

## CU Buffs appear likely to change offense to spread in 2013

By John Henderson The Denver Post The Denver Post

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BOULDER — Colorado coach Jon Embree doesn't just believe in "If you can't beat 'em, join 'em." He believes in "If you get clobbered by 'em, you'd better join 'em."

That's why he will take a chapter from his junior year at CU in 1985 and try to reverse the worst year and era of football in school history.

Get set for the spread.

All signs point to the dormant Buffaloes junking Embree's pro-set attack for the spread offense that has swept up the Pac-12 Conference in a wave of long touchdowns and gargantuan statistics. He teased with it late this season. However, after going 1-11 and scoring the fewest points in the country entering the weekend, expect a much bigger commitment in 2013.

"When you look at our games, we have moved the ball or been more effective when we have been doing some of that stuff," Embree said after Friday's season-ending 42-35 loss to Utah at Folsom Field. "So I would like to continue to move forward in that direction."

Embree knows from firsthand experience how a change in offense can reverse a program. In 1984, he played tight end on the CU team that went 1-10, at the time tying the school record for most losses.

Coach Bill McCartney, on everyone's hot seat entering his fourth year, junked a similar pro-set attack for the wishbone in 1985. Colorado went 7-5 and to the Freedom Bowl.

Much credit went to a vastly improved defense, but that option attack laid the foundation for what would become CU's only national championship five years later.

Embree thinks he has the personnel who would flourish in a spread attack, one designed to spread the field and give players the ball in space. He will have 10 starters back on offense, including true freshman tailback Christian Powell and his backup, Donta Abron, teammates last year at Upland (Calif.) High School. They combined for 947 yards this season for the Buffaloes, the third-most of any freshman duo in school history.

Helping the ailing quarterback situation will be the return of wide receiver Paul Richardson, a third team all-Pac-12 pick last year who has recovered from a knee injury. Joining him at wideout will be freshman Jeff Thomas, a bona fide speedster who spent the season back home in Dallas tending to family affairs.

"We have a lot of young talent that has growing opportunity and have made plays," Embree said. "We get guys back that have been hurt, and we have some kids coming in, whether they're grayshirts or commits, at certain positions that will help us."

Open competition at quarterback

Who will throw them the ball and who will coach them are the biggest questions. Sophomore Nick Hirschman, despite his four interceptions Friday against Utah, proved the most effective at moving the team.

Embree mentioned him and redshirt freshman Shane Dillon, PrepStar's seventh-ranked quarterback out of Christian High School in El Cajon, Calif., in looking ahead to spring ball. However, PrepStar ranked Dillon as a pro-style quarterback; he rushed for only 70 yards as a senior.

He and Hirschman, as well as fellow returnees Jordan Webb and Connor Wood, won't be compared to Oregon's Marcus Mariota as running quarterbacks.

"The one advantage of having all this youth is it all comes back, and it comes back mature and obviously with tons of experience," Embree said. "Our whole offensive line is back. There is a lot to be excited about and feel good about."

But who will coach them? It's assumed Embree will return despite a two-year record of 4-21. He said after the Utah game that CU athletic director Mike Bohn assured him he will be back — although Bohn has yet to say that publicly.

Offensive coordinator Eric Bienenmy has no experience coaching the spread and may be reassigned. Embree will evaluate the coaching staff this week; expect new coaches hired quickly.

#### Changes expected on defense

However, as in 1985, a change in offensive scheme won't matter if CU's ravaged defense doesn't improve. In 1984, the Buffs gave up averages of 395.2 yards and 33.1 points per game. The next year those averages dropped to 296.8 and 14.0, respectively.

McCartney kept defensive coordinator Lou Tepper. Embree is not expected to keep Greg Brown, whose last two defenses gave up the most and third-most points and yards in CU history.

Seven defensive starters will return, but Embree loses his best defender (end Will Pericak) and one of his best leaders (injury-plagued safety Ray Polk). Embree said he is "excited with our young D-linemen" such as freshman tackle Tyler Henington, who had his first sack Friday, and freshman nose tackle Josh Tupou, who had five tackles for loss (one sack) this year.

But somehow, Embree must improve the nation's worst pass defense. Heady safety Parker Orms will return after missing most of the second half of the season because of a concussion, and sophomore Greg Henderson is among the most improved cornerbacks in the Pac-12.

The best news is Embree's kickers return. Darragh O'Neill, arguably the Buffs' most effective player, ranked third in the league in punting entering the weekend. Will Oliver was 6-for-7 on field goals until getting a 43-yarder blocked Friday.

More than anything, Embree must change a crushed psyche. No one quit on him, but that's the easy part. Now it's time to reverse fortunes on the worst season in school history.

"Having been a part of it as a player," Embree said, "I know what those guys are feeling and what they are going through."

For Embree's sake, they'd better not go through it again.

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Buff's won't have to travel until Pac-12 season begins

The Buffaloes get a scheduling break with no out-of-state nonconference games. But they open Aug. 31 in Denver against a Colorado State team that has improved since September, and then host Central Arkansas, an FCS school that went 9-2 and won the Southland Conference.

Fresno State, which waxed the Buffs 69-14 in Game 3, visits Boulder on Sept. 14, and then the conference schedule starts (dates are TBA for Pac-12 games). But five of nine league games are on the road: at Arizona State, Oregon State, UCLA, Washington and Utah. Visiting Folsom Field will be Arizona, California, Oregon and USC.

The Buffs do not play Washington State, which finished last in the North Division.

A look at 2013 by position groups

Denver Post staff writer John Henderson takes a look at whom the Buffaloes lose and what they have to look forward to for 2013:

#### Quarterback

Key losses: None.

In a program with multiple needs, this is the biggest one. Sophomore Nick Hirschman put up good numbers in his last two games, but he's far from the talent needed to lift a 1-11 program. Redshirt freshman Shane Dillon will get every chance to win the job in the spring. None of the quarterbacks has the running ability needed to run the spread, which will likely be next year's offense.

#### Tailback

Key losses: None.

This is the offense's glimmer of hope with true freshman tailbacks Christian Powell and Donta Abron showing promise late in the year. Sophomore Tony Jones completes a capable 1-2-3 punch, but none has great breakaway speed.

#### Receiver

Key loss : Tight end Nick Kasa.

This is one of the slowest units in major-college football. Defenses stacked up in the box knowing the wideouts could be covered one-on-one. But speedster Paul Richardson returns from a torn ACL and joins freshman Jeff Thomas to give the quarterback deep threats — finally.

#### Offensive line

Key losses: None.

Entering the weekend, only Washington State gave up more than Colorado's 4.3 sacks per game — and the Cougars throw nearly every down. Still, many of those were coverage sacks, and left tackle David Bakhtiari anchors a relatively decent line that opened holes for the freshmen.

#### Defensive line

Key loss: End Will Pericak.

End Chidera Uzo-Diribe had seven sacks and backup Kirk Poston had four. But this is still the line that got

gashed repeatedly against zone-read offenses, and only four teams nationally gave up more rushing yards.

#### Linebacker

Key losses: Doug Rippey, Jon Major.

Leading tackler Derrick Webb is back and junior Paul Vigo has shown promise, but tackling was a major issue with these guys. Fundamentals will be emphasized in the spring. Big plays by linebackers were minimal.

#### Secondary

Key loss: Safety Ray Polk.

They learned by trial and error. Let's see how much the nation's worst secondary learned. Blown assignments, long TD passes and bad tackling plagued this unit. At least freshman Kenneth Crawley has speed, and sophomore cornerback Greg Henderson improved a great deal.

#### Special teams

Freshman Marques Mosley's 100-yard kickoff return Friday may have shown Colorado its returner of the future, but its kickoff return unit was second worst in the league.

#### Kicking

This was the best unit on the team. Punter Darragh O'Neill should be first-team all-league, and Will Oliver missed only one of his eight field-goal attempts, although one was blocked Friday.