

CU Buffs' Conrad Obi coming into his own

Hard work finally paying off for Buffs' defensive tackle

By Kyle Ringo Camera Sports Writer
Boulder Daily Camera

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Colorado defensive line coach Mike Tuiasosopo walked off the practice field Thursday evening with his sense of humor intact in the face of mounting injury problems among his group.

With defensive end Nick Kasa already out -- likely for the remainder of spring -- with a knee injury and Curtis Cunningham battling a sore elbow, Tuiasosopo watched Nate Bonsu head for the training room Thursday saying something in his surgically repaired knee wasn't feeling right. Kirk Poston also suffered a leg injury that limited his participation.

That's four of 12 defensive linemen ailing.

"I might have to line up," Tuiasosopo joked.

But it hasn't been all bad news for the defensive line through the first nine practices this spring. In fact, there has been a very large bright spot. He wears No. 93.

Senior defensive tackle Conrad Obi always has looked the part of a major college defensive lineman at 6-foot-3, 310 pounds, but throughout his days in Boulder, he has struggled to earn playing time. That began to change a little last fall, but only a little.

So far this spring, Obi has been one of the standout performers and is regularly earning praise from head coach Jon Embree, who earlier this week said Obi had been moved to the first-team defense ahead of Will Pericak. Tuiasosopo chimed in Thursday.

"I don't know what it was like before, but he's doing some nice stuff," Tuiasosopo said.

Obi insists his lack of playing time in the past was never from a lack of effort. He said he always has worked hard to improve and to earn the trust and respect of coaches, but he rarely earned opportunities on game days.

Obi was frequently one to stay behind after practices the past two seasons and work on his own or with a teammate.

He said he didn't want to sound as if he was criticizing his former coaches, but he believes he is more in tune with his current coaches and scheme and it's showing up on the field.

"I think knowing what to key better," Obi said. "Coach Tui does a great job of teaching us what to key and now I'm actually looking at a better key and I'm reading it faster and I'm working on my stance and I'm getting out faster so I can react faster. See the block and then defeat the block."

Colorado played a one-gap scheme under the former coaching staff and has switched to a two-gap approach with the new staff emphasizing play-ing with aggression and speed. Obi says it suits him perfectly. Tuiasosopo said he hasn't done anything special to encourage Obi.

"I'm not sure, other than being myself and coaching the way I always coach," Tuiasosopo said. "I don't know what that means exactly. I know that if things aren't getting done right, he's going to hear about it. I don't know if it's senioritis or what it is. Maybe he's feeling like he's a senior. I don't know what it is, but the light is coming on."

Senioritis is a funny term coaches use to describe a player who seems to come around when the clock on his career is running out. Obi chuckled when asked if there might be anything to it with his sudden improvement.

"Every single day I came out here hard," Obi said. "Whatever it was I came out here hard and tried to get it right, you know

what I mean? So whatever it was. Go see coach extra, go run, go work on my footwork. Whatever I had to do, I always tried to do it. So like I said about the building process, it had to build up. I've been working since freshman year."

Obi described his junior season last fall -- his fourth in the program -- as "very frustrating" because he believed he could have helped the team but wasn't getting on the field to do so. He played in 10 games but for just 64 snaps or an average of six per contest.

He said he enjoyed his best winter of his career and credited strength and conditioning coach Malcolm Blacken for bringing a new approach and adding things to workouts that players literally never spent time doing in the past. All of that helped fuel a fire that Obi insists always has been burning inside him.

"I'm just trying to get it done," Obi said. "Extra film work, extra practice. I'm just trying to get it done."

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Embree: CU Buffs must earn trip to Hawaii

By Kyle Ringo Camera Sports Writer
Boulder Daily Camera

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There are no shortage of ugly trends and shortcomings Colorado football coach Jon Embree inherited from former coach Dan Hawkins, but the program's inability to win on the road in recent years is certainly at or near the top of the list.

The first game Embree will coach this fall happens to be a road game as well as an attractive trip for players. The Buffs play at Hawaii on Sept. 3 and Embree has been using the contest as motivation for his team almost since the day he took over.

First, he tabbed the game as the program's initial opportunity to add to its wall of big wins, a wall outside the locker room with bricks painted with the date and scores of big wins in CU history. Hawkins painted over the wall and Embree plans to restore it when his Buffs earn their first significant victory.

This spring Embree has used the Hawaii game to further fuel players by telling them he will only take players on the trip who earn their seat on the airplane. If that means taking less than the 70-player limit, so be it.

Embree outlined his approach this week when a reporter asked why offensive lineman Gus Handler had spent the majority of Tuesday's practice running laps. Embree said Handler was being punished by offensive line coach Steve Marshall. Then he referenced the season opener.

"I've told the team this and you will hear me say this all the time. We can take 70 to Hawaii, but we're not taking 70," Embree said. "I'm only taking guys that can play and can help us. If you can't do what we're supposed to do, whether it's getting treatment or going to class, we're not going to take them.

"It's like I told the team. We've lost enough games with everybody. So there is nobody on this team that we need to go out there and lose. We can lose without them. So we're going to try and take the guys who can help us win. ... Some guys have got the message, some haven't. The ones that won't will be here at home."

Colorado has lost 18 consecutive games played outside the state and 16 consecutive true road games dating back to Oct. 27, 2007.

Ready to name a

starting QB?

Embree said after Thursday's practice he is not opposed to naming a starting quarterback as soon as he believes the competition has been decided. He said it's possible that could happen as early as Saturday following the second scrimmage of spring ball.

"If we feel like, 'Hey, there is a clear-cut guy.' Then we'll do it," Embree said. "I'm not into playing games or trying to make the other team figure out all that stuff. When I know, we need to let everyone know cause the team needs to know who their leader is in the huddle and that guy needs to start doing things, whether its offseason throwing, and all those kinds of things, and establishing himself as the leader."

Embree said the entire staff will sit down to discuss the quarterback situation for the first time today and all his coaches will have a chance to share their opinions about who the starter should be.

Notable

Embree said the defense was wearing the offense out early in Thursday's practice before the offense redeemed itself somewhat at the end of practice.

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Friday, April 1, 2011

Learning to hate in the Pac-12

By Ted Miller

SALT LAKE CITY -- Ohio State-Michigan? Whatever. Auburn-Alabama? That's a quaint bit of hate. Oregon-Washington? The ranting and raving from the rain-soaked adherents in green and purple fleece just doesn't compare.

To what, you ask? Well, the hottest rivalry in college football, of course.

Utah-Colorado! (Cue "Psycho" shower scene music).

Doesn't do it for 'ya does it?

Think about your college football conference. Every game matters, but some matter just a bit more. Those are your rivals. You don't like them; they don't like you. It's a beautiful thing.

Now consider Utah and Colorado fans. The Utes, who are leaving the Mountain West for the Pac-12, are still under contract with arch-rival BYU for the next two seasons, but there are no guarantees that game will continue to be played annually (though the good money says it will). The Buffaloes, who are leaving the Big 12 for the Pac-12, no longer will play arch-rival Nebraska, which is skipping off to the Big Ten.



Their new schedules include nine conference games with teams that, well, they just don't have any strong feelings about.

"I'm sure we can conjure up some kind of hate for [Colorado]," Utah's colorful offensive tackle Tony Bergstrom said. "Tell us they're Communists or something."

Tony, they are Communists.

Expansion isn't a regular thing. Oh, the Southwest Conference got picked apart in 1996, and the ACC raided the Big East in 2004-05, but when teams jump from conference to conference -- particularly when automatic qualifying conferences are involved -- it sends strange ripples across sport's space-time continuum. The Buffaloes and Utes in the Pac-12 is a new thing in a sport that leans hard on its history to fuel the emotions of obsessive fandom.

You can't force the Utes and Buffaloes to hate each other. That's not how it's done. Confessed Utah linebacker Brian Blechen, "I don't have anything against Colorado."

So what must be done? Obviously, some Pac-12 team must commit a grave offense against Utah or Colorado. This, of course, will be mostly imagined, thereby making it easier to attribute it mythic status over the coming years.

"Invariably, something is going to happen in those games, and School X is going to be the school that you point to," Colorado coach Jon Embree said.

Embree also has been selling to his players that they are a part of program history because they, in fact, are making program history.

"Coach Embree said in the locker room that we get to start new traditions, we get to start new rivalries," Buffaloes quarterback [Tyler Hansen](#) said. "That's something to look forward to. Ten years from now, if the Colorado-Utah game is a big rivalry, we can say, 'Hey, we were the first game. We started that rivalry.' That could be something special."

There are potential angles for Utah-Colorado hate. Nebraska was all about red. Colorado fans therefore are not big fans of red. Utah is all about red, too. And everyone knows that Utah fans are jealous of the vastly superior skiing in Colorado. Or is it vice versa?

On perhaps a more substantive level, Colorado is entering the Pac-12 as an equal member -- in 2012, per the original agreement -- while Utah will get no payout from the conference in 2011 (other than an equal share of revenue from the Pac-

12 championship game), and partial shares for the two years after that (50 percent in 2012 and 75 percent in 2013). There is some "all are equal but some are more equal than others" at play here.

While the Buffaloes have been a mediocre team of late in the Big 12, and the Utes are a national power coming out of the MWC, there's still a bias that favors the AQ team. When Utah -- or TCU or Boise State, for that matter -- was making one of its undefeated runs over the past few seasons, some dismissed it with a, "They wouldn't be able to do that in the SEC/Pac-10/Big Ten/Big 12."

"Coming from the Mountain West, I think a lot of people are going to be look at how we transition into that," Blechen said. "Kind of like a statement on whether we can hang or not in the Pac-12. I think we'll be ready."

Of course, Utah's most recent game with a Pac-12 team was a win over California in the 2009 Poinsettia Bowl. Colorado visited California last fall. That trip went badly.

"A lot of bad," Hansen said with a pained look. "I'm looking forward to playing those guys. That's a big game for me personally because I didn't play well last year."

So there you have it: Colorado has a history with a Pac-12 foe.

Of course, not everyone fuels up on emotion.

"I've been playing different teams my whole life," Colorado running back [Rodney Stewart](#) said. "I don't care who I'm playing against. I just try to do my job. It's just football."

It is just football, but that's the good news for we lovers of rivalries. Football is too emotional and physical of a game for teams that regularly play to remain neutral about each other.

No hate between Utah and Colorado and other Pac-12 teams? Just give it time.



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Wednesday, March 30, 2011

Embree giving Buffaloes a gut check

By Ted Miller

BOULDER, Colo. -- If some Colorado players are struggling with new coach Jon Embree's long, taxing and physical spring practices, that's by design. Embree is a no-nonsense guy who wants to send a fairly straight-forward message.

Get good or get gone.

"What it's done is it has separated some guys from the standpoint of we now know who really does love football," Embree said Wednesday, eight practices into his return to Boulder. "For some guys, they don't want nothing to do with it. Some guys you thought you'd be able to count on, you find out that it's not in their heart. They are not tough enough. It's good to find that out now because we'll make adjustments accordingly."

For Embree, he's got some guys and some *GUYS*. He prefers the latter.

The Buffaloes are adopting a pro-style offense after running the spread under Dan Hawkins. They will go with a 4-3 base on defense after using a 3-3-5 -- base nickel -- last year.

Embree is honest: There are some talent voids that the coaches will try to cover up with scheme.

"We've got to attack," he said. "We can't just sit back. I'm an honest person. We are not good enough to just line up and say we're going to beat you. From a talent standpoint, we're not at that elite level yet."

Some notes on hot spots.

Quarterback: While most signs point to [Tyler Hansen](#) remaining the starter, Embree clearly doesn't want Hansen to feel too comfortable. Also, redshirt freshman [Nick Hirschman](#) has been playing better.

"Nick Hirschman is starting to figure some things out," Embree said. "The light is starting to go on. He still needs to be a little more decisive. I'd say the edge with Hansen right now is that Tyler just is a little more decisive with what to do and just the command in the huddle."

Skill guys: Embree likes running back [Rodney Stewart](#), though he needs to improve in the passing game, and receivers [Paul Richardson](#) and [Toney Clemons](#). But he's not thrilled with the depth. He named redshirt freshman [Tony Jones](#) when asked about Stewart's backup, but then he noted, "These freshmen coming in are going to have a great chance," he said. "If you are a high school skill guy, at running back and receiver, you will have a great opportunity to play here early."

A recruiting pitch? Absolutely. It's clear the Buffaloes need to upgrade their speed all over the field.

Tight ends and fullbacks: Embree feels pretty good about [Ryan Deehan](#) and [DaVaughn Thornton](#) at tight end, and he wishes Matt Bahr (shoulder) was able to practice. But, again, tight end is a recruiting priority (Embree, by the way, is a former starting TE for the Buffaloes, so he knows the position).

As for fullback, a position that Colorado didn't use under former Hawkins, converted linebackers Evan Harrington and Tyler Ahles are leading the way. But neither has been consistent.

Defensive line: The big story early was senior defensive tackle Conrad Obi not only asserting himself after a mediocre career but also displacing standout Will Pericak with the No. 1 defense. Embree noted that got Pericak's attention.



Colorado coach Jon Embree says he'll have to cover up some flaws with scheme. "From a talent standpoint, we're not at that elite level yet."

"Now he's starting to compete," he said. "He needed a fire lit under him."

Embree also made note of Curtis Cunningham, Kirk Poston and Josh Hartigan as impressing him. Defensive end Chidera Uzo-Diribe returned to action this week after missing early practices with a toe injury and impressed Embree: "I think he's going to be a really good player. Good power. Great first step. Explosive."

Further, Embree praised senior Tony Poremba and walk-on David Goldberg for making plays.

Linebacker: Embree is pleased with inside linebackers Jon Major and Douglas Rippy, and added that Derrick Webb was playing well before he got hurt (hip). On the outside, he's not as happy. Liloa Nobriga? "He's had a hamstring. He can't stay healthy," Embree said. Patrick Mahnke? "He's flashed a little bit," he said.

Secondary: Safety Anthony Perkins is out with a knee injury, but Embree called him "the leader" of the secondary. Ray Polk, who struggled at times last year, has made an impression. Embree also made note of Travis Sandersfeld and said Terrel Smith "has finally showed up."

Cornerback? The list is short. Embree only named Jered Bell as being consistent.
