



Jon Embree wants the 2012 Buffs to wind up bowl-bound.


Photo Courtesy: CUBuffs.com



Brooks: Ten Questions To Ponder As 2012 Season Looms

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BOULDER - In any occupation, first years on the job usually are littered with hurdles. No different for a first-year college football coach. Jon Embree stepped onto the figurative track last summer and found himself quickly confronted by barriers of every description.

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Although his debut record (3-10) at Colorado might not offer categorical proof, Embree managed to clear most of his hurdles. That doesn't mean Year 2 will be any less trying, but it does mean a fundamental base has been established - which in turn means there's one less item for him and his staff to address and check off as the 2012 season closes in. His players report on Sunday, Aug. 5, with a team meeting that night and practice beginning the next day (Monday, Aug. 6).

"When you go somewhere and you're trying to create a certain environment and culture, that takes time," Embree said at the Pac-12 Conference football media day. "We went through a lot of different things (in 2011) and we're asking them to do different things that maybe they weren't asked to do different from practice, accountability, being on time . . . it was a lot different than maybe what they were used to."

In addition to whatever difficulties were created by his cultural revolution, a murderous 2011 schedule and an obvious shortage of manpower to cope with it didn't make Embree's first-year task any easier. The Buffs played

13 consecutive games (no bye week) and by the time they found themselves prepping for a scary string of games against the Pac-12's elite quarterbacks, the secondary was a shambles.

"We went through five suspensions before we played Stanford, Oregon, USC . . . the better quarterbacks in the league," Embree recalled. "That put us behind the eight ball."

The Buffs didn't escape that position until November, when they closed by winning two of their final three games and snapped a hideous 24-game out-of-state losing streak dating to 2007. Given the early trials, CU's finish proved better than its start, which Embree credits in part to his players finally adjusting to him, his staff and what was expected of them.

"When you're trying to create a new environment, a new culture, you've got to look at it from a long-term (position) and stick to your vision," he said. "That was difficult and I didn't get to do as much football as I thought I would have been able to. Having said that, this year we've been able to do more football from a coaching standpoint - and it's been good."

National college football forecasters don't expect much from Embree's second team. Neither does the media that regularly cover the Pac-12. In their preseason poll, the Buffs were picked to finish sixth (last) in the South Division behind (in order) USC, Utah, UCLA, Arizona and Arizona State.

Of course, Embree and his players aren't buying into anyone's dire predictions. "Our goal this year is to find a way to get to a bowl game," he said, indicating a season of at least six wins.

But regardless of whether Embree and his staff believe there's a football climate change underway in Boulder, the outside world wants hard evidence in the W-L column and final conference standings. Getting to a bowl game would be a solid indication that change is underway.

Ten key questions facing the 2012 Buffs as preseason camp looms:

1. What might be Embree's chief concern in his second season?

This team's youth. But in his grand scheme, it also could be a blessing. He's been around young CU teams in the past and cites former coach Rick Neuheisel's last Buffs squad (1998) and its future achievement (2001 Big 12 championship). Regardless of their age/class, Embree doesn't want his best players on the sidelines. Given their druthers, all coaches would rather start experienced upperclassmen and have experienced backups behind them. But in a formative program like CU's, Embree will go with what he has - and that likely will mean a lineup littered with young players.

2. At what positions might freshmen makes themselves seen (and heard) early?

There are several. This is a large freshman class and Embree won't be reluctant to get his newbies on the field - provided they prove themselves in camp. Asked that question at last week's Pac-12 media day, he first mentioned the secondary, where five newcomers will join the competition. If any of the fivesome opens like corner Greg Henderson did last summer, Embree will be pleased. The D-line, which loses starters Curtis Cunningham, Josh Hartigan and David Goldberg, also gets a large infusion (seven) of fresh faces. (Nine defensive linemen were among last February's 28 signees, but CU is awaiting word on the status of Kisima Jagne, and Derek McCartney is scheduled to be a January enrollee.) Tight end, receiver and running back also could be positions that see freshmen make significant moves in camp.

3. Will receiver Paul Richardson play this season?

The guess (repeat: *guess*) here is yes. But the bigger question is when. His ACL rehab has gone at warp speed and "P-Rich" has absolutely no comfort zone as a spectator. Granted, the Buffs desperately need their most experienced, most explosive playmaker, but Embree has made it clear that a decision won't be rushed and it will

involve Richardson, his family, CU's medical staff and the coaching staff. Richardson's future is at stake and the approach to it will not be made on anyone's whim.

4. What position competitions likely will draw the most attention in camp?

The obvious answer is the quarterback battle involving Nick Hirschman, Connor Wood, Jordan Webb and possibly Shane Dillon. But with 12 starters lost (seven offense, five defense) this camp also promises a bunch of other knockdown duels. Freshmen and redshirt freshmen are expected to compete for starting (or at least depth chart) positions at a handful of other critical spots. Still, Embree had better be primed to answer daily questions about the progress of his QBs and who among them is on the move.

5. What's the health status of Hirschman (foot) and Dillon (shoulder), and how quickly can Webb get up to speed?

Hirschman, whose early March misstep cost him all of last spring's drills, is listed as "full go" while Dillon, who underwent surgery on his right (throwing) shoulder, is listed as "day-to-day." But Embree appears optimistic about Dillon's camp participation. As for Hirschman making up for his lost time, Embree believes having to focus on the mental part of his position last spring might have been a boon for Hirschman. By all accounts, Webb is a quick study, and his starting experience at Kansas gives him something his competitors lack.

6. Who steps into Rodney "Speedy" Stewart's vacated spot at tailback?

The first look goes to sophomore Tony Jones, whose 297 rushing yards in 2011 included 72 in Stewart's absence in CU's 17-14 win at Utah. Josh Ford returns for his junior season after submitting another eye-opening spring, and sophomore Malcolm Creer is classified as "full go" after in-season 2011 knee surgery. Three incoming freshmen RBs also will be given close looks.

7. Embree and offensive coordinator Eric Bieniemy have emphasized the need for a strong running game. Will the Buffs have one this season?

CU averaged 108.7 rushing yards a game in 2011. That was about one quarter's worth of ground productivity in Bieniemy's day. That paltry figure left the Buffs ninth in the Pac-12 and 106th nationally. Nobody's happy with that number and improving on it will be one of this season's priorities. Tony Jones is listed as a 190-pounder, but both Embree and Bieniemy have cited a need for bigger backs and they've snagged four in Creer (205 pounds) and incoming freshmen Terrence Crowder (210), Davien Payne (225) and Donta Abron (190). Plus, January enrollee Clay Norgard is a 240-pound fullback.

8. Despite losing starting guards Ryan Miller and Ethan Adkins, can the O-line be fairly solid?

Coach Steve Marshall believes so. He's got his starting center (Gus Handler) and both tackles (David Bakhtiari, Ryan Dannewitz) back, plus a pair of players (Alexander Lewis, Daniel Munyer) who saw considerable duty in 2011. The return of tackle Jack Harris, the 2011 right-side starter before an early season injury, could allow Dannewitz to move to guard. Marshall is still developing depth and is hopeful Kaiwi Crabb, Alex Kelley and Stephane Nembot, the physical monster who switched from defense last season, can provide it.

9. Should the coaching staff feel any more secure about the kicking game this season?

Yes - provided several capable punt/kickoff returners step up early. If/when he returns, Richardson has the ability but the coaches likely will think long and hard about using him in either role and exposing him to further injury. The Buffs used a pair of freshmen (Darragh O'Neill, Will Oliver) in 2011 as their respective punter and kicking specialist, and both performed well. O'Neill averaged 38.8 yards per punt last season while Oliver made 11-of-16 field goals and 29-of-31 PAT attempts. That said, special teams coach J.D. Brookhart will be looking for O'Neill to sharpen his rugby-style punting and Oliver to focus more on getting the ball higher faster. Reliable snapper Ryan Iverson returns and versatile athlete Justin Gorman looks solid as a holder.

10. Will Embree's second camp be structured any differently than his first?

Not significantly. Physical play will be emphasized, as it was last summer. But here's one difference: Last August, the CU staff had to be cognizant of a 13-game schedule with no open week, no built-in healing time. Not so this season; the first week in October brings a bye. That's not to say Embree and his coaches believe they can get away with not "practicing smart" in this camp, but a schedule like last season's definitely demands adjustments. This camp's practice schedule shows the first day in pads on Aug. 10 (four days in) and the players' first day off not coming until Aug. 26. That could be readjusted depending on progress and performance. The camp schedule is liberally sprinkled with "walk-throughs," teaching and review periods designed to bring everyone up to speed. Only two major scrimmages are set. All practices are closed to the media and public, and Embree has made his incoming freshmen off-limits to interviews until after the opener (Sept. 1 vs. Colorado State).

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SHOW MENU



THORBURN: Let Buffs huddle up to work on questions

By Ryan Thorburn Camera Sports Writer Boulder Daily Camera

Posted:

Buffzone.com

Record crowds are turning up to watch Peyton Manning and the Denver Broncos.

Dove Valley is the center of the football universe this summer.

And the Colorado Buffaloes? Well, they might as well practice on the dark side of the moon next month.

Jon Embree will close CU's training camp to the public and the media.

The second-year head coach wants to protect a large freshman class from the spotlight while quietly determining which quarterback candidate will lead the nation's least experienced team.

Of course we all prefer Tad Boyle's transparent open-door style, but I understand Embree's decision, which he said is not a "forever policy."

The only thing that really matters is what the 2012 Buffs look like when everyone gets to see them run out of the tunnel on Sept. 1 at Sports Authority Field.

At the Pac-12 media day event in Los Angeles this week, Embree sounded upbeat and confident about the direction CU football is headed after six consecutive losing seasons.

Despite extremely low outside expectations -- the Buffs were predicted to finish last in the South Division and received the fewest votes of any team in the preseason poll -- the goal inside the locker room is to earn a bowl bid.

Unlike last fall when Embree inherited a huge senior class used to a losing culture, all of the players should now have a clear understanding of what the staff expects of them.

Instead of worrying about guys showing up on time and doing the right thing when no one is looking, Embree will be getting his fingerprints all over the game plan this season. "When you're trying to create a new environment, a new culture, you've got to look at it from a long term (position) and stick to your vision," Embree said of the toughest part of his 3-10 debut at CU. "That was difficult and I didn't get to do as much football as I thought I would have been able to.

"Having said that, this year we have been able to do more football from a coaching standpoint and it's been good."

In order for the Buffs to take a big step forward and win at least six games, one of the six quarterbacks on the roster must seize control of the offense and emerge as a dynamic player in the Pac-12.

Strength in numbers? Let's hope so.

Connor Wood enters camp with a little head start after taking all of the snaps during spring drills.

It's now or never for the big, athletic and oft-injured Nick Hirschman.

An intriguing wild card has also been added to the deck in former Kansas starter Jordan Webb.

Shane Dillon appears to be headed for a redshirt season, unless his shoulder has responded extremely well to surgery.

Perhaps the true freshman signal caller can get some advice on rehabbing an injury from Paul Richardson. There is a lot of optimism about the speedy, super-healing wide receiver possibly returning early from an ACL injury to catch passes this season.

"Paul is going to be great if he's healthy, but he's looking pretty good right now," CU safety Ray Polk said. "The quarterback situation will pan itself out, but we have seniors on defense, like Doug (Rippy) and Jon Major, that are going to make a huge difference for us."

As injuries and suspensions took their toll on an already thin roster, the Buffs gave up 48, 52, 45, 48 and 42 points during an embarrassing Pac-12 losing skid in 2011.

"We've upgraded our team speed and it's just whether it goes in the right direction," Embree said.

With an infusion of young talent on the defensive line and at cornerback, Greg Brown shouldn't have to use walk-ons or offensive players to cover elite wide receivers this fall.

That doesn't mean the defensive coordinator's job description is any easier.

In addition to Matt Barkley-led USC, Chip Kelly's hypersonic quack attack at Oregon and Stanford's bruising smash-mouth style, Brown has to scheme against first-year Pac-12 offensive wizards Mike Leach (Washington State) and Rich Rodriguez (Arizona).

"I wouldn't want to be a defensive coordinator in this league," said Rodriguez. "It's hard to prepare and practice for that. Do you build your team to defend the spread offense, do you build it to defend Stanford? I think the answer is: Both."

The Buffs have plenty of difficult questions to answer before the opener against Colorado State.

Can't blame them for wanting to be alone with their thoughts. Can't wait to see them run out of the tunnel.

Colorado's freshman defensive backs could make immediate impact

By Tom Kensler *The Denver Post* *The Denver Post*

Posted:

DenverPost.com

Colorado signed five defensive backs in February with the fingers-crossed intention that they could make an immediate impact and hold up as freshmen to the onslaught of the pass-happy Pac-12.

Reports of summer workouts in Boulder suggest the newcomers to the secondary are living up to expectations.

"They're going to be a good addition to us," senior safety Ray Polk said during the recent Pac-12 media day in Los Angeles. "You never know how they're going to do until they get into (August) camp and put on the pads and start hitting. But they're all doing great things."

Good thing, because the Buffaloes, 3-10 last fall in the first year under coach Jon Embree, were bombarded by the slew of strong-armed quarterbacks and sprinter receivers who this conference seems to churn out by the bucketful each season.

In its Pac-12 debut, Colorado ranked at or near the bottom in all pass defense categories for the league: 12th (last) in scoring defense (36.5 points) and pass-defense efficiency, tied for 11th in interceptions (seven), tied for eighth in pass defense (255.4 yards).

Colorado has Polk (free safety) and sophomore Greg Henderson (cornerback) as returning starters. Replacements must be found for departed seniors Anthony Perkins (strong safety) and Travis Sandersfeld (cornerback).

Also back is junior Parker Orms, who's all but ensured a starting job at strong safety or nickel back. Which one could be dependent upon where one of the newcomers best fits in.

Colorado signed 28 players in February and the top-rated pair are cornerbacks. Both are tall corners who are in high demand by all the powerhouse college teams. Yuri Wright (6-foot-2, 175 pounds) from New Jersey power Don Bosco Prep was a consensus national top-100 recruit. Kenneth Crawley (6-1, 170) from H.D. Woodson High School in Washington, D.C., made top-250 lists. Both rated four stars (out of five) by recruiting-based websites.

"Those guys are impressive, but all five are," Polk said. "With their athleticism, they're all Division I cornerbacks."

Joining Wright and Crawley are Jeffrey Hall (5-11, 175) of LaPlace, La., St. Charles Catholic in suburban New Orleans, Marques Mosley (6-1, 175) of Upland (Calif.) High School and John Walker (5-10, 170), who was Crawley's teammate at H.D. Woodson.

Embree told reporters at Pac-12 media day that defensive back is the spot where CU freshmen are most likely to play this season. "We signed five very good players, so they will all have a chance to compete," Embree said.

Polk has spent considerable time with the newbies and is eager to see how they perform when preseason camp begins. The entire squad is to report for physicals, equipment and team meetings next Sunday. The first practice is Aug. 6. All practices this year are closed to the public, including media.

The five new defensive backs appear to be quick learners, Polk said.

"They're figuring it out," Polk said. "The thing is, they're going to have a number of defenses that they need to learn, and they could be installed in one day in camp."

"They're going to have to learn how to study these defenses, how to look at things, how to know what your responsibilities are, all that stuff. It's a huge learning curve for them. But the more they can organize this stuff, the easier they'll learn it. We're already trying to help them with that."