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Bufs joining one wild party with the Pac-12

By Tom Kensler
The Denver Post

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(The Denver Post)

BOULDER — Movie buffs know well those old Westerns set in wide-open boom- towns, where it took scheming and dreaming to outfox the other guy. The Pac-12 Conference, anyone? "It's shootout football; it's must-see TV," said Colorado coach Jon Embree, whose team officially ushers in Pac-12 Conference action Saturday at home against Washington State. Asked what Colorado (1-3) and its fans should expect of the new conference, Embree thought back to 2005, his last year in the Pac-10. At the

time, he wore several hats for UCLA, coaching receivers and tight ends and handling the duties of passing game coordinator. In retrospect, Embree probably wonders why a seat belt wasn't issued to everyone on the staff. That season became one wild

ride.

UCLA went 10-2. But had a few plays turned out differently, the Bruins could have just as easily finished with a losing conference record. UCLA averaged almost 40 points in its six Pac-10 victories, and four of those wins were by an average of 4.3 points.

The conference name has changed with the additions of Colorado and Utah. But Embree and his assistants expect this to be the same topsy-turvy league, with wild, high-scoring games.

"It's an exciting brand of football; you're going to see a lot of different stuff," Embree said. "The Midwest style, the Woody Hayes style, is about defense . . . 10-7 is a great game. That will get you booed in the Pac-12."

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"And don't forget about the defensive backs in this league," Colorado wideout Paul Richardson said. "They get tested every week. That's why you see so many in the NFL."

On a given Saturday, that explosiveness on both sides of the ball seems to give every team a chance.

Washington State went 1-8 in the Pac-10 last season but lost by just seven to Cal and Washington and gave host Stanford a scare (38-28).

What sets the Pac-12 apart, Colorado offensive line coach Steve Marshall said, is parity. Marshall is a good one to ask about conferences. He coached at California in 2009-10 before returning to Colorado, where he had served under Gary Barnett (2000-01). Marshall also has coached in the Atlantic Coast Conference and the Southeastern Conference, as well as in the NFL.

"The Pac-12 is very deep, top to bottom," Marshall said. "It's very similar to the NFL in that anybody can beat anybody. It's like the group we're playing this week. Washington State is a dangerous, dangerous team."

"There's speed, there's athleticism in this league. You have to coach the same way each week. You have to approach every play like every play is important. That's the way I approached it with the Cleveland Browns — you never know what play is going to be the (deciding) play."

A Pac-12 game provides the ultimate chess match, said CU defensive coordinator Greg Brown, who coached at Arizona last fall. "This league has set the standard for innovative schemes and systems," he said. "You never know what you're up against."

Can Colorado compete in Pac-12 football? With a current roster that lacks depth and speed, this season will probably be a struggle. But athletic

director Mike Bohn sees better days ahead, when CU can challenge for conference titles in all sports.

"We know we're not where we want to be," Bohn said. "With this move to the Pac-12, we have a tremendous amount of responsibility and accountability to seize this opportunity with that competitive grit and competitive mettle that we haven't pulled together yet. It's going to take everybody helping to pull it off."

As for Pac-12 football, any blueprint for success is sure to include the following:

Speed: And that isn't just limited to skill positions. Pac-12 defensive ends run like linebackers, linebackers run like safeties.

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Lots and lots of cornerbacks: You can't have too many in this league.

Athletic pass rushers with an attitude: Somebody has to help those corners.

A chains-moving running attack: With all the talk of its quarterbacks and receivers, this conference has sent a ton of tailbacks to the NFL.

Recruiting, recruiting, recruiting: Nobody has to tell Colorado's Embree that blue-chippers fortify the league's rosters each year. To keep up, he has focused CU's out- of-state recruiting on California and Texas.

The talent. The skill level. The speed. The innovative coaching. The quarterbacks. It could be argued that, even in a perceived down year for top teams, the Pac-12 remains the nation's most exciting league.

"Games are going to come down to the last possession," Embree said. "It's fun as a fan. It's fun as a coach, if you're on the right side."

Footnote: CU has about 3,400 tickets remaining, according to the sports information office.

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Prowling the Pac

Denver Post CU beat reporter Tom Kensler breaks down the Pac-12 Conference, with the Buffs starting conference play Saturday.

1. No. 6 STANFORD (3-0, 1-0 Pac-12)

Led by the nation's top pro prospect in quarterback Andrew Luck, the Cardinal could go undefeated before a challenging five-game finish that includes a trip to Southern Cal and home games vs. Oregon, Cal and Notre Dame.

2. No. 9 OREGON (3-1, 1-0)

Ducks may be as talented, especially at the skill positions, as any team in the country. But losing 40-27 in the opener at neutral site to an LSU team with a backup quarterback makes a return to BCS title game a longshot.

3. No. 25 ARIZ. STATE (3-1, 1-0)

Loaded with experience, ASU was expected to be among the league's most improved teams. It is, with wins over two ranked teams, Missouri and Southern Cal. But what happened in that 17-14 loss at Illinois?

4. WASHINGTON (3-1, 1-0)

Third-year coach Steve Sarkisian said it would take time to rebuild. The 31-23 win over Cal showed progress. The 51-38 thumping at Nebraska suggests work needs to be done.

5. CALIFORNIA (3-1, 0-1)

Not sure what was gained by the 63-12 win over Presbyterian. Not much, apparently, because Bears lost the following week at Washington, 31-23.

6. USC (3-1, 1-1)



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Down in scholarship numbers due to NCAA sanctions, Trojans are vulnerable but have pro prospects at skill positions.

7. UTAH (2-1, 0-1)

The 54-10 rivalry-game win over BYU showed something; home games the next two weeks vs. Washington and ASU will reveal more.

8. UCLA (2-2, 1-0)

Fourth-year coach Rick Neuheisel may be a QB guru, but Bruins rank 11th in Pac-12 pass offense.

9. COLORADO (1-3, 0-0)

While optimism reigns for the long-term future under favorite son Jon Embree and his staff, Buffs are a work in progress that will take time to turn around.

10. WASHINGTON STATE (2-1, 0-0)

The victories came against FBS member Idaho State and undermanned UNLV. WSU flunked its first real test in 42-24 beatdown by San Diego State.

11. ARIZONA (1-3, 0-2)

With a completely rebuilt offensive line, the Wildcats haven't run the ball at all (62.2 ypg), and that's hindered senior quarterback Nick Foles and the passing game.

12. OREGON STATE (0-3, 0-1)

Pac-12 analysts contend Oregon State's Mike Riley ranks among the top coaches in the conference, but recruiting has fallen off. Losing to Big Sky member Sacramento State? Ouch.

Three questions for CU

1. Can Colorado finally get off to a fast start?

The Buffs have trailed at halftime in each of their three losses, by an average margin of 13.3 points. That's not the way Colorado coaches envisioned how this season would go, but an inability to run the ball and a lack of offensive firepower have led to early deficits.

2. Will CU's special teams start to look special?

The breakdowns on special teams against Ohio State were too numerous to list here. The kicking part hasn't been the problem, with place-kicker Will Oliver and punter Darragh O'Neill rating among the pleasant surprises of the season. But those return and coverage units? Oh, my, that is a different story.

3. Which go-to sophomore receiver will have the better game, Colorado's Paul Richardson or WSU's Marquess Wilson?

Wilson, 6-foot-3 and 181 pounds, arrives in Boulder as the nation's leader in receiving yards per game (143.0) and had his best game of the season in his last game — 236 yards and two TDs against San Diego State. Richardson (6-1, 175) has been held in check the past two games after catching 11 passes for 284 yards against California, but he vows to "step up" Saturday vs. the Cougars.

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Tom Kensler, *The Denver Post*

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Next game: Saturday at Southern California

Next game: Saturday at Colorado

Next game: Saturday vs. Washington State

Next game: Saturday at Stanford

Next game: Saturday vs. Washington

Next game: Saturday vs. Arizona

Next game: Thursday at Oregon

Next game: Saturday at Utah

Next game: Saturday vs. Oregon State

Next game: Thursday vs. California

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The Field House — Blogs — The Denver Post

SEPTEMBER 29, 2011, 3:30 PM

CU's Bahr impressed with Washington State defense

By **TOM KENSLE** |  No Comments

BOULDER — For Washington State, its offense gets the majority of the ink. But the Cougars defense has had its moments too.

The Cougars (2-1, 0-0 Pac-12) enter Saturday's game at Colorado ranked third among Pac-12 teams in pass efficiency defense and are fifth in rushing defense.

"Their defense is solid," CU senior tight end Matt Bahr said. "There are a lot of guys on that defense that play with a motor.

"You see great effort out of their defense. They're competitive. You can tell that they get into you a little bit and they'll fight you on every play.

"Definitely it's going to be a game where we're going to have to be 'on' on every play to get positive yardage against them."

ARTICLE PRINTED FROM THE FIELD HOUSE

<http://blogs.denverpost.com/colleges/2011/09/29/cus-bahr-impressed-with-washington-state-defense/20812/>

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The Field House — Blogs — The Denver Post

SEPTEMBER 29, 2011, 1:24 PM

CU's Richardson: It's time for me to step up

By **TOM KENSLE** |  No Comments

BOULDER — Colorado sophomore receiver Paul Richardson stopped to talk to reporters at the Dal Ward Center and was asked about his performances in the past two games.

Richardson said he does not want to use all the double teams that he has been drawing as an excuse.

"It's time for me to step up," Richardson said. "This week the team needs me to step up. We're 1-3. It's time for me to come out and have another breakout game."

In the two games since Richardson earned Pac-12 Conference player-of-the-week honors with 11 catches for 284 yards and two touchdowns against California, he has been all but stopped.

Richardson managed only four catches for 27 yards against Colorado State, and then had four grabs for 38 yards against Ohio State.

That's an average gain of just 8.1 yards during the past two weeks for the fastest player on the CU roster. And no touchdown in sight.

"They've definitely come out with a corner squat on me with the safety over the top of me, with a linebacker outside the box," Richardson said of the CSU and Ohio State defensive strategy against him. "They're running a triangle defense on me. They may bracket me. They're trying their best not to be singled up."

"That's a lot of respect. But I still have to be that playmaker out there. Despite what the defense does, I still have to make those plays. Even if we're starting slow, I have to start the offense by making big plays."

Richardson said he was asked by offensive coordinator Eric Bieniemy early in the week if Richardson had an explanation about why his production had fallen off so dramatically.

"At first I told him I didn't have an answer," Richardson said. "Then after practice, I told him I had an answer. I wasn't focusing out there enough. I need to focus on every play."

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<http://blogs.denverpost.com/colleges/2011/09/29/cus-richardson-its-time-for-me-to-step-up/20814/>

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CU Buffs preparing for air attack

Freshman Henderson will be key against Washington State

By Ryan Thorburn Camera Sports Writer
Boulder Daily Camera

Posted:09/29/2011 05:35:14 PM MDT

Greg Henderson could be preparing for Navy's vaunted option this week.

The Colorado freshman was military haircut-close to playing for Troy Calhoun at Air Force.

"My dad has a military background, and we really liked that school," Henderson said. "It was a real close decision. At Air Force, after football you're basically set for life with your career. But I think I made a great decision."

Instead of learning to pilot fighter aircraft at the Academy, Henderson plans to study business marketing in Boulder. The 5-11 cornerback from Corona, Calif., has already gone through a crash course in college football this semester.

Henderson has started all four games at right cornerback for the Buffs. He is only the second true freshman at CU to open a season as a starting cornerback, joining Victor Scott (1980) on the short list.

Due to a slew of injuries at the position, there will be a lot of pressure on Henderson's shoulder pads this Saturday as CU makes its Pac-12 debut against Washington State at Folsom Field.

"I tell him, 'When you're a freshman, every week you go out there with a target on you,' " CU head coach Jon Embree said. "(Ohio State) got him last week. Obviously, you're going to have some plays where they're going to make plays on you. He has been very good. And with (Washington State) being a four-wide attack, everybody back there is a target."

The secondary figures to be tested early and often by the Cougars, who enter the game ranked fourth nationally in passing offense (380.0 ypg) and fifth in scoring offense (49.0 ppg).

Washington State's dynamic go-to wide receiver, Marquess Wilson, leads the country in receiving (143.0 ypg) and already has four touchdowns. Senior quarterback Marshall Lobbestael is completing 62.4 percent of his passes and has already thrown for 959 yards and 10 touchdowns since replacing injured starter Jeff Tuel in the opener.

"Stats don't lie," CU defensive coordinator Greg Brown said. "They are tough to contend with. They have some speed, they have some size, they have some ability, and they have a nice scheme. ... That's a pretty loud statement where they rank nationally. That's lights out good."

CU's other starting cornerbacks, Travis Sandersfeld (left) and Parker Orms (left/nickel), are not expected to play Saturday due to leg injuries. Backups Vince Ewing (knee) is still a week or two away from returning, and Jared Bell (knee) was lost for the season in August.

The situation so bleak that it inspired Brian Lockridge, a senior running back without a carry this season, to try and learn cornerback this week hoping to see some game-day action. Brown joked that the Buffs were going to petition the NCAA to use 13 defensive players so they can deal with Washington State's skill players this week.

"I think it limits you. I don't think it gets you out of things. I think it limits you," Embree said of the lack of healthy bodies available in the secondary. "You have to find ways to protect guys and keep exposure at a minimum. You may not be able to be as aggressive as you want or as you'd like to be."

Despite the attrition, CU's pass defense is only yielding 183.5 passing yards per game, which leads the Pac-12.

Lockridge has been staying late at practice to learn some pass coverage techniques, but Henderson is usually the last player to leave the field as he continues to work on being more physical at the line of scrimmage and playing the ball better when it's in the air.

"He's a good player. I think he's going to be a great corner here," senior free safety Ray Polk said of Henderson. "As a freshman does, he makes mistakes now and again. You just have to keep their heads up. Everybody's going to do that, but the best thing about mistakes is you're going to learn from them if you choose to."

Only Polk (249), senior strong safety Anthony Perkins (249) and junior linebacker Jon Major (224) have been on the field for more defensive plays in 2011 than Henderson (220).

"They basically teach me everything. I really kind of look back every play, and they tell me what I'm doing just to be double sure," Henderson said of Polk and Perkins. "I learn a lot from them. They know this defense just like coach Brown, so it's like having him on the field, too."

Henderson emerged early from the large group of cornerback candidates that started fall camp. After four weeks of tough luck at a position that is so vital in the pass-happy Pac-12, the coaching staff feels even better about Henderson's decision to play at CU.

"One of the things that appealed to us, besides his athletic ability, is that he is an outstanding person and a class act," Brown said. "He takes care of business off the field. He comes from a good family, and we're thrilled to have him."

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