

Wildcats present challenges to Jon Embree's 1-8 squad

By Brian Howell Buffzone.com Boulder Daily Camera

Posted:

Buffzone.com

On the surface, the Colorado football team is coming into this week's game against Arizona looking a lot like it did a year ago when facing the Wildcats.

CU is 1-8 and riding a five-game losing streak. All five have been blowout losses, by an average of 42.0 points.

A year ago the Buffs went into Arizona week with a 1-9 record and a seven-game losing streak. They had been blown out in five straight games, by an average of 34.2 points.

Last year, CU snapped their skid with an impressive 48-29 win against Arizona.

Sure, history could repeat itself with the Buffs ending their slump by beating the 'Cats on Saturday in Tucson, Ariz. Then again, this year's slump feels nothing like last year's.

As rough as last year was, the Buffs at least had an experienced senior quarterback, an experienced senior running back and an experienced senior wide receiver. All three were signed by NFL teams this summer.

They also had a defense with several veterans that, when healthy, played fairly well.

This year, they have disarray at quarterback on an offense that ranks 122nd nationally in scoring (ahead of Idaho and Massachusetts). Defensively, the Buffs have allowed 46.2 points per game, ranking 124th -- dead last -- in the country.

Beyond the statistics, there is a general sense of hopelessness among those who follow the program. And, reality is setting in for those in the program.

"We just haven't been able to compete like we need to, and that is something that we need to be better at," head coach Jon Embree said after Saturday's 48-0 loss to Stanford.

Following that loss, athletic director Mike Bohn said that nobody is happy and he vowed that changes will be made -- and soon.

One of those changes could come at quarterback. Jordan Webb struggled again and was pulled again. Backups Nick Hirschman and Connor Wood struggled, too.

Regardless of when or where those changes come, the Buffaloes face a daunting task against the Wildcats this week.

Arizona was the vulnerable team last year. The Wildcats were just four weeks removed from firing head coach Mike Stoops and walked into Folsom Field with a 2-7 record.

This year, the Wildcats have been schizophrenic, but first-year head coach Rich Rodriguez has guided them to a winning record (5-4) and a spot in last week's Associated Press top 25 rankings.

Arizona dropped out of the rankings after a stunning 66-10 loss to UCLA on Saturday, but that came after an equally stunning 39-36 win over Southern Cal.

This isn't the best team CU will face this year -- far from it, in fact -- but it's a squad loaded with talent.

"(Stoops) definitely left some pieces in the cupboard for Rich Rodriguez and his staff," said CU defensive coordinator Greg Brown, who was on Arizona's coaching staff in 2010.

Even if the Wildcats don't have dual threat quarterback Matt Scott, who left Saturday's game with a possible concussion, they present plenty of problems for a CU team in dire straights.

"I'm taking a real hard look on what we do on both sides of the ball, and make sure that we give our kids the opportunity to be successful," Embree said.

Nine games into his second season as the Buffaloes' head coach, those opportunities have been too few and far between.

Embree's Buffs are 4-18 since he took the reins of the program in December of 2010. At 1-8 this season, the future doesn't seem as bright as it did even a year ago, but Embree has not lost his hope.

"We're not even through the second year, and as I told the team, things will be better," he said.

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Improvement from CU Buffs tough to see in their 1-8 football season

By John Henderson The Denver Post The Denver Post
Posted:

DenverPost.com

BOULDER — Any improvement Colorado's football team is making can be measured only in words. Using numbers merely restates what the dwindling crowds at Folsom Field realize.

The Buffaloes, 1-8 overall and 1-5 in the Pac-12, aren't getting better.

Stanford's 48-0 whitewash of CU on Saturday marked the fifth consecutive blowout loss for the Buffs since their lone win — over Washington State, a fourth-quarter comeback that no doubt has become the worst 15 minutes of Cougars defensive coordinator Mike Breske's life. Four of those losses, of course, were against ranked teams. It's hard to find improvement against opponents so overwhelmingly superior that the opposing quarterbacks are in Lanai chairs by the third quarter.

Yet CU isn't getting more competitive. Counting the 69-14 loss at Fresno State on Sept. 15, CU's last six losses have been by an average score of 55-11. Its average halftime deficit in those six games is 37-7. In the past three games, the Buffs' first-half scoring has consisted of two field goals at Southern California.

Saturday marked CU's first home shutout since 1986.

Because Stanford coach David Shaw rested most of his starters after halftime and called simple running plays into the line in the fourth quarter, CU no longer has the nation's worst pass defense. It moved up to 115th among 120 with a rating of 104.3.

But the CU defense is the worst in the nation, allowing 46.2 points per game. CU is tied with Washington State for the most sacks allowed with 40. The Buffs are second-lowest-scoring team in the country, averaging 16.1 points per game, tied with winless FBS newcomer Massachusetts and just above Idaho. That is CU's lowest scoring average since 1984, when it averaged 15.6 points in a 1-10 season.

Second-year CU coach Jon Embree is saddled with the task of making this a better team this season, with only three games left. He was asked what improvements the team has made.

"Offensive line, the last few weeks, has been playing better, but obviously we missed (center) Gus (Handler)," he said. "(Tight end) Nick Kasa has been a pleasant surprise. Our tight end position is starting to come back in this offense, which is critical for us."

However, the offense under coordinator Eric Bieniemy has not found an identity. The no-huddle attack flopped in the Buffs' season-opening loss to Colorado State. No quarterback has stepped forward to provide any hint of a threat, let alone consistency.

Jordan Webb, who has been benched at times in the Buffs' last two games, remains last in the Pac-12 in passing with a 107.2 rating.

Leading the nation — and mocking the Buffs at the same time — is Kansas State's Collin Klein (174.4), the Heisman Trophy favorite from Loveland High School whom Embree's predecessor, Dan Hawkins, didn't recruit.

Then again, Colorado's lack of speed is nowhere more evident than at wide receiver. In the last three games, CU wideouts have caught only 11 passes.

Help should be on the way next fall. Paul Richardson, the Buffs' lone deep threat, has missed this season after undergoing knee surgery. True freshman Jeff Thomas was expected to make an impact until family issues led him to spend the fall back home in Dallas. He is expected to return and join two three-star receiver recruits: Elijah Dunston of Chaminade High School in West Hills, Calif., and Devin Ross of Bishop Alemany High in Mission Hills, Calif.

On defense, CU remains helpless. The Buffs started two freshman linemen Saturday and the defense, despite knowing tight end was Stanford's go-to position, was unable to cover the Cardinal's tight ends.

"We improved a lot (Saturday)," senior linebacker Doug Rippey maintained. "They had one long run on us. Overall, we've just got to keep coming. I think we did pretty well, but there are things we can fix."

Who will fix it? Embree is not on the hot seat. CU is committed to him, but he likely will have to measure his loyalty when evaluating Bieniemy and defensive coordinator Greg Brown. Like Embree, neither had ever been a sole coordinator before their current stints.

Embree was asked if his coordinators are coaching for their jobs these last three weeks.

"I'm not that kind of guy," Embree said. "We'll evaluate the whole season. That's not right as a head coach to do that."

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CU Buffs eye on ... The Wildcats

Colorado at Arizona, 11:30 a.m. Saturday, FX

For the record: Arizona is 5-4 overall, 3-3 Pac-12 after losing 66-10 at UCLA.

Streaking: The 66 points were the most Arizona has given up since a 75-0 loss to Michigan State in 1949.

Who's hot: Matt Scott. First-year Arizona coach Rich Rodriguez jump-started this program behind a dual-threat quarterback who leads the Pac-12 in total offense (averaging 357.4 yards per game), even after leaving the UCLA game during the third quarter because of a head injury.

Who's not: Arizona's defense. Think CU's defense is bad? Arizona has given up even more yards, ranking 118th nationally at 498 yards allowed per game.

Key stat: 83. Arizona's first-half yards against UCLA were its fewest in two years. At halftime, Arizona trailed UCLA 42-3.

FYI: Scott is a first-year starter but was 2-0 as a starter two years ago, beating Washington and UCLA in place of the injured Nick Foles.

Injury report: In addition to Scott's head injury, linebacker Hank Hobson was strapped to a stretcher during the UCLA game, carted off the field and taken to a hospital with a neck injury. He returned to Tucson on Sunday. Guard Chris Putton was taken to the Wildcats' locker room at the end of the third quarter. Tight end Terrence Miller (ankle) and defensive lineman Dominique Austin (foot) have missed several games. Their availability for the CU game isn't known.

Coachspeak: "I'm really embarrassed with how we played (against UCLA), and it starts with me as the head coach. I thought we were ready to play, but we weren't." — Rodriguez

John Henderson, The Denver Post