



Rodney "Speedy" Stewart (5) believes the Buffs can be full of surprises this season.
Photo Courtesy: Associated Press



Brooks: Buffs Have Plenty To Prove In Pac-12 Debut

Release: 08/29/2011 Courtesy: B.G. Brooks, Contributing Editor

BOULDER - It's a new era for Colorado football. But outside of their inner circle and their immediate families, not much new is expected from the Buffaloes.

As they enter the inaugural season of the Pac-12 Conference, the 2011 Buffs are being viewed by and large as the same beasts burdened by five straight unsightly seasons. Most national preseason projections tag CU as an also-ran in the Pac-12 South, with *Sports Illustrated* forecasting a winless (0-9) debut for the Buffs as they settle into their new conference digs.

Fine with us, said senior tailback Brian Lockridge: "Despite what anyone says, having those naysayers is the biggest blessing for any athlete, any person who wants to compete. You always want to prove somebody wrong, always want to be the guy who can do it despite anything anyone else is saying . . . yeah, having doubters and naysayers is a blessing for us."

BUFFALO EXTRAS



Watch:

Tuesday Press Conference - Players
08/30/2011



Watch:

Jon Embree
08/30/2011



Watch:

Jon Embree
08/30/2011

→ [Gameday](#)

→ [Buy Tickets](#)

But *SI* and others undoubtedly view the past as prologue. CU hasn't fielded a winning football team since 2005 - and that season produced a none-too-glamorous 7-6 finish featuring four consecutive closing losses and a coaching change.

And the bottom hadn't been reached yet.

Five losing seasons and another coaching change later, the Buffs have turned to one of their own - former tight end Jon Embree - to lead them out of their despair and into the Pac-12. Embree didn't arrive last winter from the Washington Redskins talking national championships; his only promises were to restore tradition and competitiveness. He believes if those things happen, other good things will follow.

"My expectations aren't in numbers (of wins) . . . they're about hitting you in the mouth and not beating ourselves," he said. "The only way to win is be the better *team*; we're not going to have the best players."

Embree's players appear to have bought in to the team concept, but proof will have to come in the Saturdays ahead - starting this weekend in Hawai'i. If not much is expected of them from outsiders, their mood is different.

"We're not worried about where we're slotted or any of that stuff," said senior safety and co-captain Anthony Perkins. "We just want to be able to go out and be competitive in all these games. That's our goal."

Added senior tailback Rodney "Speedy" Stewart: "We're definitely going to surprise some folks this year . . . I think us not being rated high has a lot to do with our past records and things like that. But anybody is capable of beating anybody."

That might prove to be Saturday's standing rule in the Pac-12 South, where CU is aligned with fellow newcomer Utah, the two Arizona schools (Arizona State, Arizona) and a pair of Southern California schools (UCLA, USC). If there's a dominant team among that six, it might be the Utes, whose inaugural season in a BCS conference might find them in the Pac-12 championship game, maybe even in their home stadium.

The Pac-12 North appears to be the power division, with Stanford and Oregon perched in most preseason Top 10s. They play on Nov. 12 in Palo Alto, but we'll get an earlier clue about the Ducks: Oregon opens Saturday against LSU, another top national favorite, in Arlington, Texas.

Breaking down the divisions, in predicted order of finish:

SOUTH DIVISION

•1. UTAH

Coach: Kyle Whittingham (57-20, six seasons; 57-20 career).

Last year: 10-3 overall, 7-1 Mountain West Conference.

Stadium: Rice-Eccles Stadium (45,017).

Top returnees: QB Jordan Wynn, WR DeVonte Christopher, MLB Chaz Walker, DE Derrick Shelby.

Pivotal game: Sept. 10 @ USC.

Coach speak: "Week in and week out we're fully aware we need to bring our A-game. We've faired fairly well over the last 8 to 10 years playing against the BCS schools on a sporadic basis. But as you mentioned playing week in and week out is something that we've got to be ready for. We feel like we've recruited well over the last several years and we've got good players, which is the starting point." - Kyle Whittingham

Bottom line: The Utes can discard that "BCS-Buster" tag that served them well in the MWC. They're now in a BCS conference and can prove they belong, beginning with their opening Pac-12 game against the Trojans. Featuring a veteran quarterback (Wynn was an initial CU commit) and solid players in both lines, Utah is talented enough to make an early splash in the South Division. But the real key is how the Utes hold up over the course of the schedule against BCS opponents. This is not a "one-and-done" postseason appearance against a more highly rated team.

•2. USC

Coach: Lane Kiffin (8-5, one season; 15-11 career).

Last year: 8-5 overall, 5-4 Pac-10.

Stadium: Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum (92,000).

Top returnees: QB Matt Barkley, RB Marc Tyler, WR Robert Woods, FS T.J. McDonald.

Pivotal game: Sept. 10 vs. Utah.

Coach speak: "We have to improve everywhere on defense . . . it hurt us so many times last year. You look if we just play two-minute defense in the games, we can be 11-2. So there are a lot of areas to address, but specifically on defense. Our back-end, two-minute defense and explosive plays, we had so many explosive plays last year." - Lane Kiffin

Bottom line: As critical as Utah's game in LA is for the Utes, it's just as vital for USC. The Trojans need to prove they're recovering from the Pete Carroll Era, are back on an upward swing and competent enough to compete in the South Division. With Barkley directing the offense, they'll have the firepower. But the defense, which allowed 400 yards a game last season, has to improve.

•3. ARIZONA STATE

Coach: Dennis Erickson (25-24, four seasons; 141-74-1 career).

Last year: 6-6 overall, 4-5 Pac-10.

Stadium: Sun Devil Stadium (71,706).

Top returnees: QB Brock Osweller, WR Mike Willie, C Garth Gerhart, LB Vontaze Burfict.

Pivotal game: Nov. 19 vs. Arizona.

Coach speak: "As you know, we've got a lot of football players coming back - guys that have started for two or three years. So it's an exciting time for us, obviously. It's a tough league, so many good football teams and good quarterbacks in this league, it's unbelievable the amount of quarterbacks that are good in this league." - Dennis Erickson

Bottom line: After his first ASU team won 10 games, Erickson's next three squads have averaged five wins a year. This is a pivotal season in Tempe, but with 31 seniors and 19 starters returning, the Sun Devils should be able to cope. The non-conference schedule features Missouri and Illinois, presenting two September opportunities to get an early read on Erickson's fifth ASU team. The conference opener is at home against USC, which edged ASU last season by a point (34-33).

•4. ARIZONA

Coach: Mike Stoops (40-45, seven seasons; 40-45 career).

Last year: 7-6 overall, 4-5 Pac-10.

Stadium: Arizona Stadium (56,002).

Top returnees: QB Nick Foles, WR Juron Criner, WR David Douglas, SLB Paul Vassallo.

Pivotal game: Sept. 17 vs. Stanford.

Coach speak: "Certainly going to three straight bowl games, we feel like we've developed a very solid program, taking the next step in becoming an elite program in this conference and in this country is something that we're going to work hard on. You know, and challenge our players to have the ability to put ourselves in a position to win a championship or compete in a championship game is something that we'll strive to do this season." - Mike Stoops

Bottom line: Finishing was a problem for the Wildcats last season; they started 7-1 then hit the skids. But Stoops' offense will feature some of the Pac-12's best receivers this season, and in Foles, a QB who can get them the ball. However, there might be a problem protecting him: the O-line was rebuilt. Plus, Stoops lost two of his assistants (Greg Brown, Mike Tuiasosopo) to CU. But with 23 wins over the past three seasons, the program appears to be on solid footing.

•5. COLORADO

Coach: Jon Embree (first season).

Last year: 5-7 overall, 2-6 Big 12 Conference.

Stadium: Folsom Field (53,750).

Top returnees: QB Tyler Hansen, TB Rodney Stewart, RG Ryan Miller, ILB Jon Major, S Anthony Perkins.

Pivotal game: Sept. 3 @ Hawaii.

Coach speak: "I want to improve the identity of our program. I want when people see us play, I want them to understand we're a physical program, physical team. Being able to run the football. I don't think we've run the football like we should." - Jon Embree

Bottom line: Given their 13-game schedule and no bye week, a fast start is imperative for the Buffs. CU needs a win and an early shot of confidence to jump start the Jon Embree Era and validate an off-season that was aimed at "changing the culture" in the program. The Buffs figure to have more talented teams during the Embree Era, but this one is not completely devoid of players. With a few breaks - read: no key injuries - CU could surprise some teams in its Pac-12 debut season.

•6. UCLA

Coach: Rick Neuheisel (15-22, three seasons; 81-52 career).

Last year: 4-8 overall, 2-7 Pac-10.

Stadium: Rose Bowl (91,500).

Top returnees: RB Johnathan Franklin, WR Nelson Rosario, DE Datone Jones, S Tony Dye.

Pivotal game: Sept. 24 @ Oregon State.

Coach speak: "I think in this business we all are on somewhat of a hot seat at all times. I mean, it just comes with the nature of the beast. Certainly expectations at UCLA are such that it's important that we fashion together the best season possible. I think we have a number of quality kids with the kind of experience that you can safely say they're going to play well. We've got to get lucky and stay healthy like every other team has to." - Rick Neuheisel

Bottom line: Neuheisel's team will have to show significant improvement to keep him employed, and the improvement must start at quarterback - the position Neuheisel played at his alma mater. UCLA has two new coordinators, having lost veteran offensive coordinator Norm Chow and defensive coordinator Chuck Bullough. The non-conference schedule isn't amenable to a quick start: The Bruins open at Houston, then return to the Rose Bowl to face San Jose State and Texas. Opening 1-2 would set a dark tone for the season. A father-son meeting will highlight CU's visit to LA on Nov. 19; Bruins senior receiver Taylor Embree is Jon Embree's son.

NORTH DIVISION

•1. STANFORD

Coach: David Shaw (first season).

Last year: 12-1 overall, 8-1 Pac-10.

Stadium: Stanford Stadium (50,000).

Top returnees: QB Andrew Luck, RG David DeCastro, FS Delano Howell, ILB Shane Skov.

Pivotal game: Nov. 12 vs. Oregon.

Coach speak: "Coach (Jim) Harbaugh came in and fought a lot of battles that I don't have to fight. My job is to maintain a competitive spirit. Like I said before, that is one of the things that he and I had in common. We were going to compete. We're going to fight. We have different personalities, but at the same time you can ask the guys when somebody crosses the line, I'll be nose to nose with them. I might not be yelling, but I'll be dead serious. There is a standard of play that we'll play up to, and it's my job that we'll do that." - David Shaw

Bottom line: The Cardinal features college football's top QB in Luck and plays its most significant conference game at home. Those two factors give Stanford a slight edge over Oregon to win the North Division. Still, there are significant hurdles for Stanford to overcome - namely losing former head coach Jim Harbaugh and the bulk of his staff to the San Francisco 49ers. Plus, the O-line has to be rebuilt and a receiving corps needs to be revamped, making Shaw's debut season a challenge.

•2. OREGON

Coach: Chip Kelly (22-4, two seasons; 22-4 career).

Last year: 12-1 overall, 9-0 Pac-10.

Stadium: Autzen Stadium (54,000).

Top returnees: RB LaMichael James, QB Darron Thomas, SS John Boyett, CB Cliff Harris.

Pivotal game: Nov. 12 @ Stanford.

Coach speak: "We're a young football team . . . we'll have 47 either freshmen or redshirt freshmen. We have

about 11 seniors on our football team. We graduated a tremendous amount of kids last year that had great character and understood what our football program was about and how we played the game. (But) we've got some good seniors coming back." - Chip Kelly

Bottom line: After playing (and losing to Auburn) in the BCS Championship game last season, the Ducks endured a tough off-season (see: Willie Lyles saga, Cliff Harris speeding). Kelly's first task when preseason camp opened was keeping his young team focused - and with LSU looming in the opener at Arlington, Texas, that shouldn't be a problem. The key for Kelly will be how much his young talent develops by the time the Ducks travel to Palo Alto in mid-November to play the Cardinal.

•3. OREGON STATE

Coach: Mike Riley (69-54, 10 seasons; 69-54 career).

Last year: 5-7 overall, 4-5 Pac-10.

Stadium: Reser Stadium (45,674).

Top returnees: QB Ryan Katz, WR James Rodgers, S Lance Mitchell, DT Kevin Frahm.

Pivotal game: Sept. 24 vs. UCLA.

Coach speak: "I've talked to our team about this for a long time, we're going to really, really have to grow a lot through fall camp and through our season. We had five guys that had off-season surgeries and missed spring practice. So as we get back into this thing, we'll have to grow a lot and be ready to compete all the way down the stretch, get better every day. The old-fashioned cliché that we use, and that's what we're going to have to be." - Mike Riley

Bottom line: Last season marked a sharp drop for Riley's program, which missed postseason play for the first time since 2005. Rodgers' health (two major knee surgeries) will be key, as will the play of Katz at QB. Catching UCLA at home in its conference should benefit OSU with a good start, but finishing better than they did in 2010 - losing four of the final five - will be critical for the Beavers.

•4. WASHINGTON

Coach: Steve Sarkisian (12-13, two seasons; 12-13 career).

Last year: 7-6 overall, 5-4 Pac-10.

Stadium: Husky Stadium (72,500).

Top returnees: WR Jermaine Kearse, QB Keith Price, RB Chris Polk, FS Nate Fellner.

Pivotal game: Sept. 24 vs. California.

Coach speak: "I think we've got a football team that you saw at the end of last season starting to play a brand of football that we believe in. That is one that is physical that believes in running the football and playing sound defense. We're fortunate to have veteran leadership as we grow. (But) we're still a very young football team. We've played 16 true freshmen last fall . . . The challenge for us is to find a consistency level." - Steve Sarkisian

Bottom line: The Huskies returned to postseason play last season for the first time in eight years and have most of their starters returning - with the notable exception being QB Jake Locker. If Price or Nick Montana (Joe's son) can successfully replace Locker, UW could play its way back into a bowl. But the O-line must be rebuilt and two

starting inside linebackers must be replaced. This season will mark the last in Husky Stadium in its current form; beginning in the off-season, the historic venue will be refurbished.

•5. CALIFORNIA

Coach: Jeff Tedford (72-42, nine seasons; 72-42 career).

Last year: 5-7 overall, 3-6 Pac-10.

Stadium: AT&T Park (41,195).

Top returnees: WR Marvin Jones, LT Mitchell Schwartz, SS Sean Cattouse, LB Mychal Kendricks.

Pivotal game: Sept. 24 @ Washington.

Coach speak: "I'm really excited about this team with the leadership, the work ethic, the team chemistry. I'm really pleased with how they've come together. They're very eager to compete. We have created a standard and expectation at Cal over the last nine years. Last season we fell short of that, and we're not hiding from that. We understand that there is a very fine line between winning and losing, and we were six points away from being 8-4 last year." - Jeff Tedford

Bottom line: The Bears will be breaking in a new QB, and for the first time in recent memory they don't have a proven running back returning. Cal's 5-7 finish in 2010 marked Tedford's first losing season at the school. He changed offensive coordinators and hired a couple of former CU assistants - receivers coach Eric Kiesau and secondary coach Ashley Ambrose. Meanwhile, CU hired former Cal line coach Steve Marshall for a second stint in Boulder. With Memorial Stadium being renovated this season, the Bears will play at San Francisco's AT&T Park.

•6. WASHINGTON STATE

Coach: Paul Wulff (5-32, three seasons; 5-32 career).

Last year: 2-10 overall, 1-8 Pac-10.

Stadium: Martin Stadium (37,600).

Top returnees: QB Jeff Tuel, WR Marquess Wilson, WR Jared Karstetter, WLB Alex Hoffman-Ellis.

Pivotal game: Oct. 1 @ Colorado.

Coach speak: "I think a lot of things are solved. Our running game, we're a lot more physical on the offensive line. We're athletic. We have experience. Our running backs are better. Our quarterbacks and then the continuity with some of our young receivers and Jeff (Tuel) are better. So all of those ingredients are going to equate to higher productivity. I know through spring football we were executing and doing things that we've never done at a much higher clip. So I think through the summer work and fall camp you're going to see a pretty explosive offense in the fall." - Paul Wulff

Bottom line: Pullman has experienced lean times under Wulff, whose Pac-10 record is 2-25 and is running out of time to convince his bosses he can win. The Cougars believe this is the season, but they'll have to show dramatic improvement in every phase. Their schedule is favorable, with Idaho State, UNLV and San Diego State their September opponents. So, a 3-0 start isn't inconceivable if all the talk of improvement has merit. With the Cal game designated a non-conference game for CU, the Cougars will be the Buffs' first Pac-12 opponent. Suffice to say, it's a big game for both teams.

CU Buffs' Ray Polk hoping to add playmaker to résumé

Free safety expects to blossom in junior year

By Kyle Ringo Camera Sports Writer
Boulder Daily Camera

Posted: 08/29/2011 08:34:37 PM MDT

A critic might say Colorado free safety Ray Polk has spent a lot of time on the football field over the past two seasons without making many big plays.

Coaches might say he's a work in progress and a player on the verge of producing plenty of those game-changing moments in 2011.

For now, Polk is regarded as a speedy, hard-hitting junior with all the physical tools of a star and the résumé of an average college player. He has played 1,070 snaps on defense over the past two seasons without producing an interception, forced fumble, fumble recovery or a sack.

If the Buffs are to take a step forward in their first season under coach Jon Embree and win on the road and possibly break a three-year bowl drought, it will be because players like Polk become playmakers.

Embree is as interested and excited as anyone to see how Polk responds to the challenge when the season kicks off Saturday for the Buffs (8:15 MDT) in Honolulu against Hawaii. Polk should be as excited as any Buff to start the year against the Warriors. He earned the Defensive Player of the Week last season against Hawaii.

Embree likes what he has seen throughout spring ball and fall camp from the 205-pound junior. He said one of the things he likes best about Polk is that he gets to coach him for the next two seasons and doesn't have to part ways with him after only one year as is the case with senior strong safety Anthony Perkins.

Embree said when he took over as coach last winter, one of the players he looked forward most to evaluating was Polk.

"I knew he could run, but I wanted to see if he could be physical," Embree said. "We found that out real quick."

Polk says his experience playing as a redshirt freshman and sophomore in 2009 and 2010 gave him the confidence that he can compete and even thrive at the highest level of the college game. He believes he's now beginning to master the mental side of the game.

He used to be the one receiving directions from teammates on the field. Now he is providing them.

"It's different," Polk said. "You're starting to see yourself step into that role where you're more of a leader on defense and you know a lot more than you did before. It's something I've been looking forward to and I've been striving to get to this spot right now. I'm excited. It's going to be a fun year."

In providing an analysis of where he fell short last season, Polk said he needed to have more awareness of how the offense was trying to attack the defense with route combinations and then knowing which areas of the field he had help and where he didn't.

He went in to the offseason determined to improve in those areas and as the start of the season approaches, he believes he has come a long way.

He cringes when admitting it, but a season-ending injury to Perkins last fall actually helped him develop faster than he otherwise might have. He went from understudy to leading man in one play. Instead of leaning on Perkins, he had players such as freshman Terrel Smith leaning on him for the second half of the season.

"Honestly, it was a bitter, bitter, bittersweet experience for me because on the one point, you never want to see your teammate go down, but then I learned a lot from being the older guy out there and having to know everything that is going

on on the field," Polk said. "It kind of helped me progress."

Polk joined the CU program as part of the heralded 2008 recruiting class. He was a four-star running back at the time in a class with five-star recruit Darrell Scott -- who has since transferred -- and lightly regarded Rodney Stewart, who has a chance to become CU's all-time leading rusher this season.

Polk said he never has regretted his move to defense even though he might have had more big plays to his credit by now had he remained a running back.

"There's two types of leaders, you can be a vocal leader, or you can be a big-play leader," he said. "I think that I'm starting to step into that role of making plays. I think that's a huge momentum shift for the defense in making that big play. It's great to be a part of this defense because we have so many play-makers. I'm very excited for this season."

[Close Window](#)[Send To Printer](#)

CU Buffs will need to slow Hawaii's passing attack

By Kyle Ringo Camera Sports Writer
Boulder Daily Camera

Posted: 08/29/2011 06:52:31 PM MDT

The Hawaii football team earned immediate respect at the beginning of last season by going toe-to-toe with USC in its season opener and ultimately scoring 36 points in an entertaining loss to the Trojans.

The Warriors open this season on Saturday at home against Colorado but coach Greg McMackin issued a note of caution Monday on the Western Athletic Conference coaches teleconference when he said his team is young offensively with only two starters returning, and it might take some time for the Warriors to reach the same level of efficiency and productivity as last year.

The entire offensive line is new and how that unit performs will be a key factor in the development of the entire offense. That group's play will also have a huge impact on the kind of season returning starting quarterback Bryant Moniz produces.

Moniz is considered a dark horse for the Heisman Trophy by some and a definite WAC Player of the Year candidate by most.

"I think he had a better supporting cast last year, more experienced," McMackin said. " ... I expect us to start a little slow but as the season goes on I believe we're going to really pick it up. I believe we can be as good as we were last year."

Moniz led the nation in total offense in 2010 at 367.29 yards per game. The Warriors throw the ball 60 times a game, which will be a big test for a CU secondary breaking in new starters at cornerback. But Moniz won't have his two favorite targets from a year ago to go to.

Wide receivers Greg Salas and Kealoha Pilaes combined for more than 200 receptions and nearly 3,000 yards receiving last fall. Salas was the second leading receiver in the nation and Pilaes was 11th.

The passing game in any offense is largely dependent on timing, a fact CU coaches are well aware of. How quickly this Hawaii offense can master the timing it needs and how effective the CU defense is at disrupting that timing will go far in determining the winner on Saturday.

Close Window

Send To Printer

The Field House — Blogs — The Denver Post

AUGUST 29, 2011, 5:38 PM

New CU staff already has Hawaii confused in film room

By **NATALIE MEISLER** |  No Comments

Now starring in Hawaii's film room: Adrian Peterson.

Hawaii coach Greg McMackin told the WAC teleconference Monday that there are so many new influences on the Colorado football staff that Hawaii's personnel is going to many sources for film.

With an acknowledgement of offensive coordinator Eric Bieniemy's last employer, the Minnesota Vikings, McMackin said his staff is looking at film from that NFL club.

McMackin said he had known and respected CU's new defensive coordinator Greg Brown for many years. As for special teams, McMackin is looking at CU special teams coach J. D. Brookhart's former Akron teams for hints.

ARTICLE PRINTED FROM THE FIELD HOUSE

<http://blogs.denverpost.com/colleges/2011/08/29/new-cu-staff-already-has-hawaii-confused-in-film-room/20066/>

Click [here](#) to print.

All contents [Copyright](#) © 2011 [The Denver Post](#) or other copyright holders. All rights reserved. | [Privacy Policy](#) | This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten or redistributed for any commercial purpose.