

CU faces 'monumental' game

Team trying to stay in Big 12 North race, become bowl eligible

By Kyle Ringo Camera Sports Writer
Boulder Daily Camera

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What are the Colorado Buffaloes going to be for Halloween?

The question is on the minds of fans of the football program and maybe even some of its members today as coach Dan Hawkins' team plays host to the Missouri Tigers for homecoming at Folsom Field

(11:40 a.m., FSN) in a pivotal game for both teams.

The Buffs have been wildly inconsistent from one week to the next all season. Their past two efforts form a perfect example. CU beat then-No. 17 Kansas at home two weeks ago but mangled any momentum from that win in a shoddy performance on the road at Kansas State last week.

Eight games into Hawkins' fourth season at CU, they are still trying to find an identity beyond 'young' -- the word Hawkins has been using to describe them for nearly three full seasons now.

He also used the word 'fragile' this week. It's the same term he used a year ago in his postgame remarks following a 58-0 beatdown suffered at Missouri.

What better day for the Buffs to figure out who they really are, and where they are going, than a day in which anyone is allowed to be whatever they want?

More than a few Buffs called last season's loss to the Tigers the most embarrassing game of their lives. At least they know what they want to avoid --- a repeat performance.

"Last year, to be honest, was the most embarrassing game I've ever been a part of, in terms of score and how I felt walking off that field," wide receiver Scotty McKnight said. "So, I mean there is a little extra motivation there. We've got to kind of instill that in some of the young guys that weren't there because, like I said, it was the most disappointing loss I've ever experienced before in my life."

The Buffs made beating the Tigers one of their preseason goals after losing the past two meetings with the two-time defending Big 12 North Division champs by the combined score of 113-10.

Missouri comes to town on a three-game losing streak and in must-win mode. It is eerily similar to the situation last year when the Tigers had lost two in a row prior to pancaking the Buffs.

Missouri can't afford to drop to 0-4 in conference play and still harbor hopes of winning a third consecutive division title, even as mediocre as the division appears to be.

"With what's going on in the North right now, that motivates everybody," Missouri All-Big 12 linebacker Sean Weatherspoon said in a statement that really applies to both teams today. "We know that there's a lot still out there."

Colorado is 2-5 overall and 1-2 in conference play and still has hope in the division race. This is a program, after all, that won two division titles while players and coaches sat on their couches on the final day of the 2004 and 2005 seasons watching other games unfold. The Buffs won through tiebreakers with a 4-4 record and a 5-3 record respectively in those seasons.

A bowl game might actually be the less likely scenario at this point for CU. With one more loss, the best the Buffs can do is finish 6-6 and that might not be good enough to secure a bowl berth this season.

"I think as a team we want to definitely come out and get a win against them because of how they embarrassed us," CU cornerback Jimmy Smith said. "So practice has been amazing the past two days. The intensity and everyone has been flying around making plays."

"We have to win out to go to a bowl game."

It has been a strange week at CU. It began with a player's only meeting on Monday aimed at finishing the season strong and raising the bar of expectations in the locker room.

Hawkins followed Tuesday during his weekly press conference by presenting his case for why he and his assistants are doing a good job even though the results haven't shown up in the standings or on the scoreboard.

Hawkins, who prides himself and his program on never getting too high or too low emotionally, twice referred to today's game as 'monumental.'

"Your back gets a little closer to the wall, but I think all the things we want to accomplish and hope to accomplish are still there," Hawkins said. "But this is a big week for us, obviously."

This definitely isn't the same Missouri team that spent much of the past two seasons in the national rankings and the spotlight. It's a young team trying to find its way without former stalwarts such as Chase Daniel and Jeremy Maclin. But it's still loaded with talent and hungry to get back to winning.

Quarterback Blaine Gabbert is still looking for his first Big 12 win as the Tigers' starting quarterback. He has struggled since suffering an ankle injury against Nebraska three games back. All five of his interceptions have come in conference play and the Tigers haven't rushed for more than 100 yards in a game in more than a month.

Colorado knows all about offensive struggles. The Buffs continue to rank at or near the bottom of most major offensive statistical categories in the conference.

It's a four-year trend sophomore quarterback Tyler Hansen hopes to change as he prepares for his third consecutive start today. He said what the Buffs need more than anything is a sense of confidence in themselves.

"I just think now we have this perception and attitude of our program that we're not used to winning yet," Hansen said. "We're not accustomed to that. I think we have to get it. We have to win a couple games in a row and get that mojo working a little bit."

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Woelk: Time for Buffs to play with chip on shoulders

By Neill Woelk Camera Sports Writer
Boulder Daily Camera

Posted: 10/31/2009 12:23:13 AM MDT

When the Colorado Buffaloes take the field today against Missouri, they need remember only one thing:

The Big 12 North is still up for grabs. Play well and win, and they'll be right back in the thick of things. That is the beauty and curse of playing in a division that is still far and away the lesser of the two in the Big 12.

The big boys play for the prize in the South; the leftovers go to the North.

The Buffs need to decide if those leftovers are worth fighting for.

As the Buffs' season has progressed -- some might say regressed -- the temptation to over-analyze has been great. More of this, less of that. The defense needs to change (fill in the blank) while the offense must get (fill in the blank) more playing time. Simplify the playbook, expand the game plan ... pick your solution and it's been voiced.

But the answer today for the Buffs is none of the above. Nothing complicated. Dan Hawkins hit the nail on the head early this week.

The Buffs need to play with a chip on their shoulders. Play like they care. Play like someone is trying to steal their lunch instead of acting like they're willing to share.

That's what's been missing far too often this season.

Against Kansas, the Buffs played with that chip. Unhappy after letting the chance at an upset get away from them in Texas, they focused their emotion on Kansas. The Buffs forced turnovers on defense, blocked people on offense and put the Jayhawks on their heels.

But a week later, they were gracious at Kansas State. The perfect guests. "Thanks for having us, and we'll leave the turnovers on the carpet on our way out."

Enough of that.

Now the Buffs need to be horrific hosts. Pop the Tigers the minute they step on the field and don't stop until the game is over. Make Missouri miserable.

Play like it matters.

"There has to be an edge in every single game that you have to garner," Hawkins said. "Somehow, you have to find your chip."

That shouldn't be too difficult for the Buffs in this one.

They are 2-5. They've been embarrassed two years in a row by the Tigers. Fans aren't exactly singing their praises.

But most of all, the Buffs must remember how they followed up a nice effort against Kansas with the stinker at Kansas State. Their pride hasn't just been damaged; it's been battered. Just when it looked as if they were ready to step forward, they tripped all over themselves.

The fact that there's still plenty to play for hasn't escaped the Buffs. They spent the week talking about the fact that they are indeed still in the Big 12 North mix, and it's not simply a matter of bravado. The bizarre circumstances thus far in the North have created an opportunity of which CU can realistically still take advantage.

A week ago, Kansas State appeared to be the make-or-break game for the Buffs to step up and show they still belonged in the contender conversation. The loss in Manhattan could have made that a very short conversation.

But thanks to Nebraska, Kansas and Missouri also losing last week, the Buffs can still make a run at the division -- if they play well today.

Call it their latest last chance.

The good news is the Buffs are home today, where they are 2-1 this year. Even better, they get another home game next week, when Texas A&M comes calling.

Even in this season of disappointments, the Buffs have shown glimpses of promise. The defense has been very good at times. The offense, especially with Tyler Hansen at the helm, has displayed the ability to move up and down the field.

But they haven't put it all together for a complete game.

Do it today -- and keep that chip on their shoulders for the next few weeks -- and what's been an empty season thus far could still produce some flavor.

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woody paige

Paige: Dan Hawkins has to deliver wins at CU

By Woody Paige
The Denver Post

Posted: 10/31/2009 01:00:00 AM MDT



Dan Hawkins has had to deal with plenty of criticism aimed at him and his CU football program. (Charlie Riedel, The Associated Press)

Dan Hawkins has a chance to set an extraordinary record today. He can become the first coach in the history of the University of Colorado football without a winning season in his

first four years on the job.

That would be a dubious achievement for a program that has played football in three centuries.

With a victory over Missouri, CU would improve to 3-5 and Hawkins could hold out hope for a .500-or-better season. With a defeat at Folsom Field (named for a coach who had only one losing season in 15), the best Hawkins could hope for is 6-6.

Win today, and beat Texas A&M and Nebraska at home and Iowa State and/or Oklahoma State on the road, and the Buffs will produce a remarkable turnaround. Lose a couple on the road and another to the Cornhuskers, and it's same old, same old Colorado during the Dan Span.

For most of the season, Hawkins has been downright up tight — short with those outside the team, defensive about those inside the team. Frankly, he was a changed man, and not necessarily for the good. Some of those (on the team and in the athletic department) wondered what became of the confident, charismatic, cheerful coach who could shout, "It's Big 12 football!" and be respected, despite the lack of progress on the field.

Hawkins has returned principles and values to the program. All 17 seniors (including holdovers from Gary Barnett's tenure) are expected to graduate by the end of next summer. Troublemakers vanished or were banished,

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replaced, mostly, by sincere student-athletes. There is a family atmosphere but, sometimes, a bunker mentality.

But too many alumni, boosters, former players and media — as in most college football cultures — care about results on the field, not off. It's not a sport for patience.

CU will never be Texas, Oklahoma and Nebraska on an annual basis. Not enough financial and fan support, love of the game by students and school administrators or a general warm and fuzzy feeling for, or academic accomplishments by, dozens of blue-chip recruits from beyond the Colorado borders. CU has had three serious periods of cheating and moral problems that affected the football team and the entire university community.

But Colorado can have a quality football program that consistently wins more games than it loses, competes for first in the Big 12 North and, every third season or so, reaches the top 20 nationally, and occasionally plays in a BCS game, or even for the national championship.

Only once in CU history has the team wasted more than four years without a winning season.

Coaches Eddie Crowder, Bill McCartney and Gary Barnett, even in troubled times, proved themselves. Crowder raised the Buffs to No. 3 in the polls and to the Orange Bowl. Bill McCartney's Buffs played in nine bowls and, in 1990, co-shared No. 1 in the country. And CU, under Barnett, won the conference's North

Division four times, including one outright Big 12 crown.

McCartney, Crowder, Barnett, Fred Folsom, Dal Ward, Bill Mallory all had their programs up and running well before or by their fourth season. Chuck Fairbanks was gone after three seasons, and Rick Neuheisel was gone after four, three of them winning seasons.

Hawkins is unproven. The Buffs can't win on the road — only twice in Hawkins' tenure — haven't won often in the Big 12 (9-18) and aren't a top-anything team. Two years ago they ended up 6-6 in the regular season,

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Woody Paige

Post sports columnist Woody Paige fields your questions. Look for Woody's Mailbag on Thursdays.

receive a bowl bid in a watered-down system and did play valiantly in a defeat to Alabama in a bowl game. However, 2-10, 6-7, 5-7 and 2-5 won't get it done.

At the urging of athletic director Mike Bohn and others, the coach did emerge from his turtle shell this week and displayed the personality he showed in past years. He admitted that there had

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been "mistakes along the way" and that the reconstruction of CU football has taken longer than he anticipated.

Hawkins is asking for faith from the fans in his performance, not demanding it, as a person and a coach.

Bohn doesn't want to fire Hawkins because the coach was his hire; he has believed in Hawkins' cleansing of CU's reputation, and there is the matter of an almost \$3 million buyout. But Hawkins has lost too many games, and much of Bohn's allegiance.

"I'm going to be here a long time," Hawkins said from prepared notes at his news conference Tuesday. "We're going to get this thing going, and it's going to be right ... I'm not a quitter. I am a fighter ... And we'll see it through. We'll make it happen."

The success won't happen this year, and won't happen because of his speech this week.

He should be given one more season, a fifth, because of an attitude adjustment around the program and the chance to play his first full recruiting class (including redshirted players) so there won't be "we're- too-young" excuses. It'll also give him another year to recruit more skill-position players (including, please, a quarterback), to decide on one offensive philosophy, not the current two unstable and ineffective schemes, and because CU can't afford to settle his contract.

Yet, if Colorado agrees to retain Hawkins, he must agree to step away after the 2010 season, if he has another losing season.

Woody Paige: 303-954-1095 or
wpaige@denverpost.com

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cu football

Chancellor DiStefano backs Hawk

By Tom Kensler
The Denver Post

Posted: 10/31/2009 01:00:00 AM MDT



Dan Hawkins (Denver Post file photo)

BOULDER — If Colorado football coach Dan Hawkins is looking for support, he's found it in the right place. CU chancellor Phil DiStefano said Hawkins "needs more time" to be successful.

DiStefano, in a phone interview with The Denver Post, said he does not foresee making a coaching

change anytime soon.

"You would never say never, because things happen," DiStefano said. "But right now, Dan and the other coaches (within the athletic department) are recruiting good kids, recruiting the kind of kids that are going to be successful in college, that will get a degree, that will be competitive. That's what I'm looking for."

Hawkins, in his fourth season, has come under fire from fans disappointed in CU's 2-5 start. Fans posting comments online are railing against athletic director Mike Bohn, who hired Hawkins, and would like to see him fired too.

DiStefano said he has received several of those pleas but he wants Buff fans to exhibit patience.

"I just think we need to give Dan and the other coaches, and Mike Bohn, as well, more time to pull things together. In my mind, it's not a good idea to make changes at this point."

DiStefano said CU fans were upset with the lack of progress at the start of the Bill McCartney era in the early 1980s.

"I remember people saying Eddie Crowder made a huge mistake in hiring Bill McCartney, and that it was time for both of them to leave," said DiStefano, who joined the CU faculty in 1974. "Shortly thereafter, everything came together. Of course, Coach McCartney won a national championship here.

"When I get those kinds of e-mails, I think,

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"What's out there? Who would we recruit for either an AD or a head football coach? I think we have the right people in place. We need to give them the opportunity to be successful."

Bohn said in a separate interview that he fully supports Hawkins.

"There's no question that we like the direction of Dan Hawkins' football program in all areas except one. We all know what that is, the won-loss column. While that area ultimately determines a coach's longevity, it neither dissuades us from backing Dan, nor clouds our vision for what lies ahead for the Buffaloes under Dan."

DiStefano said he understands the frustration of fans upset at the lack of progress in Hawkins' fourth year.

"People are talking about Dan talking about 10 wins (during the summer), and we have two wins now, and just the way the team has played," DiStefano said. "But we have seen them play a first half at Texas that was just great, beating Wyoming, beating Kansas. They didn't do very well at all offensively last week against Kansas State."

"I think it's going to take Dan, obviously, a little more time than what we thought in the beginning. . . . I think we need to have a little more patience with our coaches and our AD."

*Tom Kensler: 303-954-1280 or
tkensler@denverpost.com*

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cu football briefs

Hawkins feels game with Tigers is "monumental"

Posted: 10/31/2009 01:00:00 AM MDT

BOULDER — Similarities abound between Missouri and Colorado, two struggling Big 12 North teams bent on making a statement in today's 11:30 a.m. matchup (FSN) at Folsom Field.

The Tigers (4-3, 0-3 Big 12) and Buffs (2-5, 1-2) desperately need a victory if they are to make any noise in the North Division race.

Both have young rosters, each with just six senior starters. Both have a sophomore quarterback still finding his way. Both start three sophomores along the offensive line. And both have found it difficult to establish the running game.

Colorado coach Dan Hawkins has called today's game "monumental" in importance. Missouri's Gary Pinkel all but said the same thing.

"The past three years, we've been up there in the (national) rankings in the middle of the season," Pinkel told reporters in Columbia, Mo.,

this week. "They all understand the big picture, and it's my job to explain that. If we don't take care of each week, from here on out, the big picture changes dramatically. There is a sense of urgency."

Missouri combined for five touchdowns of 20 yards or longer in crushing Colorado 58-0 last year in Columbia and 55-10 in 2007 in Boulder. Those big-play gashers are confidence killers, Hawkins said.

"That whole confidence and momentum thing, I think, is even more dramatic in the college game," Hawkins said. "You get a little maturity, and when (the opponent) gets a big play it's, 'OK. So they got a big play. Let's go.' "

Said CU senior linebacker Jeff Smart: "Missouri is going to make their plays. But if we play relaxed and focused, and play inspired with emotion and just have fun out there, I think we can show everybody that we have a good football team too."

Gimpy Gabbert?

Missouri quarterback Blaine Gabbert left last Saturday's 41-7 loss to Texas in the third quarter after aggravating his injured right ankle. Gabbert, 6-feet-5 and 240 pounds, is expected to play.

"It's getting better day-in and day-out," he said earlier in the week.

CU defensive backs coach Greg Brown expects

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to see Gabbert at his best. "When you watch that guy on film, he's got a commanding arm," Brown said.

Brown said two factors in the improvement of CU's pass defense in recent weeks have been switching senior Benjamin Burney from cornerback to safety and promoting redshirt-freshman safety Ray Polk to the starting lineup.

In the improv.

Now that Tyler Hansen has been elevated to CU's full-time quarterback, a big part of the Buffs' offense will be Hansen making plays when he's scrambling. Thus far, Hansen has looked mostly for junior Scotty McKnight when a play breaks down. But McKnight said the younger wideouts are starting to get the hang of how to improvise after running their prescribed pattern.

"Part of it is just a feel," McKnight said. "You have to get a feeling for the game, and know what coverage the other team is running. You're thinking, if I'm running this, I'm going to improv to that spot because I know it is going to be open. It just comes from knowledge of the game and studying film."

Tom Kensler, The Denver Post

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sports

CU's Hartigan enjoying switch to defensive end

Posted: 10/31/2009 01:00:00 AM MDT



Josh Hartigan is showing pass-rushing potential as a defensive end.

BOULDER — Yes, that was Colorado sophomore Josh Hartigan drawing playing time at defensive end last Saturday against Kansas State.

The former linebacker couldn't be happier about the position switch. Linebacker is one of the deepest areas on the team, and Hartigan has been relegated to special-teams duty as a backup for two years.

CU coaches believe Hartigan can utilize his quickness at defensive end, particularly as a pass rusher. They saw that potential a few weeks ago

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when, on the scout team, Hartigan imitated Texas All-American candidate Sergio Kindle in practice.

"I'm pretty excited," Hartigan said of the prospects of playing in CU's homecoming game today against Missouri.

In a sense, Hartigan has come full circle. The 6-foot-1, 230-pounder was a defensive end for his first three years at Northeast High in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., before moving to linebacker. Hartigan's father, Sterling Palmer, played both positions at Florida State.

"I remembered how to play D-end, but it's obviously different at this level," Hartigan said. "You have to use your hands in the college game. In high school, offensive linemen don't have good technique, so you just run around and play. Here, you have to do everything right."

Tom Kensler, The Denver Post

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Posted on Thu, Oct. 29, 2009

Mizzou faces must-win at Colorado

By MIKE DeARMOND
The Kansas City Star

Jared Perry tried his best to lend perspective.

"It's been rocky, 0-3 in conference play," said Perry, a senior wide receiver for Missouri. "But if you look back to last year, we were 1-2 at this point and time."

And yet, the Tigers still won the Big 12 North Division title, kicking off a four-game winning streak with a 58-0 smashing of Colorado.

"We've just got to fight," Perry said, "and know that, 'Win in November, you'll always be remembered.'"

Only if Missouri doesn't win on the final day of October, this Saturday afternoon at Colorado, well, no game of November might mean as much.

"It still matters," MU running back Derrick Washington said. "But we don't want to lose against Colorado. We still have the opportunity to win the Big 12 North. That's what we're shooting for."

Lose at Colorado, and Missouri may be shooting blanks.

The Tigers could finish the regular season 9-3. Everyone agrees the next five games appear winnable. A 5-3 Big 12 record could win the North, or at least earn a share.

But all those games — if you've been watching the Big 12 the last two weeks — also appear losable.

This isn't a Missouri juggernaut heading to Colorado. Add a fourth straight loss, and 2009 could wind up like 2004 for Mizzou. The Tigers lost five straight Big 12 games that season and finished 5-6.

It was the last season Missouri didn't go bowling.

"We're running out of time," coach Gary Pinkel said.

That's stating the obvious.

And yet, if Missouri can defeat Colorado for a fourth straight time, momentum could go from reverse to full speed ahead.

"Start with this game to get rolling," MU center Tim Barnes said. "Building on that. If we go out there and do well, get our confidence up, I know this team, we've got enough talent for it to be very dangerous."

Immediately after Missouri's 41-7 loss to Texas, MU senior linebacker Sean Weatherspoon said he'd never seen Pinkel in such a dark, almost dangerous, mood.

Pinkel fairly charged into his postgame news conference, venting his frustrations. Or perhaps Pinkel was laying the emotional groundwork for the Colorado game and beyond.

"I don't vent," Pinkel said Monday. "Everything I do in front of my team is calculated."

The keys to a must win for Mizzou appear to be these:

- Early devotion to a running game that seemed to work against Texas before two late Texas TDs at the end of the first half forced Missouri to the air in a vain attempt to catch up in the final 30 minutes.
- A return to a defense that had made steady improvement on a disastrous 2008 before reprising those bad old days in a chicken-with-its-head-cut-off runaround against Texas.

Pinkel's main concern seems to be the latter issue.

"It's a lack of focus, it's a lack of concentration, it's maybe emotional stability issues," Pinkel said of the defensive "communication" problems.

"A lot of those things, and they're all inexcusable."

As for running more and passing less to ease the responsibility on sore-ankled quarterback Blaine Gabbert?

"We know what we have," said freshman Kendial Lawrence, one of three running backs who formed a committee approach against Texas. "It's just a matter of us producing."

To reach Mike DeArmond, call 816-234-4353 or send e-mail to mdearmond@kcstar.com

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Longmont, Colorado
 Saturday, November 14,
 2009

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Buffs look to improve...now

By Patrick Ridgell

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BOULDER — Misery loves company. Or maybe it's Missouri loves company.

Either way, today's battle at Folsom Field between Colorado and Missouri pits two teams that, to varying degrees, have struggled in recent weeks. One will leave today feeling better; the other will be reeling.

While CU's struggles are well chronicled, the Tigers are seeking an immediate elixir. Missouri has been outscored 101-36 over the past three weeks in losses to Nebraska, Oklahoma State and Texas.

The Tigers might be even younger than the Buffs. They list 36 freshmen and sophomores on their two-deep roster. They're seeking their fourth straight defeat of CU, which would be its longest streak over the Buffs since taking six in a row from 1979 to 1984.

If we take Missouri coach Gary Pinkel at his word — and this is a bit of a stretch — even CU looks good to the Tigers.

"We are preparing for Colorado now," Pinkel said Monday. "They are a great football team."

Huh? CU (2-5, 1-2) remains last in the Big 12 in scoring, yards gained, punt returns, net punting, pass efficiency and pass efficiency defense. The Buffs are next to last in rushing offense, points allowed and turnover margin. Were it not for Missouri (4-3, 0-3), the Buffs would be last in the Big 12 North.

There was a lot said in and around the Dal Ward Center this week, most notably coach Dan Hawkins' plea for patience. One especially revealing comment came from quarterback Tyler Hansen.

"I think right now we have this perception and attitude of this program where we're not used to winning yet, you know what I mean?" Hansen said. "We're not accustomed to having that winning attitude. I think we have to get it."

It's a good weekend for the Buffs to get it. For starters, it might be CU's biggest weekend of the recruiting season.

Rivals.com listed 10 visitors expected to make official visits, including players like four-star California defensive back Demetrius Wright, who's being recruited by schools like USC and Tennessee. There's also four-star linebacker Justin Parker of Beaufort, S.C. He's looking at Clemson, South Carolina, Nebraska and many others.

CU reported 8,000 tickets remained Friday for today's homecoming game, which, if that many

Countdown to kickoff

Missouri (4-3, 0-3) at Colorado (2-5, 1-2)

When: Today, 11:30 a.m.

Where: Folsom Field in Boulder

TV/Radio: FSN/KOA-AM

The series: Missouri leads 39-31-3. Missouri has won four of the past five, including the past two by a combined score of 113-10.

In the spotlight: CU — QB Tyler Hansen: It's impossible not to put Hansen in the spotlight. His development is paramount to the program's immediate hopes.

Missouri — LB Sean Weatherspoon: A finalist for the Lombardi Award, Weatherspoon is fourth in the Big 12 with 8.71 tackles per game. CU will try to run the ball; Weatherspoon will try to stop it.

When CU has the ball: Missouri, sixth in the Big 12 in total defense, will try to spy Hansen and confuse him. Of course, the past two years, the Tigers have built such huge leads that their defense wasn't under any pressure. CU hasn't scored on Missouri in more than seven quarters, and the Buffs — last in the Big 12 in points and yards — are coming off a six-point effort at Kansas State.

Advantage: Missouri

When Missouri has the ball: Missouri wants to use quarterback Blaine Gabbert's mobility, which has been limited in recent weeks. CU looked clueless trying to defend Missouri when Chase Daniel was running its spread the past two years. Gabbert is not as experienced, and if he can't move, CU should be able to

remain unsold, would leave quite a few empty seats and signal lagging interest in a losing program. Maybe angry fans have chosen to stay away to vent their frustration. If so, CU's administration undoubtedly will take note.

The smallest crowd at Folsom Field this season was 50,535 for the Wyoming game Sept. 19. CU lists Folsom's capacity as 53,750.

Missouri quarterback Blaine Gabbert has an ankle injury he said he "dinged up" again in a 41-7 loss to Texas last week. He wore a cast on it Monday, saying it was merely a precaution.

CU reported Friday it hasn't had so much snow to deal with on a game day in 10 or 12 years. Folsom Field has underground heating, and no flooding is expected. Still, how well Gabbert's ankle holds up today will be key.

While Missouri's offense has gashed the Buffs the past two years, CU's offense has posted season lows in yards in each of the past two meetings with the Tigers. Last week at Kansas State, the Buffs ran for only 60 yards and totaled 244.

Hansen, making his third start, must improve. Coaches say they want him to play the whole game, including the two-minute drills, and not feel subject to a quick hook. He must earn that trust.

Hansen said he knows to expect defenses to spy him, assigning players to follow him and keep him in the pocket. Normally such a scheme opens something else up. That wasn't the case last week at Kansas State, Hansen said. If Missouri spies him today, the Buffs have to figure out where the Tigers are vulnerable.

CU is the second-most penalized team in the Big 12, with 65 in seven games. Nationally, only Troy and Texas Tech have committed more. The search for playmakers continues, and Hawkins gave no indication this week that the wide receiver rotation will expand. The offensive line is expected to start the same five for the second straight week, but the backfield will have no Darrell Scott again.

Hawkins admitted this week that his team did not find as much confidence from its Oct. 17 defeat of a ranked Kansas team as he had hoped. Meanwhile, Missouri has slapped the Buffs around the past two years, outscoring them 113-10. Confidence might not abound.

Obviously, there are lots of things the Buffs must fix. But nothing will improve until their psyche does.

"Coach Hawkins says we're real close, but we're there," Hansen said. "We just have to open our eyes and believe we're there."

Read Patrick Ridgell's [CU sports blog](#). He can be reached at pridgell@times-call.com.

pressure him.

Advantage: Even.

Special teams: CU's were bad last week, and they've been inconsistent in recent weeks. The Buffs are last in the Big 12 in punting and punt returns but second-best in kickoff coverage. Missouri is second in punting and last in kickoff returns.

Advantage: Missouri

Key matchup: CU cornerbacks Jimmy Smith and Jalil Brown vs. Missouri receiver Danario Alexander. Missouri lost lots of talent from its 2008 team, but Alexander is stepping up and having a huge year. He has 50 catches for 701 yards already. He's third in the Big 12 and ninth in the NCAA in receiving yards per game.

Prediction: Missouri shouldn't humiliate the Buffs today, but it's doubtful CU has closed the gap enough to win.

Missouri 31, CU 20

Patrick Ridgell

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Size doesn't matter for CU's Speedy back

By [David Briggs](#)

[Saturday, October 31, 2009](#)

Two years ago, Rodney Stewart was asked to walk on for a Mid-American Conference school. Today, he will be the focus of Missouri's defense.



Stewart:

77.8 rushing yards
per game

For the 5-foot-6, 175-pound Colorado tailback, it's been an unlikely rise to Big 12 prominence.

Stewart is the smallest player the Tigers have seen this season, and he registered even smaller on the watch of Colorado fans when he arrived to Boulder last fall. Who cared about a two-star guy when five-star prep All-American Darrell Scott, the top-ranked running back in the country, was also stepping onto campus?

But here he is, "Speedy" as his teammates call him, already tempting comparisons to one of the most dominant backs in Big 12 history.

"He's much like the little guy at Kansas State who played so well," Texas Coach Mack Brown said.

That little guy, of course, is Darren Sproles, the similarly diminutive star who rushed for nearly 5,000 career yards earlier this decade.

Powerful — he can bench press more than 400 pounds — yet lithe, Stewart is following a strong freshman year with a breakout second season. The sophomore, who beat out Scott for the starting job, is fifth in the Big 12 in rushing (467 yards, 77.8 per game) and has flashed star potential.

Stewart ran for 108 yards and two touchdowns in Colorado's 34-30 upset win over No. 17 Kansas, his third 100-yard game of the year. If the Buffaloes (2-5, 1-2 Big 12) are to beat Missouri today, count on a similar blueprint.

"Rodney is pound for pound as good as anybody," Brown said in a teleconference. "He's hard to tackle. He has a low base but is also very strong. He's got all the elements that make you a good football player."

Said Colorado Coach Dan Hawkins: "I don't think size matters. He's not the largest in stature, but in the end, it's about being productive, and he's proved that he is."

An under-the-rocks find, the Westerville, Ohio, native attracted little interest out of high school. Part of this was because of an anterior cruciate ligament injury that cost Stewart his junior season. But as a senior at Brookhaven, he ran for 2,036 yards and 33 touchdowns.

Stewart and his coaches expected the offers to come flooding in. They did not. Ohio State ignored him, as did most everyone else. No FCS school offered him a scholarship.

Only a family tie put him in touch with Colorado. Stewart's cousin, Douglas Rippy, a linebacker from the Dayton area, had recently committed to CU. Knowing Stewart wasn't receiving many looks, Rippy dropped his buddy's name to running backs coach Darian Hagan.

"He was looking for a running back, and he didn't know if Darrell Scott was going to commit or not," Stewart said. "So Doug said, 'Well Rodney Stewart, he was in Ohio with me, and he doesn't have a lot of offers.' He told coach to give me a call, and he did.

"I got on a visit that week."

Stewart was a Buffalo. The struggle for recognition, however, continued. Colorado landed Scott, a California native regarded as second only to Ohio State quarterback Terrelle Pryor in the 2008 recruiting class, and four-star running back Ray Polk.

But Hagan liked Stewart, and his out-of-nowhere find soon began to outperform his more heralded recruits. Explosive and physical, he claimed the starting job with a 166-yard performance in a late September win over West Virginia.

This year, as Scott continues to struggle with ineffectiveness and injury — he is out three weeks after undergoing arthroscopic knee surgery — it's been no different. Stewart is a rising Big 12 star.

"A lot of people passed on Rodney, and I couldn't understand it," Stewart's high school coach, Anthony Thornton, told the Denver Post. "After he had that big game against West Virginia" last year, I got "a lot of text messages from assistant coaches who recruit this area. They said, 'Congratulations on Speedy.' I didn't do it, but I wanted to text them back, saying, 'Yeah, you missed on him.'"

Reach David Briggs at dbriggs@columbiatribune.com.

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