colorado football, they're not happy about it either.

"As a leader, I'm going to do everything I can in the offseason to make sure we're going in the right direction. We've got a lot of work to do."

Where do Hawkins and his staff begin? Entering last week's game, Colorado showed up much too often near the bottom of the NCAA statistical charts. Down there with, dare we say it, New Mexico State, San Jose State, North Texas, Washington State and other football floor mats.

There are 120 NCAA Football Bowl Subdivision teams. Colorado ranked 118th in penalties committed, 117th in sacks allowed and punt returns, 113th in rushing offense and net punting, 111th in passing efficiency and 108th in total offense.

Hawkins, admittedly a "glass half-full guy," insisted Friday that his team was just 10 plays from gaining the minimum of six victories to become bowl-eligible in 2009. That may be true. But how many other teams can say the same? Those teams intend to improve too.

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This fall, perhaps even more often than during Hawkins' three previous years, Colorado never looked in sync. When the offense played well, the defense didn't. More often, the reverse was true. The defense played well enough to win games against Kansas State, Iowa State and Nebraska. But the CU offense failed to do its part. Silly mistakes (turnovers and penalties) deserve some blame.

Colorado Football

Watch video of

Nebraska-Colorado

- football Nov. 27 .

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Nebraska-Colorado football

- Nov. 27 .

Analyze boxscore for

Nebraska-Colorado football

- Nov. 27 .

View slide show of CU

cornerback Jimmy

- Smith .

View slide show of CU coach

Dan Hawkins with his son Cody,

a quarterback for the Buffs .

View slide show of

Colorado-Iowa State football

- Nov. 14 .

View slide show of Texas

- A&M-Colorado football Nov. 7 .

Visit the CU Stats Page for

boxscores, Big 12 standings,

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-

Visit Tom Kensler's All

Things Buffs blog for a

behind-the-scenes look at

- CU sports .

But usually that means a team lacks playmakers and just wasn't talented enough.

Under Hawkins, Colorado has never finished better than 10th among Big 12 teams in either scoring or total offense. Against high-powered conference foes, that leaves CU always playing catch-up.

"We need to keep adding speed," Hawkins acknowledged.

Help is on the way at wide receiver, with Michigan transfer Toney Clemons eligible for next season. Hawkins also likes two rangy, redshirt-freshman wideouts (6-4 Terdema Ussery and 6-5 Jarrod Darden). Former Buff Kendrick Celestine returned to Boulder and hopes to regain his eligibility in time for spring drills. And look for wide receiver to be a position of emphasis in recruiting.

As juniors in 2010, quarterback Tyler Hansen and tailback Rodney Stewart will be more seasoned. CU needs the offensive line, unsettled for much of the past two seasons, to finally play up to expectations.

The sputtering offense failed to finish off scoring opportunities. Friday's game against Nebraska provided another frustrating example. Late in the third quarter, Hansen connected with sophomore wide receiver Markques Simas for a 58-yard completion — Colorado's longest play from scrimmage for the season — to the Huskers' 25-yard line. But Hansen was called for

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intentional grounding on third-and-2, a spot-of-the-foul loss of 17 yards. Aric Goodman then missed a 52-yard field-goal attempt.

"This team is really close, really close," departing senior safety Benjamin Burney said. "I can't wait to see these guys next year. It's going to explode."

It remains to be seen whether even that will be good enough to compete with the Big 12's best.

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Colorado

Starters back

Offense: QB Tyler Hansen, Jr. (eligibility in 2010); TB Rodney Stewart, Jr.; WR Scotty McKnight, Sr.; WR Marques Simas, Jr.; OT Nate Solder, Sr.; OT Bryce Givens, So.; OG Ryan Miller, Jr.; OG Mike Ittis, Jr.; C Keenan Stevens, Sr.; PK Aric Goodman, Sr.

Defense: DE Marquez Herrod, Sr.; DE Forrest West, So.; DT Curtis Cunningham, Jr.; DT Will Pericak, So.; LB B.J. Beatty, Sr.; CB Jimmy Smith, Sr.; S Ray Polk, So.

Starters lost

Offense: TE Riar Geer, FB Jake Behrens. Defense: LB Marcus Burton, LB Jeff Smart, CB Cha'pelle Brown, S Benjamin Burney, P Matt DiLallo.

Eligible transfer to watch

WR Toney Clemons, Jr. (Michigan): The 6-foot-2, 205-pounder is a former four-star prospect and CU's most explosive receiver in practices.

Three redshirt freshmen to watch

LB Derrick Webb: Former Memphis Whitehaven HS standout could replace Marcus Burton as team's most punishing tackler.

CB Deji Olatoye: Ohioan has size (6-2, 185), athleticism (6-4 high jump) and smarts (business major).

TE DaVaughn Thornton: Coaches believe the 6-5, 230-pounder from Denver East could develop into CU's next great tight end.

Three goals in spring

1. Get used to new assistant coaches. In addition to former NFL DB Ashley Ambrose being elevated to full-time WR coach, look for at least one other offseason change in the staff.
2. Settle on an O-line. Even in the 12th game, there was some juggling, with backup center Mike Ittis becoming a starting guard.
3. Develop an offense with greater big-play capability.

Tom Kensler, *The Denver Post*

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2010 CU schedule

September

4 vs. CSU (in Denver)

11 at California

18 vs. Hawaii

October

2 vs. Georgia

9 at Missouri

16 vs. Baylor

23 vs. Texas Tech

30 at Oklahoma

November

6 at Kansas

13 vs. Iowa State

20 vs. Kansas State

26 at Nebraska

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