



Bill Hempen has elevated the Colorado soccer program to a nationally competitive status.

Photo Courtesy: CUBuffs.com



Brooks: Hempen Transforms 'Fear Factor' Into Soccer Success

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BOULDER – Bill Hempen doesn't sport a T-shirt or bumper sticker proclaiming "No Fear." Fact is, he's just a little bit afraid – and over the years it has served him well. Throughout a stellar coaching career, few things have motivated him like the fear of failure.

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"There was a fear factor coming here," Hempen admits about his arrival at the University of Colorado 10 years ago as the women's soccer coach. "I don't want to fail. I have not failed. We've had a couple of under-500 seasons, but I don't feel like those were failures. I think it's good to have that (fear factor). Entering this stage of my career, it's perfect timing."

Timing appears to be among Hempen's strong suits. In 1988, he was an assistant on the men's soccer staff when the Duke administration decided to start a women's program from scratch. The call went to Hempen, and he laid a foundation for a team that eventually would make the NCAA Championship game (1992), win the ACC (1994) and finish fourth nationally that season.

There are no guarantees in coaching, but Hempen was successful enough during his 15 years at Duke – he was a men's assistant for

two seasons before the school tabbed him to head the women's program – that he probably could have made Durham, N.C., his final career stop. Being ACC coach of the year three times and national coach of the year once stand solid on a resume.

But his marriage in 1999 to Duke assistant Stephanie Poncher – ironically, a CU graduate – and the birth of a daughter (Emma) started both Hempens thinking of getting closer to family. She is a native Californian, he a native Missourian; Boulder seemed a fine midway point.

Good move for him, his family – and CU.

BUFFS SOCCER NEEDED a jump start, and Hempen had the cables. After his first CU team finished 3-11-1 (10th) in the Big 12 Conference, the ascent began. His next two teams went 10-8-2 (fifth) and 15-4-1 (first), earning Hempen Big 12 coach of the year in 2003. Since then, his teams were consistent contenders, earning seven top-five league finishes. CU was 51-38-11 in the Big 12 under Hempen. His career record (Duke, CU) is 272-175-42, including 110-75-26 in Boulder.

Now comes the move to the Pac-12 Conference and a challenge that vaguely reminds Hempen of fashioning a program from the ground up at Duke and taking over a CU program in need of an overhaul. If there are similarities in entering a new conference, there is one major difference: With the Buffs, a foundation is in place, but not enough of one to allow Hempen to relax if he wants to realize his dream of making this a final coaching stop.

"I was at Duke for 15 years, a head coach for 13 in the ACC. I come here and spend 10 years in the Big 12. Now, if I can get 10 years in the Pac-12, that's some pretty good neighborhoods I've coached in. It's exciting," he said.

"When I made the jump to come here, it was a challenge. This (move to the Pac-12) is that same kind of jolt ... I've got to do better, do more. I want to stay here; I don't want to move again. There's some (accomplishments) I want here. We were so close in the Big 12 – three championship tournament appearances and we got one big trophy. Certainly there's a challenge ahead of us to get to that same level in the Pac-12."

Once again, that fear factor is kicking in.

Hempen enters the Pac-12 having lost top assistant Paul Hogan, who had been with Hempen for all 10 seasons at CU. They were (and remain) ultra-tight: Hogan lived with Hempen for a year. Hempen was Hogan's best man. Hogan is godfather to Hempen's son, Lucas. Hempen knew Hogan aspired to be a head coach, and last winter the call came. Hogan was named head coach at Coastal Carolina.

Hempen took his time replacing him, settling in May on Chris Gnehm, who had been an assistant at Florida Atlantic for nine seasons. Hempen's other full-time staffer is Tracy Chao, who is set to begin her fourth season.

Hogan's departure "was tough," Hempen said, "but we all hope our assistant coaches want to be a head coach. And he was really, really working to be one."

And as Hempen viewed that process, "It was like watching my life; I did almost the exact same thing," he said, noting that Hogan – from Atlanta – and his new wife – from Charlotte – wanted to settle in a locale nearer their families.



Bill Hempen, beginning his 11th year as head coach guides, the CU soccer program into the Pac-12 era.

"He was ready and excited about the opportunity," Hempen said. "It stunk that he had to leave, but I knew he was going to eventually. The time was right for him."

Hempen initially believed Hogan might hire Gnehm, whose resume includes about 60 appearances as a model/actor in various commercials (Jell-O Pudding, Cracker Jacks, Cheetos, to name a few), because the two were "good buddies." (Hogan calls Hempen and Gnehm "my best friends in the world.") But Coastal Carolina's athletic director asked Hogan to retain the school's assistant, freeing Hempen to approach Gnehm.

"Chris had worked in my camps and we had joked about him coming here...but I didn't want to rush into a hire," Hempen said. "He's coming in at a time when we're moving to the next phase – and we know we have to work at it. He's a high energy guy and he's been pushing it hard ever since he's been here. He's excited about this; it's a different challenge for him."



Hempen (center) lost long-time associate Paul Hogan (left) to a head coaching job but maintains a solid staff with Tracy Chao (right) and incoming assistant Chris Gnehm.

IN TRUTH, MOVING into the Pac-12 will be a different challenge for everyone involved with CU soccer. But Hempen is up to it, and he believes his players are also. Amy Barczuk, a junior midfielder/forward from Centennial (Arapahoe), said she and her teammates "know it's a huge season for us. We've got huge expectations; we want to get to the NAACs. But everyone knows that and will deal with it well."

Hempen agrees: "When I got here it was pretty slim pickings, but there's a good core group here now and they're equally excited about making the jump. So there's motivation from their point of view because it'll be a challenge for them. So it's not just me and my assistants feeling that jolt; the group that's here is on board, too. It should be a fun little journey we're about to embark on."

Hempen's players might chuckle at him describing anything as "a fun little journey." There might not be a more intense, demanding coach on CU's payroll. Here's Hogan on his mentor's style: "Girls go through the spectrum with Bill...he's probably one of the most demanding coaches they'll ever play for. They struggle the first year because he demands perfection, and that's unattainable to some degree."

"But he won't give a kid any slack for having the wrong gear, not having a ball pumped up, whatever. He's on them. They haven't been held accountable like he'll hold them accountable. But as they mature in the program, they're going to understand they're going to be held to high standards. As they get older and stay in the program, they accept it and at the end of the day they're going to be better people because of it." Hempen calls his style "fair," but also "extremely" demanding.

"I would hope they would see that I'm fair," he said. "They know they're all given an opportunity. I sleep well at night knowing that. I remember hearing Mack Brown (veteran Texas football coach) saying, 'At the end of the day, your players pick who plays by how they practice.' He's right. When you're not playing, it's not me who's not playing you, it's you who's not playing you. That's where practice comes in for us."

"Every day it's a challenge for our team. We're limited in some ways so far as staff, keeping statistics on everything...but we know enough about the kids on a day-to-day basis to make what we think is a legitimate judgment on who plays when, where, and understands my thought process. I really think if you ask our kids, if nothing else I'm fair. The kid who plays many minutes, the kid who gets spot duty, the kids who don't play at all...I have no problem with anybody asking them anything about our program. I don't keep a kid away from recruits because she doesn't play as much; there's reasons why. The kids are given a chance on a daily basis to perform and show me why they need to be on the field. In a word, I'm fair."

As for the demanding part, Hempen wants every player "to be uncomfortable enough to know that I'm paying attention. You get in a comfort zone...I've gone through that, you know? Like right now, I'm not in a comfort zone going into the Pac-12. I have to be better today than I've ever been, as well as tomorrow and the next and the next day. Those kids know I want their best and expect their best. I'll tell them when they aren't giving their best. But that's part of the deal. You give me everything you've got and I'll be fair."

Said Barczuk: "He's a good coach. He's definitely fair. He creates a level playing field for everyone with the opportunities they get. But he also demands a lot. He's hard on everyone and expects a lot out of us. There are high expectations for everyone...even more so this season."

"He'll call you out if you're not up to it, if you're slacking. But I think any college program you go to, it's a whole new level and when you agree to play a college sport much more is expected of you."

HEMPEN'S STYLE PRIMARILY is the product of his days at Meramec (Mo.) Junior College, where he played for Pat McBride, the first American-born soccer player to sign a contract in the NASL and a soccer legend in the St. Louis area.

"We worked so hard; you couldn't believe some of the stuff he made us do," Hempen recalled. "But at the end of the day, he was like the Pied Piper; he had to kick us out of his office so we'd go to class. We just loved everything about him. He was hard. He coached in the MISL, the St. Louis team. I tried out and he had to cut me. He's my favorite coach, but I wasn't good enough. I respected that. It was one of the hardest things for me, but he's still Pat McBride to me and always will be."



Bill Hempen has won 272 games in 23 years as a head coach at both Duke and Colorado.

The best coaches evolve, and Hempen believes his biggest evolution has been in his game-day sideline demeanor. "I want to believe this – and I don't know if anybody else sees it – but I try to let everything we do during the week, after it hopefully sinks in, that on Friday and Sunday (game days) that I'm not on the sidelines going, 'Get over here, over there, do this, do that,'" he said. "I hate that; there's several coaches you coach against and you're looking down there thinking, 'Is that person ever going to shut up?'"

"If I was a manipulator early, I think I've gotten away from it. At least maybe not nearly now what I once was...Let kids play; you can only give them so much information. They look over at you and half the time you're wasting your time because they can't hear you anyway – or they don't want to hear you. We work very hard during the week so that (games) are their opportunities to show they've been paying attention."

Hempen served as an assistant coach two summers ago on the U20 U.S. National Team with former UCLA Coach Jill Ellis, who since has taken a post with the U.S. Soccer Federation. That experience, said Hempen, proved "invaluable because I could see the thought process of a peer and what she was looking for and the kinds of players that are necessary to be part of a national program. That allows me to see what I need to be a part of the national scene here at Colorado and what will get us to that national competitive level."

There's a simple observation and solution applicable for CU: Draw more elite players from an ever-widening and deepening national soccer pool. While Hempen has been able to recruit very good – some of the very best, in fact – players from Colorado, he wants to break through on the national front.

"We haven't ever gotten that elite of the elite," he said. "Sure, Frannie Munnely was the elite of Colorado. Nikki Marshall was the elite of Colorado...but we haven't gotten that elite player from outside the state. I think when we get that one, then we'll hopefully be able to keep some of the best of Colorado here but also draw from outside – the elite player."

"Now, the difference between the elite player and the next player, that gap has closed considerably. So now it's finding that player who's elite to us and our program. Those kids have followers – other like players that hopefully can get that pipeline rolling in this direction."

Hempen has seen soccer become more competitive at every level in Colorado, but he wants to take it up a notch at his level. He's the "founding father" of the Colorado Cup, a four-team (CU, University of Denver, Northern Colorado, Colorado College) tournament that begins on Friday, Aug. 19. CU plays CC at DU (4:30 p.m.), with the host school playing UNC at 7 p.m. On Sunday, Aug. 21, DU plays CC at 12:30 p.m. at Prentup Field in Boulder, with CU meeting UNC at 3 p.m.

Hempen's hope is that after its first two years, the Colorado Cup becomes so popular among in-state soccer fans it outgrows its campus venues. He sees the event "bringing quality games to four campuses over a two-year period. It can be an awesome way to start the season – just jump in, let's get after it. It's a great opportunity – a celebration of kids in our state, a chance for them to see what hard work and determination can bring.

"And, yeah, it'll be a challenge for us...if you look at it from a glass-half-empty perspective, it's like what have I got to gain playing in those games? If you look beyond at what it can do for the games in the state, it's awesome, and I think the kids will be excited to play in this to kick the season off."

For the Buffs, it's a different way to begin what will be a very different season. They're also counting on it being a very good season. And if their coach is approaching it just a little fearfully, that's just the way it should be.

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