



Jon Embree plans to beef up his special teams with more starters.

Photo Courtesy: Associated Press



Brooks: More Starters To Show Up On Special Teams

Release: 09/26/2011 Courtesy: B.G. Brooks, Contributing Editor

BOULDER - Jon Embree believes he has a remedy for Colorado's ragged and ineffective special teams play, but he concedes the fix might come at a high price.

Still mirroring his disappointment from Saturday's 37-17 loss at Ohio State, Embree said on Monday that he plans more liberal use of starters on special teams when the Buffaloes play their first-ever Pac-12 Conference game Saturday at Folsom Field against Washington State (1:30 p.m., FCS).

Terming CU's special teams work last weekend in Columbus "obviously pathetic," Embree acknowledged the risk of exposing starters to injury by using them on special teams. But in light of the Buffs' poor showing in those areas against the Buckeyes and with nine league games looming, "It's damned if you do, damned if you don't," he said. "We're at the point if we have to play 30 guys, we'll play 30 guys the whole game. That's where we are."

The Buffs rank near the bottom of NCAA statistics in several special teams categories: 120th (last) in kickoff return yardage (13.85); 119th in kickoff coverage (31.27 average yards allowed); 89th in punt returns (5.4 yards); and 78th in punt coverage (9.7 average yards allowed).

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Ohio State averaged 67.5 return yards on a pair of kickoffs, including one 90-yarder, with a 75-yard return of the opening kickoff nullified by penalty. CU, meanwhile, averaged only 12.6 yards returning eight OSU kickoffs. The Buffs also had yet another kickoff that went out of bounds and suffered additional poor field position after a pair of short rugby punts.

Embree said he went into the season's first month realizing his team's lack of overall depth, "So you try to protect some guys . . . for example, how many special teams do you put (freshman) Greg Henderson on? He's your only starting corner. You risk an injury to him. We have that at a few positions where there's not depth behind a starter and you want to be leery of exposing them on those plays and limit the chance of injury.

"You play a team with (Ohio State's) kind of speed and size . . . that's the reason for a lot of those penalties. We had guys who couldn't get in position, so they hold. That's what happens on special teams when you get outrun 30 or 40 yards down the field and you're trying to get a guy - you end up grabbing him because you can't run with him. So the starters are just going to have to go . . . You just hope you can stay injury free."

CU's first three opponents, said Embree, didn't expose coverage or return units manned mostly by backups: "We were able to get away with it some against Hawaii, Cal and CSU, but we won't against Stanford, USC, Oregon - some of those teams that are going to be that same creature you just played.

"We tried to give some guys, some backups, some opportunities - guys who might figure into some things and keep them in the game and help us so they're not going into a regular position cold."

Embree also is contemplating further reducing his travel roster for conference road trips. CU was allowed to take 70 players to Columbus, but Embree elected to travel 64. "I'm not willing to bring a guy just to have a guy," he said. "We could be down to 58, 56, for Stanford, with the changes on (special) teams and some other things. It is what it is. It's got to be guys who are all in. We'll keep on it."

After Saturday's Pac-12 opener, the Buffs have consecutive road games at Stanford (Oct. 8, 4:30 p.m. MDT) and at Washington (Oct. 15, kickoff time TBD).

CU's 20-point loss to what many believed was an average Ohio State team underscored Embree's contention that the Buffs haven't learned to capitalize on opportunities. "They were there . . . but our guys didn't take advantage of some great ones," he said. "That's the great thing about playing the kind of schedule we do here - there are great opportunities to do things every week. If you don't look at it like that . . . being a competitor and getting to go do things, then you're missing out. You don't get to hit reset; there are no do-overs."

The Buffs ended non-conference play at 1-3 - certainly not the start Embree envisioned for his first CU team. "I thought it was critical to get a fast start; I thought that would help their confidence," he said, alluding to the Buffs' 5-7 finish in 2010 and five consecutive losing seasons. "But with Pac-12 play starting (Saturday), we've got nine more games ahead of us . . . there's a lot out there if we take advantage of our opportunities."

Embree heard from several friends and colleagues upon returning from Columbus. Not so surprising was a conversation with his former CU coach, Bill McCartney. But perhaps topping the list of surprising telephone calls was one from Ohio State coach Luke Fickell, with whom Embree said he had "a great conversation for about 20 minutes."

Embree planned to share some of Fickell's thoughts with the Buffs at Monday's team meeting, specifically "what they thought from a personnel standpoint, what they thought from a scheme standpoint. They went into that game amped up; they looked at us as a formidable opponent. There were some (CU) guys they were really trying to key in on. He was a little surprised at the margin . . . yeah, he was a little bit surprised."

In Saturday's aftermath, Embree mused that maybe he was "asking too much" of his players. By Monday at midday, it was clear he had re-thought that. He said he was still "evaluating things" and wanted to gauge some players' responses on "the special teams deal or whatever. Trust me, we're not going to lower the standard. We're going to keep on it. I'm mad at myself because I gave some guys too much of an opportunity to contribute.

You'd like to have a lot contributing (and) I felt like there were some guys who could have helped and have been good contributors on (special) teams."

Following the game, he said a number of starters volunteered to play special teams: "They know why I was doing it the way I was doing it . . . but they're like, 'I don't care if I'm on all four (special teams), or two or three of the four.'

"We'll see. It's a fine line, because I'm not lowering the standard. I guess what I've got to see is if the standard's too high, the only way you can fix that is to recruit people in who don't think it's too high. You've just got to keep improving and get them to see it the same way you do."

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CU Buffs prepare to deal with Washington State passing attack

By Natalie Meisler
The Denver Post

Posted: 09/27/2011 01:00:00 AM MDT

BOULDER — This is not the week to be running thin in the secondary.

Washington State (2-1), ranked fourth among FBS schools by averaging 380 passing yards a game and sixth in total offense at 539.7, comes in as Colorado's Pac-12 opener Saturday.

Starting cornerback Parker Orms is out with a leg injury. Third-teamer Paul Vigo is also out, with a pulled hamstring.

The Buffs enter the QB-rich Pac-12 with a true freshman and either a redshirt freshman or sophomore starting at an injury-riddled cornerback position — and with very little depth.

A nickel package should be the order of the day against the Cougars.

"At least five (defensive backs)," CU defensive coordinator/secondary coach Greg Brown said of the way others play Washington State. "We have the 'help wanted' sign out."

The staff will look to the backups on either side — sophomore Ayodeji Olatoye on the left behind Orms and redshirt freshman Josh Moten on the right.

Cornerback already was a rebuilding area this season, with the 2010 starters moving on to the NFL. There are no redshirts to pull, having lost true freshman Sherrard Harrington to an injury in preseason camp. Another costly injury loss: sophomore Jared Bell, early in camp.

The staff already converted one reserve receiver, senior walk-on Jason Espinoza, to cornerback. Embree ruled out converting anyone else from the offense, especially because he's still looking for a third running back behind Rodney "Speedy" Stewart and Tony Jones.

"It's only the fourth week. We need a third running back," Embree said.

Special help. Although standout freshman starting cornerback Greg Henderson could certainly help CU's ailing special teams, CU coach Jon Embree said it won't happen.

The Buffs struggled in all areas of special teams last Saturday against Ohio State. The tape gave no new clues.

"It just reconfirmed what unfortunately we saw live," Embree said after Monday's short practice. "Part of the issue with special teams is we don't have depth on our team. We don't want to lose a Greg Henderson."

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Stewart update. Embree said Stewart's sore shoulder appeared fine, but the Buffs don't have any contact work on Mondays. Also, center Daniel Munyer, who injured an ankle in the third game, should be back this week.

Stanford kickoff. Kickoff for CU's Oct. 8 game at Stanford will be 5:30 p.m. MDT. The game will be televised nationally on Versus. Pending television arrangements, CU is awaiting word on five more kickoff times.

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Offensive line injuries stymie run game for CU Buffs

Bufs' run game 105th in nation due to problems up front

By Kyle Ringo Camera Sports Writer
Boulder Daily Camera

Posted:09/26/2011 11:57:48 PM MDT

The Colorado football program has another streak going. It's not quite as significant as 19 consecutive road losses, but it's nothing the Buffs are bragging about either.

It has been 21 quarters of football since a Buffs running back scored a rushing touchdown.

The last time a CU running back found the end zone on a running play was in a win over Kansas State in November at Folsom Field.

Both of CU's rushing touchdowns this season have come from quarterback Tyler Hansen.

The Buffs are 105th in the nation running the football, averaging 86.5 yards per game. They are averaging 3.2 yards per carry and they lack a bigger back to complement the jitterbug style of senior Rodney Stewart.

But who carries the football isn't the biggest problem holding up the run in Boulder right now.

CU coaches have had to piece together the offensive line each week so far this season.

They entered the season opener at Hawaii relatively healthy, but seven plays into the game bodies started falling with left tackle David Bakhtiari suffering a sprained knee that kept him out until last week.

The Buffs haven't used the same five starters for any two games this season. They lost starting right tackle Jack Harris for the season to a broken ankle and have used a total of nine offensive linemen.

"It's played a role," Embree said. "It has, but we got to go. You know what I mean? We have to keep working on it and keep improving. The good thing is it's providing some playing time for some guys who will be players for us in the future. So that is the positive out of it."

This wasn't exactly what Embree and Eric Bieniemy had in mind when they came to Colorado to take over the stagnant program they had helped to build into a national champion 20 years ago.

Both men believe in a physical approach to football with a strong running game leading the way.

The first four games with Embree at the helm of the program and Bieniemy calling the shots on offense has produced nothing close to their ultimate vision.

In fact, when the Buffs have been at their best this season, it has been when quarterback Tyler Hansen has had time to throw to Paul Richardson, Toney Clemons, tight end Ryan Deehan or running back Rodney Stewart coming out of the backfield.

Running game?

The truth is the Buffs just don't have much of one.

It's not comforting thought considering the portion of the schedule most considered to be the easier month of the year in the preseason is now behind them.

Bieniemy said the Buffs have to get better at running the football. He said one factor that has played a part in low rushing

totals is CU falling behind in three of their four games by at least 10 points and needing to throw the ball more.

"Do we want to be better in the run game? Yes, we do," Bieniemy said. "The bottom line is it doesn't make a difference who is up front. That guy needs to step up front, and I've got to put us in the right position to have success in the run game."

Stewart played with a bad shoulder at Ohio State and coaches said they need to get him more rest going into conference play. Bieniemy said he has taken Stewart out of the game and replaced him with redshirt freshman Tony Jones, but Stewart puts himself back in the game.

"I'm up in the booth like, 'What is he doing in the game?' But that's just the type of kid he is," Bieniemy said. "You got to drag him off the field."

Bieniemy said he has talked with Stewart about allowing other backs to give him some rest and get some experience.

"I told him, 'Let us worry about doing this job, you worry about the job you have to do when we put you in there,'" Bieniemy said.

Jones and Brian Lockridge are expected to see more playing time in coming weeks.

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CU Buffs notebook: Jon Embree to use more starters on special teams

By Kyle Ringo Camera Sports Writer
Boulder Daily Camera

Posted:09/27/2011 12:03:13 AM MDT

Colorado coach Jon Embree said Monday he has no choice but to use more starters on special teams after the debacle of special teams mistakes at Ohio State.

Embree said depth and speed deficiencies he has talked about since he was hired are showing up on game days, particularly in the kicking game where coaches have tried to get away with using reserves and younger players.

Embree said CU players are being out-run on kickoff return and kickoff coverage, which has played a big part in why the Buffs rank last in the nation in returns and next to last in kickoff return defense.

Final three

Embree said CU is down to its final three options at cornerback with Jered Bell (ACL), Travis Sandersfeld (broken leg), Parker Orms (several leg injuries) and Paul Vigo (hamstring) all hurting.

In addition to Greg Henderson, who started the season opener, the last three cornerbacks CU has to work with this week are Ayodeji Olatoye, who played a lot at Ohio State, Josh Moten, who has played sparingly on defense, and Jason Espinoza, who recently moved back to defense from wide receiver.

"It's like that at a few positions and it is what it is so we just got to go with it," Embree said.

Notable

Embree said while he is allowed to travel 70 players on road trips, he will likely only take 56-58 players for the next few road trips. He said he isn't going to bring guys just to bring them if he doesn't believe they can help in games.

"It's going to have to be like it is in the league. Some guys are just going to have to go and cross-train a few guys for different things and you go with it."

Embree said he is not planning to pull any redshirts to help the problem.

Quotable

"I put up some bum numbers these past two games so this week against Washington State should be interesting." -- A Paul Richardson tweet on his performances against CSU and Ohio State.

Quotable part two

Embree was asked about the availability of Parker Orms this week when Orms was spotted at practice Monday. Orms has several leg injuries. "He's just standing around. He's OK for a photo."

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