

THORBURN: Jon Embree's CU Buffs will have to be road warriors

By Ryan Thorburn Camera Sports Writer
Boulder Daily Camera

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Oh, the lengths Colorado football will go to in the quest for a bowl game this season.

In 84 days, we get to officially say Aloha to the Jon Embree era ... out in Hawaii.

The Buffs will fly 3,360 miles (one way) to kick things off against the Warriors of the WAC. Due to the travel, the beaches, the luaus, the vacation atmosphere, the Warrior spirit, and so on, this is traditionally a distraction-filled disaster for visiting teams.

In 1990, on the day Ty Detmer had been announced as the Heisman Trophy winner, Hawaii thrashed BYU 59-28 at Aloha Stadium. The Warriors have defeated Pac-10 teams twice in bowl games in their home state -- beating Oregon State 23-17 in the 1999 Oahu Bowl and Arizona State 41-24 in the 2006 Hawaii Bowl.

A home victory over Washington in 2007 secured an undefeated regular season that also included an upset of Boise State and allowed Hawaii to be that year's BCS-buster with an appearance in the Sugar Bowl. Last year, the Warriors gave USC a scare before ultimately getting outscored 49-36.

If you want to talk old-school upsets, CU had an 8-0-1 record during the 1924 season before a 13-0 defeat at Hawaii on Jan. 1, 1925.

Paradise lost.

This year's opener is one of the more winnable and dangerous games on CU's unforgiving schedule. Tyler Hansen and Rodney Stewart will have to put some nice fantasy numbers on the board for the Buffs to snap a program-record 17-game road losing skid.

A non-conference game against new conference rival Cal follows at Folsom Field on Sept. 10. One of the first goals Embree will have while rebuilding the program is to establish dominance at Folsom Field. The Bears will be favored, but the Buffs will have more than a puncher's chance of winning this game.

Remember, even Hawk-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named -- who coached CU to 16 consecutive road defeats on his way out the door, including the historic fourth-quarter collapse/final nail in the coffin at Lawrence -- pulled off some memorable upsets (Oklahoma, West Virginia, Georgia) in Boulder.

CU then faces Colorado State in the Rocky Mountain Showdown in Denver. The key to beating the Rams? A reliable wake-up call and strong coffee. The game at Invesco Field will kick off at 11:30 a.m. Plenty of good seats available, including room for a party of 20,000 in the upper deck.

Despite all of the dire predictions for the 2011 Buffs -- recently in this space, one gloomy scribe had a four-win forecast -- CU could find itself 3-0 out of the gate.

And, suddenly, that 2,300-mile back and forth to Columbus doesn't seem quite so daunting.

Jim Tressel and Terrelle Pryor were going to be suspended anyway, but now that they've been deported from Buckeye Nation, Ohio State football is about as vulnerable as its ever going to be.

Big upset over the marquee Big Ten program at the Big Horseshoe? Still unlikely, although CU will be the team with the high-character head coach and dual-threat senior quarterback.

October should begin with a split -- a home victory over Washington State and a road loss at Stanford. The Buffs will have a chance to avenge the 1999 loss at Washington on Oct. 15. The Huskies have been down in recent seasons, even with

Jake Locker under center.

If the Buffs are 6-1 or 5-2 at this point, Embree should be clearing space on the mantle for the Pac-12 Coach of the Year hardware. If the Buffs are 4-3, Hansen and the seniors will still have a good look at finishing their careers on a winning note.

No matter what the situation is, thanks to the brilliant move a year ago from the Big 12 to the Pac-12, fans will be in for a treat with three attractive home games -- Oregon (Oct. 22), USC (Nov. 4) and Arizona (Nov. 12) -- in a four-week span. CU also plays at Arizona State on Oct. 29 in Tempe, a nice place to be in the fall.

A 2-2 record during this stretch might feel like 4-0 and would give the final road trips to Los Angeles (at UCLA on Nov. 19) and Salt Lake City (at Utah on Nov. 25) some meaningful story lines.

Add it all up and CU will travel an estimated 16,748 miles (seven round-trip flights and a bus trip to Denver) during a 13-game schedule that features only five home games and no bye weeks.

If the Buffs somehow manage to become bowl eligible against one of the nation's most difficult schedules, they deserve to use the frequent-flyer points for a fun postseason trip to the Las Vegas Bowl or the Kraft Fight Hunger Bowl (in San Francisco).

Assuming, of course, upgrades to the Rose and Holiday Bowls are unavailable.

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