

Leaving the Big 12 behind, Colorado is now part of the Pac-12 Conference

Will Colorado forget its history with the Big 12 and Big 8 conferences as it steps into play with the newly expanded Pac-12?

New Colorado football coach Jon Embree thinks the Buffaloes can be aware of the past while building on the future. "I just want our players to embrace it . . . we have to know who we are and where we're going," Embree said at the Colorado Football Kickoff Luncheon.

A year ago, Colorado bolted from the Big 12 when it looked like the conference was falling apart. Nebraska accepted an invitation to the Big 10 and the Pac-10 was very interested in possibly adding six Big 12 teams - Oklahoma, Oklahoma State, Texas, Texas A&M, Texas Tech and Baylor. Colorado was possibly in the mix but Texas politics might have dictated that Baylor - not Colorado - would land on its feet.

The Southeastern Conference also courted some teams from the Big 12 South Division.

Colorado and Nebraska left but the 10 other Big 12 schools regrouped and saved the conference. No replacement schools were added but that could come in the future.

So, after decades of athletic competition with schools from Oklahoma, Kansas, Iowa, Nebraska and Texas, the Buffaloes are now headed West - along with Utah - to join the Pac-12.

"But the bottom line is, we're all done," he said. "I want (current Buffs players) to be able to stand up in front of the team ten years from now when they're done and tell them about their experiences and how it related to the things before them. We need to know about all the great things that have been done here - we've won a Heisman, two Butkuses, two Thorpes, a Mackey, a Davey O'Brien . . .

"We've accomplished some great things here. We've won a national championship, we've played in some of the biggest games in college football history. They need to know that, they need to understand what they're a part of.

"I'm just letting them know what their heritage is."

Embree isn't taking a great team into this new venture. Most preseason forecasts predict Colorado will no more than five of 12 games in football.

Embree thinks they will do better.

"Because I know me," he said. "I know my coaching staff. I believe in those players . . . that they've made unbelievable changes in their habits off the field, the fact that every guy is there this summer working out. I don't think that guarantees anything, but it gives you a chance."

Work habits have changed and Embree predicts more of a fighting spirit this fall.

"The most talented team doesn't always win - that's why you play the game. These guys will go out and fight and compete and we'll see what happens," Embree said.

Under fired coach Dan Hawkins, Colorado had five losing seasons in a row and were 5-7 last year. Embree doesn't embrace a scheduling strategy that avoids BCS schools and accepts "cupcakes."

Five seasons ago, Colorado lost to Montana State in its opener.

"You've got to play whoever they put out there . . . I just want to build Colorado. You've got to be excited about whoever you play; you've got to treat every (opponent) like they mean something," Embree said.

Colorado paid for an early release so it could begin playing Pac 12 football in 2011. Utah is exiting the Mountain West Conference and will also start league play this season.

Utah will replace Nebraska as the last game on the Colorado football schedule with a game set for Nov. 25 in Salt Lake City.

Utah-Colorado may blossom into a genuine replacement for Nebraska-Colorado but that could be just a dream considering the history of NU-CU rivalry.

Colorado and Utah are the Pac 12 South Division with Southern California (now on probation), UCLA, Arizona and Arizona State. The North Division has Washington, Washington State, Oregon, Oregon State, Stanford and California. Another reason Colorado jumped was for a more lucrative television package for football (which won't kick in until 2013). However, the Big 12 just signed a new deal that will sweeten the coffers of those 10 schools.

Colorado also cited a better academic climate in the Pac 12 as a reason for the switch and more alumni in Pac 12 states than Big 12 states.

Utah is 58-20 under Coach Kyle Whittingham and could dominate the first few years of a yearly match with Colorado.

In the Big 12, the conference championship game was played on a neutral field. In the new Pac 12, the game will be played on the home field of the qualifying team with the best record.

(The Big 12 will have to play a 9-game round robin conference schedule because the NCAA requires 12 teams in a league to sanction a championship game).

Oregon or Stanford will probably be favored in 2011.

Colorado hosts Oregon for homecoming on Oct. 22.

On Nov. 19, Colorado heads to Pasadena to play UCLA, which is coached by former Colorado coach Rick Neuheisel. The good news for the Buffs is that Neuheisel is only 15-22 in three years at UCLA (but he did trounce Texas last season).

Embree's son, Taylor, plays for UCLA and UCLA has two players that transferred from Colorado (center Kai Maiava and receiver Josh Smith). Plus, Colorado legend Eric Bieniemy is a UCLA assistant coach.

Colorado raided Arizona and hired two assistants, Greg Brown and Mike Tuiasosopo. Arizona coach Mike Stoops (brother of Oklahoma's Bob Stoops) hired former Colorado safety Ryan Walters to replace Brown.

This is odd. California and Colorado will play a "non-conference" at Folsom Field on Sept. 10. California spanked the Buffs 52-7 last season. That game will not count in the standings because it would give both schools an irregular number of conference games

Former Colorado coaches Eric Kiesau and Ashley Ambrose now coach for California while former California coach Steve Marshall is now with Colorado.

Will Colorado have any easy conference football games?

Well, maybe Oregon State. OSU has never won the Pac 10 title outright (they shared it in 1964 and 2000). Oregon State has been to the Rose Bowl three times but the last visit was 47 years ago (1964).

Colorado doesn't play Oregon State in 2011.

Washington State is another possible doormat. WSU has won only five football games in three seasons under Coach Paul Wulff (5-32 overall, 2-25 Pac-10). WSU comes to Boulder on Oct. 1, which is the first official Pac 12 Conference game for the Buffaloes.

Each Pac 12 team will play a nine-game schedule that includes five games within its own division and four games in the other division. The teams with the best record in their respective divisions will meet for the title on Dec. 2.

Oregon and Stanford are Top 10 candidates, coming off extraordinary 12-1 seasons. Oregon lost to Auburn in the BCS Title game while Stanford got an Orange Bowl win over Virginia Tech. Utah is coming off three consecutive 10-win seasons including a 13-0 mark in 2008. Southern California and Arizona return a host of starters including experienced quarterbacks in Matt Barkley (USC) and Nick Foles (UA).

"It's a very strong conference - a lot of diversity offensively and defensively," Embree said. "You'll see a lot of different things week-to-week. I know everybody says, 'SEC, SEC.' But I know you're not going to hear anyone say the Pac-12 is the weakest anymore. I think we've closed the gap. There's good talent, good players, great coaches.

"It's just an exciting time. The speed (in the Pac-12) might be as consistent across the board, but there's a lot of speed in this conference. I mean, Auburn didn't run away from Oregon (in the 2011 BCS title game). That just shows you...and then Cal holds Oregon to whatever, 13 points? So there's speed in this conference.

"If you just look at what they've done over the last couple of years, Oregon and Stanford...and USC, although no one wants to talk about them because of the NCAA issues - but you still play them so you'd better talk about them, you know?"

Embree doesn't discount WSU or ASU.

"... Washington State and Arizona State, just from watching them, could have very good years," Embree said.

"Washington State lost a lot of close games, but they have a lot of people coming back. Paul (Wulff) has done a good job of building that. He maybe hasn't seen the benefits as early as he wants to, but I wouldn't be shocked to see them do well next year. And Arizona State has a lot coming back, too. Dennis (Erickson) is always going to do a really good job and get his team ready. I mean every team is good."

Arizona lost to Oklahoma State 36-10 in the Alamo Bowl.

"It really is from top to bottom a very good conference," Embree said. "But I expect us to be (competitive) right away because we're learning how to be physical. The guys had a good grasp (in spring ball) of what we're trying to do offensively and defensively. And we don't have a choice - we have to (be competitive). I've told our guys we're going to be underdogs in probably 11 or 12, maybe all 13 of our games.

"Understand that now. We're not going to be the most talented team out there. That's OK. We've got to go play, fight, compete, muddy up the game, slow it down, speed it up - do whatever it is that you need to do to give yourself a chance. I think we need to have some success early because the kids are right there and that will help validate the stuff we've been doing and give them some more confidence. Then we'll see what happens."

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