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Utah, Colorado prep for Pac-12 football

By Bud Withers, The Seattle Times

SEATTLE -- In Boulder, where Playboy magazine recently named the University of Colorado its top party school in the nation, some people are studying.

Inside the CU football offices, staff members have spent a few months eyeballing video of every other school in the new Pac-12 Conference, compiling a dossier on their 2011 opponents.

First-year coach Jon Embree assigned each assistant two Pac-12 teams to scout, just one of the ways the expanded conference already has affected newbies Colorado and Utah.

In his Salt Lake City office, Utah coach Kyle Whittingham recognizes the upgrade in competition from the Mountain West, but he also knows the benefits.

"We had several players in this last recruiting class that we'd not been able to get had we not gone to the Pac-12," he said.

Even as Whittingham points to the recruiting benefits of being in the conference, he says it's changing the way the Utes will go after prospects.

"Our assistant coaches have been great evaluators," he said. "We've made a living finding that diamond in the rough, and that's still going to be a big part in our recruiting.

"However, we feel (now) we've got to get in on the high-profile guys."

In particular, Utah must feel as though it has won the lottery. Consider that, as the expansion brushfire struck 11 months ago, Utah wasn't even going to be a part of a bigger Pac-10. The conference was on the brink of adding six Big 12 schools and becoming a 16-team colossus.

But when that fell through, the Pac-10 instead went to Plan B, and added Utah with Colorado, which the conference had designated as the first addition.

Now fast-forward to the announcement earlier this month that the Pac-12 has a TV deal in place that should pay each school an average of nearly \$21 million over 12 years.

Published reports put Utah's projected TV income this year in the Mountain West at \$1.2 million.

Whittingham couldn't suppress a wry laugh at the advancement.

"Commissioner (Larry) Scott did a fantastic job hammering this deal out," he said.

As if that's not enough for the Utes, there's this: In 2011, they don't have to play either Oregon or Stanford -- two BCS bowl teams last season.

In general, the move to the Pac-12 affords Utah a familiar role. If a team that finished No. 2 nationally in 2008 can perceive itself an underdog, that's the Utes.

"For the past several years, we've played with a chip on our shoulder," Whittingham said. "That's served us some motivation. Our players understand we're going to a very good conference. We've got to raise the bar in everything."

In the near term, the spotlight will be on two people at Utah: Norm Chow, the offensive guru who left Rick Neuheisel's staff at UCLA to install a new attack for Whittingham; and quarterback Jordan Wynn, who missed spring drills recovering from offseason shoulder surgery but is expected to be healthy by fall drills.

The picture is different at Colorado, where Dan Hawkins, once the face of a successful Boise State program, was fired after five seasons and replaced by Embree, who played tight end at CU in the 1980s.

Colorado comes off a 5-7 season, and given that it put three draftees into the NFL in the first four rounds -- including cornerbacks Jimmy Smith and Jalil Brown -- there's a suspicion the Buffs could struggle, especially on defense.

The new additions figure prominently into the schedules of Washington and Washington State.

Utah's first Pac-12 home game is against the Huskies on Oct. 1.

That day, Colorado will play host to Washington State in Boulder.