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college football

CU coach Embree taking crash course on new Pac-12 opponents

By John Henderson
The Denver Post

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BOULDER — It's not like Jon Embree doesn't have enough to catch up on. Colorado's first-year football coach spent the spring studying his new players, establishing recruiting contacts and reacquainting himself with college football after years of working in the NFL.

At least his alma mater's campus layout has barely changed.

Piling on like a USC linebacker is a task that burdens few first-year coaches. Embree is boning up on a Pac-12 Conference in which Colorado is a virtual stranger. If you think his roster's depth is bare, you should see the cupboard with Pac-12 opponent information. In the last five seasons, Colorado has played two Pac-12 teams — and we all know how the last game turned out.

Embree hopes the Buffaloes' 52-7 pratfall last September at Cal isn't an omen for what's ahead in CU's maiden Pac-12 season. While Utah is sticking to its routine of waiting until game week to study its next opponent, Embree has made scouting the Pac-12 a priority this offseason.

How much time?

"Over five days a week," he said.

Thanks to modern technology, he can scout as much as he wants, wherever he wants. Gone are the days when schools sent their latest game film overnight to their next opponent. Since 2005, Colorado has uploaded all of its game film onto a website that any conference school can access. Rivals go to the Colorado folder and pull up its games, just as CU did in the Big 12 and will do now starting with the Pac-12.

Embree doesn't even have to be in his office. He can watch video at a stoplight or on his cellphone. The videos are organized to the point Embree can see an opponent's nickel defense for an entire season. The players can too.

"It's unbelievable to have the ability to watch all the film, online, anywhere," Colorado video director Jamie Guy said. "When players used to have to study film, they'd have to come into the building and watch it in either their position meeting room, or on their own in the meeting room when no one's around.

"Now they can practice, eat dinner, study and go home and watch the film. They're further ahead of the game."

The CU staff won't need subtitles to understand



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what they're watching. Embree is one of seven coaches on the Buffs' staff who've coached in the Pac-10, which becomes the Pac-12 this fall when CU and Utah officially join.

Embree may have coached in the NFL the past five years, but he and offensive coordinator Eric Bieniemy coached at UCLA from 2003-05. And Embree's son, Taylor, is a senior receiver for UCLA, so the coach has watched the Bruins extra-close the last three years.

Embree is so ingrained in the Pac-12 he calls Washington by its local handle, U-Dub.

"You're going to get a league that's very diverse on both sides of the football," he said. "You might see the same scheme twice during the year."

Embree is either taking notes or watching teams on video four or five times a week. He has assigned each assistant two teams to scout as if they're playing them this Saturday. He watched Stanford's spring game on TV.

This year, the league may be as deep as any BCS conference. Washington State, the traditional bottom feeder, has nine starters back from a vastly improved offense, and Arizona State could be a national sleeper with 19 starters back. Oregon returns nearly all of its skill-position players from the team that played for the national championship.

Then there's Stanford, where quarterback Andrew Luck is the undisputed No. 1 NFL draft prospect.

"Those two teams?" Embree said. "Gotta pack a lunch."

When the preseason magazines come out this summer, look for Colorado to get a lot of last-place votes for the South Division. The Buffs return 17 starters, but the five starters who are gone include two cornerbacks who were drafted

last week, a left tackle taken in the first round and their best linebacker.

Said Embree: "We're the biggest question mark coming in."

*John Henderson: 303-954-1299 or
jhenderson@denverpost.com*

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New Jet McKnight flies friendly skies

By Rich Cimini
ESPNNewYork.com

MISSION VIEJO, Calif. -- [Scotty McKnight](#) was only 8 when he met [Mark Sanchez](#).

They were ball boys for nearby Santa Margarita High School, led by star quarterback [Carson Palmer](#). At halftime, when the big man on campus was resting, the little Carson wannabes took the field.

Each week, the ball boys and water boys teamed up to face their counterparts in a 10-minute game. They played in one of the end zones -- the long way -- taking it ultra seriously while providing halftime entertainment for the fans.

Who could've guessed that a lasting friendship and, quite possibly, an NFL quarterback-receiver tandem would emerge from that end zone?

"Obviously, it wasn't structured," said McKnight, recalling those "Wonder Years" moments. "It was like, 'Hey, get open.'"

The play calls will be more complex from now on.

The [New York Jets](#) used their final selection in last weekend's draft (seventh round, No. 227 overall) on McKnight, a wide receiver from Colorado. Even though they probably have done more pitching and catching over the years than [Mariano Rivera](#) and [Jorge Posada](#), this will mark the first time McKnight and Sanchez have played on the same organized team.



Scotty McKnight is the only player in CU history to lead the team in receiving four consecutive seasons.

They attended different high schools and went their separate ways for college, but they spent school breaks and offseasons working out together at Mission Viejo High School, where Sanchez is hosting about a dozen teammates for a weeklong passing camp.

To McKnight, this seems like old times. The reality hasn't sunk in yet.

"When it really will sink in, if it comes down to it, will be catching my first pass in a game at Meadowlands Stadium or my first touchdown," McKnight said. "That'll be the time when I think, 'OK, this is really cool.' As of right now, it feels the same as it did when we were little kids."

Jets blog



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Despite a prolific career at Colorado, where he owns the school record with 215 career receptions, McKnight wasn't considered a lock to be drafted. He's only 5-foot-11, 185 pounds, not unbelievably fast, and some teams assumed he'd wind up signing with the Jets as a free agent because of his relationship with Sanchez.

When the Jets picked him after taking a similarly undersized receiver in the fifth round, [Jeremy Kerley](#), it fueled speculation that Sanchez was behind the pick. They've already heard the whispers around town.

"Everyone around here is like, 'Oh, man, he's getting a handout,'" Sanchez said. "Are you kidding me? I couldn't even talk to people on the team during the lockout. It was just in passing, 'Keep an eye on my boy.'"

McKnight is in a tough and unusual spot. It's not often that you find a seventh-round pick in a pressure situation.

"I understand that it's going to be viewed in that way," he said. "I can't control what people say about me. I can control going out there and working. If the results are there, there's no room for people to speculate judgment on, 'Oh, this guy only got picked because of his friend.'"

If not handled properly by the Jets, it could create awkward moments, especially when it comes time to finalize the 53-man roster. But at the same time, it could have a positive effect on Sanchez, having his buddy around.

In the past, Sanchez has used McKnight as a sounding board, watching film with him and talking through plays and mistakes. McKnight likes to think he's a good listener, and he has benefited, too, improving his knowledge of NFL offenses.

NFL Draft 2011



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"He has a lot to prove," Sanchez said of his buddy. "It'll be a deep depth chart, depending on whether [Braylon \[Edwards\]](#) and [Santonio \[Holmes\]](#) come back. He's got his work cut out for him."

With a devilish grin, Sanchez added, "I'll make it difficult for him."

McKnight has endured his share of difficulties. In 2005, as a senior in high school, he was suspended eight games for writing threatening words to a female English teacher in a creative-writing assignment. The words were haunting and graphic, and the teacher's complaint was leaked to newspapers.

In an interview last weekend with the New York Post, a remorseful McKnight didn't deny anything that was written, but he called it a misunderstanding. He said the class was told the assignment never would be read. The controversy cost McKnight a scholarship to Boise State, but he walked on at Colorado and had a stellar career.

At his Pro Day in March, McKnight caught passes from you-know-who, who flew in from California to serve as his friend's personal quarterback. McKnight's performance was good enough for the Jets, who made the two friends teammates for the first time. Chemistry shouldn't be a problem.

"I'd be lying if I said [our friendship] wasn't beneficial," McKnight said. "We've been out here on this field, throwing, since we were little kids."