

CU's Jon Embree fills void with Buffs4Life

Foundation has donated around \$200,000 to Buffs in need in 5 years

By Kyle Ringo Camera Sports Writer
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Long before he was the head coach of the Colorado football program, Jon Embree recognized the lack of a solid support system for former CU athletes who encountered tough times in their lives beyond school.

As a former Buff who played tight end at the school in the 1980s under former coach Bill McCartney, Embree saw some of his former teammates and other athletes at the school face health challenges and personal problems virtually alone. It bothered him.

"I just felt like there are so many great experiences you have here as a player, and for guys to just go away and not really have anything that brings us back. The university does their thing, but I wanted something where we did stuff for ourselves," Embree said. "We can't rely on the university because, A, they can't do everything we need, and, B, it really should be us helping each other from a family standpoint."

In 2005 he began organizing a non-profit organization to address the issue with former teammates James Smith and Charles Johnson. The goal was to bring together former Buffs, not just football players but athletes from all sports and every generation, to provide a place where they could all turn for help any time they needed it.

The Buffs4Life Foundation blossomed in 2006 just after Embree had been passed over as head coach of the program in favor of Dan Hawkins. The organization holds one fundraiser annually, a family-themed weekend gathering for golf, picnics and other outings with the proceeds benefiting a few former CU athletes and their families who are deemed most in need at that time.

The first family to receive help from the organization was that of the late Anthony Weatherspoon, a teammate of Embree's in the mid-1980s, who played fullback and died of cancer in November 2005. The charity raised \$9,000 for Weatherspoon's family that first year and has given approximately \$200,000 to Buffs in need over its first five years.

"We've had teammates that have died and left behind families and we give them Christmas presents and birthday presents cause we want them to know there are people there who care about them," Embree said. "For me, that is just ... I don't know if it's just how I'm wired or whatever, but I want to help. I want to help people. With kids who are here in the program, I want them to know that when they're done, there is something there that is going to help them."

Buffs4Life also has helped former CU quarterback John Hessler who was nearly killed a decade ago in a hit-and-run accident. Another former Buff fathered triplets and Buffs4Life paid for nannies for six months to help the family adapt to the big change.

"It's amazing how life can give you some (challenges)," Embree said. "To have someone there that can help you, I think, is important. And I think it's important that it's us doing it."

Last year and again this year, the organization is helping with some of the medical costs for Samantha Remington, the daughter of former CU linebacker Barry Remington. She underwent her second heart transplant last spring at 18 and recently graduated from Monarch High School with plans to attend Front Range Community College in the fall.

"Jon has done a phenomenal job putting it together," Barry Remington said. "Even when nobody was saying, 'Hey, we need to do this.' He said, 'Hey, I think this is the right thing to do.'"

Buffs4Life is also helping former women's golfer Brook Gillis (formerly VanWyk) this year. Gillis was recently diagnosed with Leukemia.

This year's event is next weekend in Broomfield and is sold out. Embree said he likes to cap the number of participants at 200 because it allows the organization to make sure the experience is a first-class event for those who participate.

Bufs4Life accepts donations from anyone and does not restrict participation in the annual weekend festivities to just former Buffs.

Former UCLA running back Maurice Jones-Drew, who was recruited and coached at that school by Embree and CU offensive coordinator Eric Bieniemy, has participated every year, Embree said. Embree said Washington Redskins tight end Chris Cooley, whom he coached last season, is hoping to participate this year.

"A lot of guys show up who don't golf, but they bring their families," Embree said. "It's great just to see all the kids, our kids, playing together."

Embree has a vision for the future of the organization that includes a network that will help find jobs for former Buffs. He said his major goal beyond being able to provide more help to former Buffs every year is encouraging more participation in the Bufs4Life weekend from former female athletes at CU -- a group that has never numbered more than 12 at one event.

"I just hope this continues to grow and we continue to be able to help people," Embree said.

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Heart of an angel: Samantha Remington gets another chance to live full life

Daughter of former CU Buffs' linebacker has second heart transplant

By Kyle Ringo Camera Sports Writer
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SUPERIOR -- Thump-thump... thump-thump... thump-thump.

The heartbeats of girls all over the world often are affected by boys. None more so than Samantha Remington.

The 19-year-old daughter of former Colorado linebacker Barry Remington and his wife, Brigitte, has a wide and warm smile and an infectious love for life both made possible by the boy's heart that beats inside her.

Remington recently graduated from Monarch High School and will begin classes at Front Range Community College in the fall. Just 13 months ago, she and her family were unsure whether any of that would be possible.

As she sat in class taking finals at the end of her junior year last spring, Remington felt her heart racing. It was pounding out more than 200 beats a minute. She felt as if she was in the process of running a mile but she was only writing. She called her mother and they headed to the doctor.

A day her parents had feared for years had finally arrived. The heart Samantha Remington received as a transplant when she was just 4 months old was failing after giving her life for nearly 18 years. She needed a second transplant.

She was born with a defective heart in 1992 after a virus her mother contracted during pregnancy settled in the organ. She waited seven weeks for a donor match then.

This time the wait lasted just five days.

A boy, the beloved son of an unknown family, had lost his life, and his parents made the life-saving decision to allow him to help others by donating his organs to people like Samantha.

A week before Memorial Day she hugged and kissed her mom and dad, two younger sisters, Cassie and Carly, and her little brother Jack and entered a surgical suite at Children's Hospital where Dr. Dave Campbell performed the same eight-hour procedure he had performed on Samantha 18 years earlier. It has become more routine now than the first time she endured it, but it still seems like magic.

"They did a really brave thing," Samantha Remington says of the families who gave her life once again. "I know it takes a lot of courage to do something like that."

A year later, she has passed all the tests the doctors have given her. They have lifted all restrictions and Samantha Remington has her life back. She is free to do what she wants. Climb a mountain, run a marathon, travel to Italy.

"She's a tough cookie and my wife is a tough cookie," Barry Remington, the Buffs' all-time leading tackler, says. "She pretty much keeps her going. We're blessed that she is here. She is a tremendous fighter."

Samantha is taking her renewed opportunity at life and running with it. She is working as a spokeswoman and model for the American Heart Association and she has teamed with her uncle to start the Samantha Remington Angel Heart Foundation (SammyAngelHeart.com).

The foundation's mission is to provide financial aid to other transplant patients and their families.

According to the Organ Procurement and Transplantation Network, 111,715 transplant candidates (all organs) were waiting for organ transplants as of Saturday evening. The Remington family knows all too well the physical, emotional and financial hurdles those individuals and their families will have to clear if they are fortunate enough to receive a donated organ.

Samantha Remington's most recent surgery nearly coincided with Barry Remington being laid off from his job. He had a successful career in radio sales and marketing prior to the economic downturn in recent years.

The Remingtons spend between \$25,000 and \$30,000 annually on health insurance for their family of six. It's a small price to pay compared to families without insurance. Some of the tests Samantha has required have cost more than that.

Buff4Life, a non-profit charity founded by CU football coach Jon Embree in 2005, stepped in to pay some of the Remington's medical bills after the second transplant last year and is helping once again this year. Fairview Friends Foundation also has helped the family.

The Remingtons said they are grateful and don't know where they would be without the help. The entire experience has changed them.

"It does give you a lot of perspective," Barry Remington said. "I think if you go through one of those kind of things, you kind of enjoy the simple things in life. It gives you kind of a reality check about how to look at things. You probably live more day to day than you would if you didn't have to go through that situation."

One month after receiving her second transplant last year, Samantha Remington's first real trip anywhere in public other than the doctor's office, was to the Buff4Life weekend outing where she addressed a room full of former CU players and their families and thanked them for their help.

"Great girl," Embree said. "She is definitely one of my favorites. I'll do whatever I can to help her. She is a fighter. You wouldn't know she has stared at death when you're around her. I was so glad we could help them, and I want to help them more because she deserves it."

During the four or five years leading up to her second transplant, Samantha Remington couldn't do many of the activities her friends could do because her heart was slowing her down. She had her first bout with rejection in the fourth grade and underwent spinal fusion surgery for scoliosis when she was 14.

Now, she is learning to live with the reality that she really can do anything she wants to do. Unlike other heart donation programs around the country, the transplant team at Children's Hospital in Denver encourages its patients to live life as normally as possible when they reach the stage Samantha Remington has now.

Children's Hospital in Denver averages 15 heart transplants each year. They have performed plenty of re-transplants like Samantha's, but they have never done a third, transplant team coordinator Dee Dee Gilbert said.

The average life of a transplanted heart is 18 years but some have provided life for 25 to 30 years. Each case is different. It's possible Samantha Remington could confront the need for a third transplant at some point in the future.

No one who knows her doubts her ability to overcome that hurdle, too, should she ever have to face it.

"She is just a strong girl," her mother, Brigitte Remington said. "I'm telling you. She is somebody you can learn a lot from."

Samantha Remington filled her bedroom with angels when she was a little girl. She even dressed as one for Halloween one year. She included them in the name of her foundation because she believes they are all around her -- in parents' eyes, the surgeon's hands, the generosity of former football players and others.

She thinks she might want to work in a hospital one day or some aspect of the medical field. She is a good public speaker, as Embree and many former Buffs would attest. So maybe a spokeswoman for a hospital or charity will be the right fit.

She has options. She has a life to lead. She couldn't be more thankful.

"I'm really interested in the human body," she said. "I love the human body and like science and stuff like that. It's really interesting to me and I can relate a lot to it. So it's like I want to give back."

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