

Ringo: CU Buffs must thrive to avoid rivalry with Rams

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If things go well for the Colorado football program over the next five years, the Buffs will find a new rival in the Pac-12 Conference to replace the rivalry lost by cutting ties with Nebraska and the Big 12.

If things go well, that rivalry will be developed probably with one of the other Pac-12 South Division teams and it will be born out of meaningful games that, perhaps, make or break the teams' chances of playing for the conference title and possibly participating in a BCS bowl game.

It's safe to say the rivalry isn't likely to be with one of the North Division teams because the Buffs won't play each of them every year. How do you make a rivalry out of that?

Can you really see emotional fans yelling at each other in an emptying stadium after a game or on message boards, "Just wait. In two or three years, it's payback time!"

Doesn't really work.

So the likely candidates are Arizona, Arizona State, USC, UCLA and Utah.

Maybe a player, a coach or a group of fans will do or say something in one of the coming years to throw a little salt on the wounds of the opponent and really get everyone's blood boiling.

Colorado fans will never forget or forgive the classless "Sal is dead. Go Big Red" sign painted across Interstate 80 by Cornhusker fans just inside Nebraska state lines prior to the 1990 game. It was, of course, a reference to former Buff quarterback Sal Aunese, who died from cancer during the 1989 season.

That sort of thing can fuel a rivalry even more than a three-game losing streak.

But, a new rival will emerge if things go well for CU.

If things go poorly for the Buffs during that same span, then five years or seven years or 10 years from now, the Buffs will be stuck with the rivalry they've got -- Colorado State. And at that point, there might not be any way to escape the Rams permanently occupying that niche on the CU schedule.

If in five years, the Rams are still viewed as the primary rival on the CU football schedule as they are heading into the 2011 campaign, then it likely means CU will have lost two or more times to the Rams in that span. It also would mean that the Buffs did not play well enough to put themselves in position each year for at least a chance at representing the south in the Pac-12 title game, taking some of the steam out of those November conference games.

Buffs fans and even former Buffs scoff at the idea of CSU becoming the primary rivalry game on the schedule in years to come, though it is the reality of the next two or three years at least.

Why is that? CSU always has been viewed as the little brother in the relationship and not a true equal the way conference partners generally are.

Generally, a rival is another team from your conference, though there are some exceptions. South Carolina and Clemson being one. A rival is a team with a similar track record in terms of wins, conference titles, bowl games, All-Americans, award winners, draft picks and fan support not necessarily over the life of the program. It can be in just a 10, 20 or 30 year snapshot.

CSU just never has measured up on any of those fronts. But if things go poorly for the Buffs in these initial years in the Pac-12, the two programs will likely continue to be seen as more in line with one another than at points in the past.

There are some who cringe at the notion that CU's new rival could become Utah. Maybe that is because Utah is joining the league along with the Buffs from a conference that CU fans view as inferior, probably because it included CSU.

But facts are facts, and over the past five years, they are clearly on Utah's side in any argument over which program has been more competitive and successful. It's not the Utes a lot of people will be picking to finish last in the South this year. It's the Buffs.

Perhaps we have the underpinnings of a rivalry right there.

The Pac-12 announced this week that Utah and Colorado will play this year on the Friday after Thanksgiving, just as the Buffs and Cornhuskers had since 1996. Same day, same uniform color to dislike, different opponent.

It's not out of the realm of possibility to think that one of the two teams could have some big dreams within reach heading into that game this year or in 2012 or 2013. Maybe it's a chance to get back into a bowl game for the Buffs this season and a chance to play for the conference title in 2012. Maybe it's a chance to play for a conference title this year or next for the Utes.

One team stealing that from the other in the final week of the regular season sounds like the start of a rivalry to me.

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