

CU Buffs coach Dan Hawkins on pivotal season: 'Time to cinch it up'

By Kyle Ringo, Camera Sports Writer
Boulder Daily Camera

Posted: 07/15/2010 11:27:09 AM MDT

Colorado football coach Dan Hawkins is starting to sound like a man with the same sense of urgency about the results his team produces on the field as the fans and media who have been so critical of him.

"It's time to cinch it up a little bit," he said this morning during a phone interview with the Camera.

University leaders, including President Bruce Benson, Chancellor Phil DiStefano and athletic director Mike Bohn, have said this season will be a pivotal one for Hawkins. That trio decided last November to give Hawkins one more year to prove himself after a 3-9 season and plenty of acrimony among the fan base.

The Buffs begin Hawkins' fifth fall camp in Boulder in three weeks and probably need to produce the first winning season in Hawkins' five-year tenure for the coach to keep his job. Anything short of that likely will lead to a coaching change.

It's a pressure-packed situation Hawkins hasn't faced much at the outset of previous seasons in his career. But he said it's really no more pressure than he already puts on himself.

"I told someone the other day, I mean, I used to eat Maalox like it was M&Ms when I was a high school coach," he said. "You're driven by your own standards and motivations. That's what keeps you going in any walk of life.

"You never sit back and go, 'Yeah, well OK. It looks like everything is OK. So let's not try to get better.' I've always felt the same. It didn't matter if we were 13-0 or whatever."

Hawkins wasn't comfortable identifying a specific number of wins his team must produce this year, but he left no doubt he has a deep desire to prove he can turn the program around and reward those supporters who have stuck by him.

"That's why we do what we do," Hawkins said. "That's why you challenge yourself. That's why you take over a program and that's why you change venues to try to figure out the puzzle and get back on top."

Hawkins will have his most experienced team during his tenure this season with 54 lettermen returning, 15 starters and 48 seniors and juniors in the post-spring depth chart. He believes it bodes well for the coming campaign despite the schedule being tougher this season than last.

The coach's mantra with his team throughout the off-season has been encouraging players and assistant coaches to work each day on improving by three plays a game this year. Hawkins believes his team was just a handful of plays away from winning in most of its losses last year.

"I think for us, being able to go through all the stuff that we've gone through, you need to be able to learn from that and take some emotional energy into whatever it is you do," Hawkins said. "You take that experience and kind of go, 'All right, I've been to this stadium. I've seen that team. I've played. I've done this. I've done that. It's time to cinch it up a little bit.'

"I think that's certainly a progression we need to take. Any great pursuit is driven by some passion and some experience that comes from a variety of places. You realize how close you are but yet how far you are away and how much effort it takes to close that gap."

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Top priority for CU Buffs QB is efficiency

By Kyle Ringo Camera Sports Writer
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Posted: 07/15/2010 11:40:54 PM MDT

The Colorado football team will begin fall practices unsure whether senior Cody Hawkins or junior Tyler Hansen will be the starter when the season kicks off Sept. 4 in Denver against Colorado State.

Hansen was the starter for the final seven games last season and managed to hold on to the top spot through spring ball. Coach Dan Hawkins has a pretty simple and straightforward set of criteria for deciding who will get the job.

"It's just being efficient all the way around," Hawkins said. "No matter what that is. It's doing the things that a good quarterback does consistently to move your football team.

"That's not taking sacks and not turning it over and knowing what to do with the football and being a good leader and orchestrating some chemistry in there. It's all those things."

Offensive coordinator Eric Kiesau closely monitored the competition in spring ball, charting results in every part of practice from individual drills to scrimmage situations. That could continue through the first few weeks of camp to provide the most accurate and complete picture in making the decision.

If Hansen keeps the job, he will end Cody Hawkins' three-year run as the opening day starter. Hansen has replaced Hawkins as the starter in the middle of each of the past two seasons. James Cox was the last player, other than Hawkins, to start a season under center for the Buffs. Cox started the first game of the 2006 season before Bernard Jackson took over the role for the remainder of the year.

Hawkins says Buffs healthy

Colorado football coach Dan Hawkins said the Buffs have survived the summer unscathed in terms of injuries, but there are still a few weeks remaining before the start of fall camp.

Hawkins said players such as defensive lineman Nate Bonsu, wide receiver Scotty McKnight, place-kicker Aric Goodman and offensive linemen Max Tuioti-Mariner, Ryan Miller and Matt Bahr, all of whom were either injured during the spring or missed spring ball entirely, should be healthy for the start of camp.

That announcement came with a bit of a caveat, given that coaches are not allowed to watch players work out during the summer.

"They're doing OK, but we haven't been out there," Hawkins said. "So we're not watching them move. They're lifting and running and doing their therapy and all of that and we expect them to be OK, but, like I said, we're not out there."

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Published: 07.15.10

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Danny Summers

Keenan Stevens had one of those Wally Pipp/Lou Gehrig experiences last year.

Good thing for Stevens he was on the Gehrig side of the scenario.

Ten plays into the University of Colorado 2009 football season, Buffaloes' starting center Mike Iltis rolled his ankle. Stevens, who had played a grand total of one game — consisting of 10 plays — in three previous seasons, was called upon to replace the injured Iltis.

Stevens held his own against rival Colorado State that Sept. 6 day at Folsom Field in Boulder. Enough so that he ended up starting the final nine games (playing in 11) despite the fact that Iltis was healthy enough to start a week after his injury.

"They ended up moving him to left guard," said Stevens, a 2006 graduate of Lewis-Palmer High School and a former walk-on at CU. "It probably wasn't a good thing for him, but I believe that if you keep working hard good things will happen."

Stevens' strong work ethic and attention to detail impressed the CU coaching staff so much that he is listed as the starting center for his upcoming senior season.

"I knew that if I stayed with it long enough I'd get my shot and be ready for my opportunity to do the best I can with it," said Stevens (6-foot-2 ½, 295 pounds), who is majoring in anthropology.

Stevens' first start came against West Virginia (the Buffaloes' third game). He sat out Week 2 against Toledo when Iltis was back in the starting lineup, and played sparingly in Week 3 against Wyoming.

Two of Stevens' biggest thrills came in Week 5 at Texas in Austin, as well as in the final week of the season Nov. 27 at home against Nebraska.

"Playing in front of 103,000 people in Texas was pretty amazing," he said. "I've never experienced anything like that. And then going up against the great talent of Nebraska was a big challenge."

Against Nebraska, Stevens was matched up with Cornhuskers 6-4, 307-pound defensive tackle Ndamukong Suh — the second overall pick in April's NFL draft.



With a bit of serendipity and a ton of hard work, former Lewis-Palmer standout Keenan Stevens found his way into the starting lineup for the Colorado Buffaloes. Courtesy photo | Colorado University

"Keenan rose to the challenge and handled it very well," said Buffaloes' graduate assistant offensive line coach Ben Steele, who played three years in the NFL. "A lot of the success Keenan had will carry over into this year."

After hardly being a blip on the radar his first three years at CU, Stevens made the prestigious Rimington Trophy Spring Watch List this year as one of 37 centers named to the list. The Rimington Trophy is presented annually to the Most Outstanding Center in NCAA Division I-A college football.

"The harder you work the luckier you can get," Steele said. "Keenan is a product of that. It shows in everything he does. He definitely has the right tools and is always working to better himself. He gets all his work in and still makes time to come in and watch film."

Stevens is participating in voluntary workouts at CU this summer, while working 20 to 30 hours a week for a landscaping firm in Boulder. Training camp opens Aug. 4 and the season opener is Sept. 4 against Colorado State in Denver.

The former Ranger is one of the strongest players on the team, posting some of the best number in the weight room in the bench press (390), power clean (365) and squat (600).

Stevens has high expectations for the Buffaloes this season and expects them to be bowling again come the holiday season.

"We're looking at the Fiesta Bowl," he said. "Our offensive line has really come together and we have depth like we've never had during my time here."

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