

Woelk: Expectations, reality don't always mesh at Colorado

By Neill Woelk Camera Sports Writer
Boulder Daily Camera

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Lately, I've been deluged with e-mails from folks recalling the "good old days" of Colorado football, and wondering why Colorado can't repeat them.

Most of the missives, naturally, refer to the Bill McCartney era, when Mac -- after a protracted rebuilding period -- put together a stretch of six consecutive seasons in which the Buffs finished ranked in the nation's top 25. That stretch was followed by two more seasons in the top 25 under Rick Neuheisel, giving the Buffs eight straight top-25 teams.

It is that stretch that Buff fans remember so fondly -- and it is that stretch that has given some CU fans a distorted view of the big picture when it comes to Colorado football.

A certain percentage of Buff faithful want to believe their program is -- or at least should be -- on par with the Big 12 and national elite. If Texas, Oklahoma and Nebraska enjoy success on an annual basis, they reason, so can Colorado. After all, the Buffaloes did compete with those schools, and every other program in the nation, for the better part of a decade.

But what some CU folks can't admit, even to themselves, is that the McCartney glory years were an aberration, not the norm. Those years were the result of a "perfect storm" that is not likely to form again anytime soon.

Fact: In the last 32 years, Colorado has enjoyed exactly 10 seasons in which the Buffs finished ranked in the nation's top 25. Eight of those came in the aforementioned McCartney-Neuheisel stretch, with the remaining two -- both under Gary Barnett -- coming in the last 12 years.

That means that CU has fielded a nationally competitive team roughly 30 percent of the time -- and if you look back farther through history, that number is about right.

The simple truth is that Colorado is not a top-tier football factory -- certainly not at the same level as Texas, Oklahoma, Alabama, Michigan, Ohio State, etc. Rather, Colorado has been an upper-level second-tier program, capable of the occasional appearance in the Top 25 and -- when the stars align -- a legitimate shot at a league championship and a top-10 finish.

That's the reality.

So what happened during the McCartney era that allowed Colorado to move ever-so-briefly into that upper stratosphere?

Recruiting. In the mid-1980s, the timing was perfect for Colorado to begin grabbing great players out of Texas and California. The Southwest Conference was crumbling, with several of its members on NCAA probation, and the others -- including the flagship Longhorns -- struggling under less-than-successful coaching. There was a mass exodus of prep talent from the state, and McCartney and his staff were there to reap the benefits.

Today, it's exactly the opposite. Texas is back on top. Texas Tech has improved, and Texas A&M is attracting its share of in-state talent. The task of convincing top-flight players from Texas to leave the Lone Star State has become a difficult task -- much more so than when McCartney was at Colorado.

Ditto for California. In the mid-1980s, Washington ruled the Pac-10. Don James did indeed get his fair share of talent from Southern California, but there were still plenty of great players in the state looking to go elsewhere. Today, USC corrals much of that talent, a greatly improved Cal program gets its share and UCLA appears to be rising again.

That leaves fewer players for out-of-state programs.

Oklahoma's slide. When McCartney was building his program, the Big Eight consisted of the Big Two (Oklahoma and Nebraska) and the Little Six. In what was an incredible stroke of luck -- part of Mac's "perfect storm" -- Barry Switzer was forced out at Oklahoma after the 1988 season when the Sooner program spiraled out of control.

That coincided perfectly with McCartney's rebuilding effort. The Sooners dipped under Gary Gibbs and Colorado quickly took their spot in the Big Two. It took OU athletic director Donnie Duncan three more tries before he finally found the right coach, hiring Howard Schnellenberger and John Blake before finally hitting upon Bob Stoops. In that interim, Colorado filled the void.

Administrative support. As McCartney was building his program, he received the full support of CU's administration. It meant greatly improved facilities (the Dal Ward Center) as well as a much-more cooperative admissions policy with the help of then-president Gordon Gee. That has changed dramatically. If the same policies that are in place today had been in place in the McCartney era, many of the great players Mac brought to Boulder would never have been admitted to CU.

Those factors -- along with a tremendous coaching staff -- conspired to produce eight years of unparalleled success in CU football annals.

They also created a distorted view of what Colorado football "should be" and what it actually is.

Aside from that eight-year abnormality, CU's football trajectory has always been a roller-coaster. Unlike Nebraska (decades of steady success under Bob Devaney and Tom Osborne), Oklahoma (Bud Wilkinson, Chuck Fairbanks and Switzer) and Texas (Darrell Royal and Fred Akers), CU has been an up-and-down program.

The difference is stark. When the football factories struggle (Bill Callahan at NU, John Blake at OU), they can recover quickly because of the infrastructure, tradition and support in place.

When Colorado struggles, the rebuilding effort is much more difficult.

Fact: Under Mack Brown, Texas has enjoyed at least 10 wins in each of the last eight seasons. That's one more double-digit victory season than Colorado has enjoyed in the program's entire history.

Those numbers aren't easy for CU fans to digest. But while Buff faithful might not admit it, such a disparity is not likely to change dramatically anytime soon.

For starters, Colorado does not enjoy anywhere close to the financial support from boosters that schools such as Texas, Oklahoma, Michigan, Alabama, etc., enjoy. Neither is Boulder as supportive of the local university as residents from Ann Arbor, Mich., to Stillwater, Okla., to Eugene, Ore., are to their schools.

Not good, not bad, just a fact.

Neither is CU alone in this situation. Colorado residents -- for whatever reason -- have never been overwhelmingly rabid boosters of any of the state's institutions. Rather, the state throws its undying support behind its pro football team. The Broncos are to Colorado what the Huskers are to Nebraska. The Buffs, Rams and Falcons, meanwhile, cater to far more tepid support.

Fact: Of the three major Division I programs in Colorado, CU has the worst facilities.

Fact: CU has never sold out every game in a single season, not even in McCartney's most successful years. The most Folsom Field sellouts in a single year is five, coming in 1993. Otherwise, Mac played before a less-than-full house at least twice every season, even in his very best years.

Meanwhile, even though the state's population continues to grow, the crowds don't. Heading into this season, the Buffs had sold out Folsom just nine times in the last 10 years -- and this in a stadium that is 25,000 to 30,000 seats smaller than several of its Big 12 brethren.

Again, not good or bad. Just facts, reasons why expectations at CU are sometimes out of whack with reality.

Can it change?

Of course it can. Anything is possible, but reality suggests that it's not likely. Unless there's a Boone Pickens or a Phil Knight hiding in the wings waiting to put millions upon millions of dollars in CU's pockets, it's likely that CU will remain what it has been for the most of its history:

With good leadership, a decent football program that has the chance to occasionally put itself in the national spotlight.

That's not a bad thing or a good thing.

That's just reality.

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cu football

Bufs quick to imitate W. Va. stars

By Tom Kensler
The Denver Post

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BOULDER — For the past week, Quentin Hildreth's teammates on the Colorado football team have been kidding him about having some divine practices.

Make that Devine practices. Pun intended.

On the scout team, the freshman tailback from Denver East imitates West Virginia's electrifying runner, Noel Devine, so the CU defense will have some idea of what to expect Thursday night at Morgantown.

Colorado coaches say it's impossible to replicate the speed of West Virginia, led by Devine and quarterback Jarrett Brown. But the 5-foot-8, 190-pound Hildreth is doing his part by impersonating Devine. CU wide receiver Toney Clemons has the task of mimicking Brown.

Hildreth, an invited walk-on, is redshirting this season. Clemons, a junior, must sit out this

season under NCAA transfer rules after leaving Michigan.

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"Q and Clemons, those two are doing a great job on the scout team," CU junior defensive end Marquez Herrod said.

Hildreth has a similar build to Devine (5-8, 175), but there's more to it. To imitate the Mountaineers star, Hildreth must study the game tapes as intently as do CU's defensive starters.

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Hildreth tries to match Devine's running style, his tendencies, when he likes to shift into another gear.

Scout-teamers face a new challenge each week, but this one is especially difficult. A junior from South Florida, Devine is as explosive as any running back in the country. CU defenders don't have to be reminded. In last year's 17-14 overtime victory over West Virginia in Boulder, Devine squirmed and sprinted for 133 yards on 26 carries.

Each time he touches the ball it appears to be a breakaway waiting to happen. Through three games this season, Devine has 320 yards and five touchdowns for the Mountaineers (2-1). He broke loose for a 71-yard touchdown run in the 41-30 loss at Auburn on Sept. 19.

"You give Devine the smallest gap and he takes off for another 20 or 30 yards," CU junior linebacker B.J. Beatty said.

In last year's meeting at Folsom Field, West Virginia also got 148 yards on the ground from quarterback Pat White. White is playing these days for the Miami Dolphins, but his replacement at WVU isn't chopped liver.

A fifth-year senior, Brown goes 6-4 and 225 pounds, and he has a stronger arm than his predecessor. Brown has gained 208 yards on keepers and also sports a 68.5 completion percentage.

"West Virginia is very, very fast. They're very

electric," CU coach Dan Hawkins said. "I don't know that you're ever going to stop them. You're just going to have to have to try to limit them a little bit."

CU junior cornerback Jalil Brown said attempting to tackle players like Devine and Brown can be a one-and-done proposition.

"If you overrun a tackle or take the wrong angle, that's the end of it," Brown said. "You don't get another chance to get a second shot at it. You have to play disciplined football."

Growing up in the Pittsburgh area, Clemons never played quarterback, so he's having a blast impersonating Brown.

"I always wanted to take direct snaps," Clemons said.

Clemons also knows the scout team is serious business. He was chosen to imitate Brown because the 6-2, 205-pound wideout has a strong, rangy build and is explosive in the open field.

"Brown is a big guy, a physical guy that's real elusive," Clemons said. "He runs well and is really athletic. I'm just trying to mimic him and showcase my athletic skills as well."

Clemons was asked if he also can throw the football like WVU's Brown.

"I can get it there. Put it that way," Clemons replied with a chuckle. "It might not be the

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Buff's wage battle with attrition

By Patrick Ridgell
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BOULDER — Peruse the Colorado Buffaloes' roster and, in some ways, the missing names are as notable as those still there.

Josh Smith, the receiver who racked up the all-purpose yards last year, transferred. Chris Perri would have been a senior defensive tackle this year. He's gone. Guard Kai Maiava isn't around; he might have helped a green offensive line. Same with pass rusher Drew Hudgins on the defensive line.

There are others. Lots of others.

Every college football program deals with attrition; CU is no different. The question is whether attrition at CU has been so excessive that it has become, to coach Dan Hawkins, a big problem.

Here's how he replied.

"The interesting thing is before I got here, of the three previous signing classes here, of the 60-some guys (those classes included), about 60 percent of them never made it to our roster," Hawkins said.

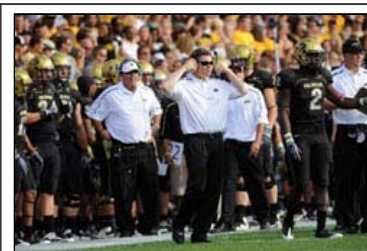
"From the time I've been here, about 60 percent (of Hawkins' recruits) have been on the roster.

"You always use that 50 percent as the Mendoza Line, but ... there's a lot of names from '03, '04 and '05 (recruiting classes), and I've never seen those guys."

The Buffs have only 14 seniors on scholarship; only 77 players are on scholarship in the program, he said. The NCAA allows 85. Inexperience permeates the defensive line. The offensive line is the youngest in program history. Hawkins, hired in December 2005, has signed four recruiting classes at CU.

That "Mendoza Line" to which he refers cites an old baseball cliché about a shortstop named Mario Mendoza who was flashy on defense, not so much as a hitter. Mendoza's average, or line, became thought of as the acceptable offensive threshold below which a hitter's presence in the majors could not be justified.

Mendoza hit .215 in his career. Hawkins' Mendoza Line is better than that 50-percent mark, but there's more to it.



University of Colorado coach Dan Hawkins, center, has battled attrition through his four-year tenure. **Joshua Buck/Times-Call file**

A glance at Colorado's 2007 recruiting glass:

Junior college players (4)

Player

Pos.Status

Patrick Gates

TB Not admitted

Drew Hudgins

DE Quit due to injuries

Nick Nelson

QB Eligibility expired

Chris Perri

DL Dismissed

••

High school (24)

Player

Pos.Status

2007 REWIND

New coaches must hastily assemble their first classes, so assessing the success and retention rate of Hawkins' 2006 group should come with a grain of salt. It included 22 players. Twelve are in the program today.

The 2007 class included 28 names on signing day. Sixteen remain in the program today. Seventeen of the 21 signed in 2008 remain.

The 2007 class remains in flux. Two of its members might return.

Receiver Kendrick Celestine quit about a year ago and returned home to Louisiana due to personal issues. He has returned to Boulder, taken a job and enrolled in school, hoping to rejoin the program in January. He says he didn't realize what he gave up when he left.

Celestine attends an occasional practice, where former — possibly future — teammates greet him warmly.

CU announced during the summer offensive tackle Sione Tau was "excused" for the season. He might be able to return in January, but that's to be determined.

Still, that class, the first Hawkins and his CU staff had more than a year to compile, provides CU with juniors and third-year sophomores, players who comprise the core of the program.

It included quarterback Nick Nelson, who couldn't beat out Cody Hawkins for the starting spot and never played much. His eligibility expired after 2008. Injuries cost Hudgins, who came to the program known as a strong pass rusher, his chance.

But others from that group included running back P.T. Gates, a junior college signee over whose capabilities Hawkins fawned. Gates didn't qualify. CU in recent years has lacked playmakers.

Maiava started at guard as a true freshman, moved to fullback that spring and then scrambled.

Academics and other issues have kept Tau off the field. Perri flashed some talent before being dismissed. Quarterback Matt Ballenger quit last spring when it became clear to him he wouldn't play.

CU's attrition has particularly hit receivers and offensive linemen. Only one receiver signed from 2006 to 2008 — Markques Simas — is on the roster today. And he made his debut last weekend. Anthony Wright signed as a defensive back.

Gary Barnett's final class in 2005 included five offensive linemen. One, junior college transfer Bryce MacMartin, played in 2005 and 2006 before his eligibility expired. The other four are gone.

Hawkins signed five offensive linemen in 2006. One remains — Eric Lawson — and he's now a defensive tackle. Tight end Nate Solder moved to tackle.

Hawkins said having 16 members of that 28-man class is not a bad ratio.

Ethan Adkins

OL Starting left guard

Tyler Ahles

LB Reserve

Matt Bahr

OL Reserve

Matt Ballenger

QB Quit team

Blake Behrens

OL Reserve

Kendrick Celestine

WR Quit; trying to return

Shawn Daniels

OL Reserve

Eugene Goree

DT Reserve

Josh Hartigan

LB Reserve

Jonathan Hawkins

DB Reserve

Mike Ittis

OL Starting center

Devan Johnson

RB Never qualified

Brian Lockridge

RB Reserve

Kai Maiava

C Quit team

Ryan Miller

“If you’re looking at most people’s numbers, you’re looking in that 60- to 70-percent range (of retention),” Hawkins said.

FOR COMPARISON’S SAKE

Nebraska signed 27 players in 2007, when Bill Callahan was its coach. Bo Pelini succeeded Pelini prior to 2008. Of those 27 2007 recruits, 17 were listed on Saturday’s roster. Of the missing 10, three were junior college transfers in 2007.

Missouri signed 27 in 2007; 19 were on its roster Saturday. Of the missing eight, four were junior college transfers in 2007. The Tigers have won the Big 12 North each of the past two years.

Kansas signed 22 in 2007; 17 were on its roster Saturday. Of the missing six, three were junior college transfers.

The Buffs who remain from that 2007 class and were interviewed for this story were unaware that 12 of the 28 are gone.

They aren’t concerned about it.

“I wouldn’t have even noticed,” offensive lineman Matt Bahr said. “But that’s kind of the nature of the beast in college football. School, football, personal life — there’s a lot of factors that play into being here and being able to be a part of this team.

“Some guys decided they didn’t want to be a part of it. Some guys just had bad fortune or whatever. The guys that are here, we’re all about what coach Hawkins is about — excellence with class is what we’re about. If you’re not about that, it’s going to be hard to be here.”

Said offensive lineman Ryan Miller: “You get guys that fit and you get guys that don’t fit. So I’d rather have the guys that fit and stay, and the ones that don’t, don’t.”

CU kicked safety Nate Vaiomounga off the team last November following an arrest for allegedly stealing a purse. He had other run-ins with CU police after signing with the program in 2007. He was academically ineligible in 2008.

When Hawkins unveiled his 2009 class, which grew to 20 players in the summer when Will Jefferson signed late, he trumpeted its non-football accolades. He said the recruits came from solid families. Fourteen had GPAs of 3.0 or better. Fifteen were team captains. Twelve played on a league championship team in high school. Five won state titles.

To minimize attrition, Hawkins said, he’ll seek similar qualities in future classes.

“Every time you take over a program and you look at the dynamics of who makes it, who doesn’t make it, there’s socially, culturally, athletically, academically, all of that stuff,” Hawkins said.

“Who can come into your environment and thrive? Sometimes there’s a little bit of a learning curve with that.”

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

OL Starting lineman

Conrad Obi

DE Reserve

Anthony Perkins

DB Starting safety

Lagrone Shields

DE Reserve

Markques Simas

WR Finally eligible

Josh Smith

WR Quit team

Lamont Smith

DB Dismissed

Sione Tau

OL “Excused” for 2009

Nathan Vaiomounga

LB Dismissed

Anthony Wright

DB Reserve WR

Patrick Ridgell