

## Coordinator Kent Baer could help CU Buffs turn football program around

By John Henderson *The Denver Post* *The Denver Post*

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Yes, Virginia, there was a dominant Notre Dame defense before Brian Kelly arrived.

In this Christmas spirit, it's fitting that the best gift Colorado could receive is Kent Baer, the defensive coordinator of that long-forgotten Irish D and a man new CU coach Mike MacIntyre says will join him in Boulder as a coordinator.

Back in 2002, Baer and first-year Notre Dame coach Tyrone Willingham looked poised to lift the Irish back to greatness. Notre Dame, under Baer, ranked ninth nationally in scoring defense.

That Notre Dame team was 10-1 before finishing 10-3.

Baer, 61, was a Frank Broyles Award finalist for the nation's top assistant coach that year.

He won't have Notre Dame-level personnel to work with at CU next season. In fact, of the eight coordinator jobs he has had since 1983, none poses as big a challenge as what he faces in Boulder. Only at Washington, which was also coming off the worst season in school history, did he face a similar rebuilding task. Colorado was last in scoring defense (46.0 points per game) and pass efficiency defense (173.6 rating) this past fall.

Yet Baer, a Logan, Utah, native and a Utah State graduate, has had a knack for pumping life into a flatlining defense. Besides Notre Dame, he improved defenses at Utah State, California, Arizona State and Stanford, all in his first year. In his second year at Stanford, the Cardinal jumped from last in the Pac-10 in scoring defense (allowing 32.6 points per game) in 1994 to third (20.8) in 1996.

"I'd like to toot my horn and take all the credit, but I can't," Baer said in a telephone interview from San Jose, Calif. "It's been a group effort by a lot of really good people. As a defensive coordinator and a staff, we certainly have a knowledge and understanding of where we want to end up.

"It always starts with talent, but we've done a great job of evaluating."

At San Jose State, where prep All-Americans are few and far between, the importance of evaluation is massive. When MacIntyre arrived in 2010, he inherited a 2-10 team and promoted Baer from linebackers coach to coordinator. In three years, the Spartans went from 109th in total defense (442.9 yards per game allowed) in 2009 to 28th (351.4) this year, from 109th in scoring defense (34.5 points) to 25th (21.4).

His efforts earned him the interim head coaching label for the Spartans' Military Bowl game Thursday in Washington against Bowling Green. A victory would put another exclamation point on Baer's résumé. It would give San Jose State, now 10-2, its best record since 1940.

"It's really special when you take a team where no one thought you'd ever win or even have a winning season, at a place like San Jose State, recruit the kind of players we recruit, evaluate it, work hard and be ranked 24th and have 10 wins under our belt and beat some great football teams," he said. "I've been in this a long time and at a lot of great schools, and this has to be one of my top two or three seasons of all time."

As for his scheme, Baer prefers a 4-3 defense with a lot of blitzing as necessary as face masks in the pass-happy Pac-12.

"I love him," said San Jose State defensive end Travis Johnson, the Western Athletic Conference defensive player of the year. "He's able to put this defense together and really run it well. He has everybody on the same page. He's great at figuring out what to do with the other team."

Take this year's opener at Stanford. The Cardinal scored two quick touchdowns, but San Jose State held the eventual Pac-12 champion to a field goal in the second half in a 20-17 loss.

Baer has suffered his share of career blips, as most career assistants do. He followed Willingham's falling star from Notre Dame to Washington, where Willingham fired him after a 4-9 season in 2007.

With Baer coaching linebackers at San Jose State the next year, Washington went splat, going 0-12.

Baer's value to CU isn't just supplying a quick fix. CU will be the fifth Pac-12 program at which he has worked. Despite spending the last five years in the WAC, facing Oregon's fire-drill offense, Stanford's power game or USC's stable of NFL receiver prospects won't be a culture shock.

It sounds as if Baer has spent years studying the spread offense that has been magnified in the Pac-12.

"Every spread offense is different," he said. "The first thing you've got to do is figure out how you want to line up to a spread offense. Who do you want to carry the ball, because most are all zone-read teams.

"If you have a great, great back and a great quarterback and you say, 'I don't know,' then you've really got to mix it up."

Unless a better opportunity knocks on Baer's door in the next few days, he will be in Boulder soon. CU's defense could use a present, even if it is too late for Christmas.

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Baer has his work cut out

46.0

Points per game allowed this season by the Buffs, who ranked last in scoring defense in the nation.

173.6

Pass-efficiency rating by opposing teams, worst in the nation