

McCartney provided winning formula for 1990 CU Buffs

By Neill Woelk Camera Sports Writer
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Here's something you can take to the bank:

No coach in America -- not Nick Saban, Bob Stoops, Mack Brown, Jim Tressel, Urban Meyer, Bobby Petrino or Bo Pelini -- would dare attempt today what Bill McCartney tried in 1990.

Pick your coach, pick your school, but rest assured, nobody would be crazy enough to do what Colorado's football coach did 20 years ago.

Simply, McCartney took the toughest schedule in America and made it tougher.

Months before the beginning of the 1990 season -- just a few months after Colorado lost to Notre Dame for the 1989 national championship -- McCartney agreed to play Tennessee in the Buffs' season opener in the Pigskin Classic at Disneyland.

Thus, along with a non-conference slate that already included Stanford, Illinois, Texas and Washington, the Buffs agreed to play another quality major conference opponent.

That gave the Buffs four non-conference games against teams that would end the season ranked in the nation's Top 25.

Think about it. Put together a list of programs who play that kind of non-conference schedule today and you can stop before your start.

Nobody does it -- and for good reason.

Nobody does it because it's akin to suicide. If you have plans of playing for a national title, if you have designs on a BCS bowl, you do your best to make the non-conference portion of your schedule a warm-up.

You don't risk your season before the conference schedule even begins.

But McCartney didn't believe in warm-ups -- and McCartney never ducked risk if there was reward at the end.

UCLA. Michigan State. Notre Dame. Oregon. Ohio State. Arizona. Stanford. Iowa. The Buffs played all of those teams *before* McCartney had the program turned around.

But Colorado's 1990 schedule might be one of the most difficult any college team has ever faced.

Certainly, it was the toughest in the nation in 1990.

"You have to test your mettle," McCartney said last week when recalling that 1990 season. "You have to see what your players have. When you're getting ready to play Oklahoma and Nebraska, when you're getting ready to face those kinds of teams every year, you'd better steel yourself for that kind of competition."

That's a lot of steel.

Seven of CU's 1990 opponents were ranked in the final Top 25. Six played in bowl games (Oklahoma was on probation and could not participate in the postseason).

Washington ended up fifth in the nation. Notre Dame finished sixth after losing to Colorado in the Orange Bowl. CU's other Top 25 opponents included Tennessee (8th), Texas (12th), Oklahoma (17th), Nebraska (24th) and Illinois (25th).

That's four non-conference games against ranked teams, two conference games against ranked foes and a bowl game for the national title.

Colorado finished with a 5-1-1 record against that bunch, tying Tennessee and losing to Illinois before beating the next five.

"I can't say that it's never been done before because I don't know that for a fact," McCartney said. "But how many teams have played the nation's toughest schedule and won a national championship? I can't believe there are too many."

20 years later

Next Saturday, Colorado will honor the 1990 national champions at the Colorado-Georgia game. A large number of players and coaches will be on hand for the weekend festivities. Stories will be retold, games will be relived and McCartney will have a chance to catch up with many of the players he hasn't had the chance to talk to for years.

McCartney is obviously looking forward to the reunion.

CU's former coach showed up for a recent photo session nattily attired in CU gear. He's lost weight recently -- he jokes that he's "getting back down to playing weight" -- and does not look like a man who celebrated his 70th birthday in August.

"It's been too long since I've seen or talked to some of them," McCartney said. "It will be good to catch up."

While McCartney has technically been away from the game for 16 years -- he announced his resignation immediately following CU's 1994 regular season finale -- the game never really left him.

He still watches games on television, from high school to college.

He attends Fairview High School games (his son Tom is the head coach).

His grandson, T.C. McCartney, the son of former Buff quarterback Sal Aunese, is on LSU's roster, where he plays for one of McCartney's former CU assistants, Les Miles.

"All my life, I've been following football," McCartney said. "Even when I've been out of football, this time of year is exciting. You can feel it. It's in the air. Coaches are always coaches."

And, yes, he keeps close tabs on the college game. He knows that Tom Osborne has returned to Nebraska in the role of athletic director. He knows that Bill Snyder is back at Kansas State. He knows he's every bit as young as those men.

But as rumors swirl that he's ready to make a return to CU should Colorado decide to make a coaching change, he simply chuckles.

"Boulder is a special place, a unique place," he said. "No other place in America has the package that Colorado has in Boulder. The town is alive. It's safe. The climate is terrific. Combine that with academic excellence and the football tradition, and there's no other place like it."

But does that mean he's ready to return if asked?

"They have a coach and I want him to succeed," McCartney said. "I'd like to see Dan Hawkins build Colorado into a winner."

Special season

If anyone knows how to build a winner in Boulder, it is McCartney. Like everything he's ever done, he approached it with a methodical plan, a strategy he was convinced would succeed in the unique environment of Colorado.

There was no secret sauce. Recruit great players. Assemble a great staff. Play a tough schedule.

And make sure the environment you provide for your players is one in which they can succeed.

"Five of my assistant coaches were black," McCartney said. "That was no accident. You have to create a culture, an environment where your players feel safe and comfortable away from home."

But that 1990 season was special in another way. The Buffs were coming off an 11-1 finish in 1989, a year in which they went unbeaten in the regular season before losing to Notre Dame in the Orange Bowl for the national championship.

That 1989 season is also the year that former Buff quarterback Sal Aunese died of cancer, a story that put the Buffs in the national headlines.

"Even in 1990, maybe the biggest single thing as far as that year goes was the year before when Aunese died," McCartney said. "Most young people never lose someone that young in their lives."

"It has a way of drawing you together in an emotional bond. I think we were still drawing on that. Our heads were knit together in a special way that helped us through adversity."

Mac the motivator

The 1990 season did not start particularly well for the Buffs. They tied Tennessee in the opener, barely beat Stanford a week later and then lost to Illinois to fall to 1-1-1.

But a huge fourth-quarter rally at Texas gave the Buffs a 29-22 win and put them back on the right track. They followed the win at Texas with a big win over Washington, then reeled off wins at Missouri, against Iowa State, at Kansas and at home over Oklahoma before a showdown with Nebraska.

"That Nebraska game was big," McCartney remembers. "We hadn't beaten them in Lincoln in more than 20 years. Nobody on my team was alive the last time we'd won in Lincoln. We knew that could be a mental block, so we took measures to extremes."

On the day the Buffs left for Lincoln, McCartney met individually with every player on the traveling squad.

"I put two chairs in the middle of the room," McCartney said. "Face-to-face with every player -- and we didn't exchange pleasantries. I got right up in their mustaches. I told every player I had to hear from him personally what I could expect from him at Nebraska."

"One after another, every player told me, 'Coach, I'm going to bring it.'"

The Buffs did indeed "bring it" -- but not before it was almost too late. After four Eric Bieniemy fumbles helped the Huskers to a 12-0 lead after three quarters, the Buffs rallied to score four fourth-quarter touchdowns, all by Bieniemy.

Colorado left Lincoln with a 27-12 win.

The Buffs then beat Oklahoma and Kansas State to finish the regular season, then defeated Notre Dame in an Orange Bowl rematch, 10-9, to give CU its first -- and to this date, only -- national football championship.

To this day, his former players still talk about McCartney's motivational abilities.

"When you have a bunch of talented guys who have the ability to be successful, you have to know how to get it out of them," former linebacker Kanavis McGhee said recently. "I think he realized what he had, and knew the potential within us."

"He had a way of saying the right things at the right times to get guys to buy into it. That's what made us successful. Within the team, there was a group of guys who bought what he was selling and took it to heart. That's why we won."

But maybe the most telling statement by one of McCartney's former players came from former wide receiver Mike Pritchard, who was asked to play tailback against Tennessee in place of a suspended Bieniemy.

"The one thing that gave me pause was that I hadn't run between the tackles in several years," Pritchard said. "But when Coach Mac first asked me to play tailback, my first thought was that I didn't want to disappoint him. He believed in me so much, I had to do whatever he asked."

That was McCartney. That was 1990.

And that's how a championship season was built.

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