

YAHOO! SPORTS

Discover Yahoo! With Your Friends

Explore news, videos, and much more based on what your friends are reading and watching. Publish your own activity and retain full control.

[Login with Facebook](#)

Colorado coach Jon Embree: 'How did we get here? How did this happen?'



By [Graham Watson](#) | [Dr. Saturday](#) — Fri, Apr 20, 2012 4:26 PM EDT

Jon Embree didn't think his first season as Colorado's coach would be as challenging as it was. He knew the program was at a low and winning games hadn't come easy, but what he didn't anticipate was how the decline would affect him emotionally.

Embree had spent 15 years in the Colorado program as a player and a coach. He was a tight end when the Buffs went 1-10 in 1984, the worst season in Colorado football history. But he was also on the team when it rebounded and made bowl games and 10-win seasons a regular occurrence. So taking over a Colorado team that had been so low for so long stirred a frustration in him for which he wasn't prepared.

"There was some just anger and whatever about, how did we get here? How did this happen?" Embree told Yahoo! Sports. "As a player or coach, there's only three years, four years out of 15 at Colorado that I didn't go to a bowl game. I was part of winning 10 games or more four different times at this program and now all of a sudden we can't win on the road. That's the alum, that's the former player, that's the guy that was here when program was arguably at its lowest point in the history of Colorado football. And you come in here staring at something that's similar to that."

"Last year, it was a hard year for me just going through those things just knowing the history that I have with this program and just knowing where we were and where we had been. You never thought you would be back almost to where you were as a player."

Colorado was 5-7 when Embree took over for Dan Hawkins in 2011. He inherited a team that hadn't had a winning season since 2005. Hawkins came from Boise State, where he had turned the Broncos from a I-AA team to a budding FBS powerhouse. But he wasn't able to work the same magic at Colorado.

The Buffs won six games in Hawkins' second season and then failed to win more than five the rest of his tenure. On Oct. 27, 2007, Colorado beat Texas Tech on the road — it was the Buffs last road win before they defeated Utah 17-14 in the final game of last year.

Embree knew this job wasn't going to be easy, but it was heartbreaking to see how bad things had gotten under Hawkins and how much work was needed to get Colorado back to the respectable program it was in the 1990s.

To that end, Embree didn't come into Colorado preaching to his players about winning national championships. He barely talked about a bowl game. He made them focus on one goal and that was to win on the road.

"We're far away from where I think we can be as a program," Embree said. "But as far as a team, last year, us finally winning on the road, I think it frees up the team this year to have an opportunity to talk about things like going to a bowl game. There's a lot of work that needs to be done and we're doing it, but you can't start talking about bowl games. That's why you never



(Jason O. Watson/US Presswire)

heard me say that last year, about trying to win a bowl or how many games we're going to win or things like that because we needed to somehow win on the road. And now that we've got that done we can talk about trying to find a way to win six games and get to a bowl."

In Embree's first season, he saw flashes of the damage the years of losing had done to the psyche of his team. Against Cal, Colorado hit a field goal with 30 seconds remaining to force overtime only to give up a 32-yard pass on first-and-30 and give up the game-winning touchdown two plays later.

Colorado had a similar late-game meltdown against Washington State. And then the bad thoughts started creeping in. The "here we go again" syndrome started to affect the team and Embree had no way to combat it because he didn't have many positive outcomes on which to draw.

"It was kind of like a self-fulfilling prophecy," Embree said. "I've been fortunate to be around some very good teams and the mindset of when you go into a game expecting to win versus hoping to win is totally different. And when you're in a tight game or you're in a situation where it doesn't look like you're going to win and you're on that side where you don't blink, you know you're going to win the game somehow, that's what you end up doing. Conversely, when you're one of those teams that find ways to lose games you consistently do that."

"It wasn't like it was something done intentionally or maliciously by the upperclassmen. They were trying to lead and help the team, but part of it was they just didn't know how."

Embree said the difference between this year and last year is like night and day. When he first walked into the CU locker room, he said he wondered if it was a funeral home because it was so quiet. He said players didn't know anything about each other except their names and positions. And now, he's seeing more interaction among players in different positions and guys wanting to be around each other instead of feeling like they have to be.

The bad luck hasn't gone away, though. At the beginning of spring, quarterback Nick Hirschman was sidelined with a broken foot. During spring practices, leading receiver Paul Richardson suffered a torn ACL and will miss the season. Colorado looked very rough during its spring game and Embree said he'd probably count on a lot of the incoming freshman to play key roles next year.

All told, Colorado's transformation won't be a two or even three-year process. This is a broken program that's going to need a lot of help to get back to where it was nearly two decades ago.

Embree said he doesn't use his experience or the team's 1990 championship as motivation. Instead, he asks players how they want to be remembered when they're gone. Similarly, these next few years will define Embree's place in Colorado's football annals as well.

"Now that they've had a little taste of success, if you wanna call three wins success, but winning on the road and some other things, they're feeling like there's hope," Embree said. "I think when you have something close enough in your grasp like that, I think you'll do whatever you have to do to make sure you don't go back. I think they have a good memory of what it was like but I don't think they sit there and dwell on how things used to be. I think they're focused more on how things are going to be, focused more on the future."

"Like" Dr. Saturday on [Facebook](#) for football conversations and stuff you won't see on the blog. And follow Dr. Saturday at its new home on Twitter: [@YahooDrSaturday](#)



Josh Moten (Ron Chenoy/US Presswire)



(Russ Isabella/US Presswire)

REPLAY

**5 YEARS
1 PRICE**

0 CONTRACT

CenturyLink Price-Lock Guarantee

Details

CenturyLink™

High-Speed Internet

Only **\$19.95**

a month when you bundle Home Phone Unlimited*

Learn More »

CenturyLink™

Copyright 2012 Dr. Saturday

Copyright © 2012 Yahoo! Inc. All rights reserved. | Yahoo! - ABC News Network | /