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Embree is Colorado to the core

By Ted Miller

When you talk to new Colorado coach Jon Embree, two things stand out. First, as a former player and coach, his connection to the Buffaloes runs deep. Second, not unlike Colorado fans who feel a powerful affinity for the program -- those who remember the glory years under Bill McCartney -- the malaise of recent seasons eats at him on a visceral level.



New Colorado coach Jon Embree is hoping to return the program to the prominence he remembers.

Embree didn't negotiate the tricky coaching ladder just to become a head coach. He climbed it to become Colorado's head coach. As a competitor, he's always wanted to win, of course, whether he was at UCLA or the Kansas City Chiefs or the Washington Redskins. But Buffs fans should know this: Winning at Colorado is personal for Embree. Whatever he lacks in head-coaching experience, he may well make up for with a singular commitment to restoring football in Boulder.

"The plan was always to be back here," he said. "That was always the plan. This is the only job I've ever wanted."

There also may be an additional edge to Embree's drive to rebuild Colorado. Consider his résumé.

As a touted local recruit in 1983, he bought into what McCartney was selling and became an impact player as a true freshman tight end. In his final season, 1986, the Buffaloes overcame a 0-4 start to finish 6-6. Then it was off to a brief NFL career.

In 1991, he joined McCartney's staff as a volunteer assistant. In 1993, after a year as a high school assistant, he came back to Boulder with a full-time job, coaching tight ends, and he remained with the Buffaloes until 2002, sticking around to work for both Rick Neuheisel (1995-98) and Gary Barnett (1999-2002).

OK. This is boring. What's the point? Ah, glad you asked. Embree was in Boulder for 15 years as a player and coach from 1983-2002. What key years are missing? Correct: 1989 and 1990, when the Buffs won back-to-back Big Eight championships, went 22-2-1 and split the 1990 national title with Georgia Tech.

Embree signed with Colorado in 1983 because "I believed in the vision that Bill McCartney had for the program and where this place could go and how it could be special. It was really all Bill McCartney." And he experienced the highs and lows of a rebuilding program, including a 1-10 finish in 1984. But he wasn't there when Colorado reached the pinnacle, as a player or coach. Perhaps that's an itch that he'd like to scratch.

"I felt like we were always close," he said. "We were always right there. We were close. But we just couldn't get over the

hump."

Now consider Embree's staff: offensive coordinator Eric Bieniemy, defensive line coach Kanavis McGhee, recruiting coordinator Darian Hagan and linebackers coach Brian Cabral. They were all there in 1989 and 1990; Cabral as a coach, the rest as players (Hagan and Cabral were both retained by Embree, while Bieniemy and McGhee were new hires).

Make no mistake: This isn't about living in the past. But Embree believes a starting point is understanding what made the program great under McCartney.

"What he did is he gave us an identity," Embree said. "Who are we? What is Colorado football going to be known for? That is how he started laying that foundation."

That identity isn't an earth-shattering kaboom. It's fundamental football: Be physical, run the ball, stop the run, get the ball to playmakers and play good special teams.

"It's a real simple formula when you sit there and you hear it," he said. "OK, what's the big deal? But getting that done was not an easy task. ... Once [McCartney] got the mindset of the players in the program on how we have to win games, and why we do things a certain way, that's when it took off."

And when Embree talked to insiders both before and after he was hired, a lack of identity kept coming up.

"If you asked the players, 'What are the three plays we're going to run on offense if we have to get a first down?' They couldn't name one," Embree said. "The way we practice. The way we train. We had no identity. We just kind of showed up and played."

Traditions were lost. Players were griping. "A lot of guys didn't feel like it was true competition, that jobs were kind of given to guys," Embree said. The culture was negative.

"I told the team when I got the job: 'I saw a team that hoped they could win but didn't believe they could win,'" Embree said. "They were just showing up and playing and seeing what would happen. That's not Colorado football."

And, let's face it: The Buffaloes played the final two years under Dan Hawkins knowing the university wanted to fire him, only an [ill-advised extension in 2008 made that prohibitively expensive](#). That's not much of a motivator for players.

Of course, all of the inspiring talk of culture and attitude only goes so far. Look at this: [It's the 1990 roster](#). What do you see? Lots of really good players. Culture? McCartney won because he recruited a lot of guys who ended up playing on Sundays. A lot of those name guys -- including Bieniemy and Hagan -- came from California.

Hello, Pac-12 South Division.

Embree got a late start in recruiting but made a notable 11th-hour surge and [signed 21 players](#). Still, the Buffaloes will need a significant talent upgrade before they start talking about Pac-12 championships.

Embree is pretty honest about not really knowing what he's inherited, though he watched film from 2010 to evaluate returning players. The Buffaloes were riddled by injuries this past fall -- starting with quarterback [Tyler Hansen](#) -- so there's a bevy of potential starters who didn't make a full impact in 2010.

Embree said players are telling him they are working harder than ever before in the offseason. We'll see. Embree wants spring practices, which start March 11, to be physical and competitive. Positions are open. Players who were lost in Hawkins' doghouse will get second chances.

"It will be interesting to see who actually does it," Embree said. "Everyone can talk about what they are going to do."

Embree knows as well as anyone that new coaches typically say all the right things and inspire hope among a beleaguered fan base. Hawkins evoked almost manic enthusiasm when he arrived in 2006 after a hugely successful tenure at Boise State.

But it's probably not hyperbole to type this: No person in American wants Colorado football to be successful more than Jon Embree. That counts for something out of the gate.

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CU players look to impress at NFL combine

By Jeff Legwold
The Denver Post

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Offensive tackle Nate Solder (Denver Post file photo)

With the NFL scouting combine set to open Wednesday — special-teams players, offensive linemen and tight ends are the first to arrive in Indianapolis — three University of Colorado players are on the doorstep of the next step in their draft chase.

And in the tests, medical exams and workouts that will follow, all three have questions they'll have to answer to make an impression.

OT Nate Solder:

Solder could be the first offensive tackle off the board if things continue as they have since he completed his final season with the Buffs.

Scouts and personnel executives liked his work at the Senior Bowl. And though he had a couple of bobbles against some of the more powerful pass rushers in drills, he still has the footwork, size, reach and flexibility that move a player up the board.

The question for him will be whether he can consistently show the lower-body strength to anchor himself in pass protection and fire out in the run game.

He can show some of that in drills in Indianapolis or at the Buffs' pro day on March 9, but the decision about how that will go will also be based on what Solder has already shown in games.

"That's my feeling — most of the work is already done," Solder said. "I've played all my games."

But he can bolster the feeling he will do the work to improve all parts of his game with his approach in the interviews. His workout would come on Saturday.

CB Jimmy Smith: Smith is one of the biggest cornerbacks on the board, and few players outside of a franchise quarterback move up on draft weekend like big cornerbacks who show some speed.

If Smith, who will run with the last position

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groups on Tuesday, can clock his 40s in the low 4.4s, he could move into the draft's first day.

Scouts want to see speed and fluidity in the hips — that helps defensive backs move from the backpedal to turning and running with

Blog: All Things Broncos



The Denver Post's NFL reporters post analysis, notes and minutiae on this blog devoted to the Denver Broncos.

So Brown, who was the biggest cornerback there, also can move himself up with a continued good showing, especially when the defensive backs go through their workouts Tuesday.

"When I don't feel like getting up every day, I just think about what I need to do to get where I want to go," Brown said. "The combine is big for me, just as (the Senior Bowl) was big for me. I'll make sure I'm ready."

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the receiver deeper in the route — so if Smith shows that next week, he won't wait as long to hear his name called.

CB Jalil Brown: Brown played alongside Smith with the Buffs, so he received plenty of action as quarterbacks chose to go his way from time to time to avoid Smith.

And several scouts admitted they had limited expectations for Brown at the Senior Bowl when the week's worth of practices opened. However, after Brown had completed his week in Mobile, Ala., every scout I polled said they figured to grade him out better than they first thought he would.

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