

CU Buffs' Mike Ittis chose degree over football

Former CU center at peace with decision to leave team ahead of senior year

By Kyle Ringo Camera Sports Writer
Boulder Daily Camera

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During one of the early meetings with his new team back in December, Colorado football coach Jon Embree called out 24 players' names and asked them to stand in the auditorium of the Dal Ward Center.

A large percentage of the players on their feet at that moment were starters or significant contributors on games days in 2010, including center Mike Ittis, who had suffered a torn anterior cruciate ligament in the season finale against Nebraska. It was the second torn ACL of his career.

Embree then told everyone in the room that all the players who were standing had failed to produce a 2.0 grade point average in their fall semester classes. Embree took it one step further and said that the players who were failing in the classroom were probably a big part of the reason the team wasn't preparing for a bowl game for the fourth time in five years.

"It comes down, ultimately, to me just not taking care of my responsibilities the way I should have been," Ittis said explaining how he came to be among those standing that day.

Although it took six months to become official, Embree probably lost his senior starting center for the 2011 season in that moment, but he also might have set Ittis back on the path to graduation and a better future.

Ittis quickly regained a sense of urgency about his grades and started to feel conflicted about his future on the field. Football no longer felt as important to him as it had in the past, though part of him desperately wanted to rehabilitate his knee and help return the program to respectability in 2011.

Another part of him wanted to get healthy physically and academically. He had been a decent student earlier in his career. Ittis said it was important to him to regain his eligibility by doing well in his spring semester classes before making a decision about football. He did that.

After recovering from surgery and having many heart-to-heart talks with his family, Ittis chose a degree over one more season. He informed the coaching staff of his decision near the end of the spring semester and purposely didn't return to the building for nearly a week so that he wouldn't be talked out of it.

"During the course of those months, I really started reevaluating where I was in my life," Ittis said. "Football had brought me so far along. I couldn't have asked for anything more to be able to go play Division I football and get a free education for four years at a prestigious school. I started to look back on this last fall and how things had been going academically and where I was at and what I needed to do to graduate, and I sat down and talked with my parents a couple times, talked with my brother and realized at this point I need to start progressing."

By giving up football, Ittis also forfeited his scholarship. He remained on scholarship this summer, but will have to pay his way during his final year as he works toward graduation.

Ittis said he didn't lose his love for the game and he never doubted he would be able to rehabilitate his knee and be a starter and a leader again this fall. But he said he was also honest with himself by admitting that he didn't believe he could be successful in both football and the classroom.

"You get to these high level classes and you can't mess around," Ittis said. "You fall behind one chapter and you're just left in the dust."

Ittis said CU coaches and his teammates have been supportive. He said choosing not go through his final year with them was a difficult decision, but one he is at peace with now. He said the risk of another knee injury or some other kind of injury was a factor he considered.

"I also took that into account," Iltis said. "Do I really want to blow another knee out and then be limping around crippled for the rest of my life and not be able to play with my kids when I'm 40 years old?"

"The NFL is always a dream, but the way I look at it is football is a huge part of my life, but it really is only five percent of my life."

In an interview earlier this spring, Embree also told the story of how he called out the players in academic trouble shortly after taking over the program. He noted that some of them have left the program or been told they weren't welcome back. He said plenty have made dramatic improvements.

Athletic director Mike Bohn said earlier this week during a roundtable discussion with reporters that the football team produced the best team grade point average in the history of the program during the spring semester.

In a recent interview, Embree said the number of players who are academic peril has shrunk from 24 to just a few.

Embree credited director of academics Kris Livingston and her team for helping turn things around in one semester. He also credited his players.

"That says a lot about the players, that they want to," Embree said. "We had to do some things from a discipline standpoint, but they want to. They really do. I tell them, 'Don't tell me, show me.' And they're showing me. A lot of their actions are showing that they want to do it."

The Buffs are scheduled to begin fall practices in 12 days.

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