



With three games remaining, CU coach Jon Embree is hopeful of a strong finish.
Photo Courtesy: Associated Press



Brooks: QB Questions Top Lists For Buffs, Wildcats

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TUCSON, Ariz. - This week's burning question in the desert concerns the health of Arizona quarterback Matt Scott and his status for Saturday's game against Colorado. The bigger question among Wildcats fans: Is the Pac-12 Conference's total offense leader really needed against the severely 'D' deficient Buffs?

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Their gut answer is no, and Scott is considered doubtful after suffering a concussion last weekend. But in the remote chance he's cleared to play, Arizona coach Rich Rodriguez might believe he needs him.

A glance at the Pac-12 stats shows why. Arizona is the only team ranking lower than CU in total defense (497.3 yards a game to 498) and pass defense (293.1-314.9). CU is allowing 46.2 points a game, Zona 35.0, stationing them at Nos. 12-11, respectively, in the conference.

But on the flip side, behind Scott's 357.4 yards a game - 316 of it passing - the Wildcats put up 520.7 yards and 35.9 points a game to the Buffs' 293.0 yards and 16.1 points. A Tucson columnist wrote earlier this week: "Minus Matt Scott, Arizona is Colorado. That's the personnel difference between the two teams: a skilled quarterback. That should tell you two things. One, how important quarterbacking is in football and, two, how

well Rich Rodriguez and his staff have coached this season."

So here's what might have crossed Rodriguez's mind over the last several days: Even with a backup quarterback - that would be junior B.J. Denker - making his first college start, what are the chances of Arizona's offense successfully moving the ball and punching up a load of points against CU? Um, odds would seem pretty good and the oddsmakers agree; the Wildcats are 30-plus point favorites.

And this certainly enters the afternoon's equation: for the first time in nine games, the Buffs' offense will open under a new quarterback - either Connor Wood or Nick Hirschman. CU coach Jon Embree said he would make his starter known on Friday or Saturday.

Hirschman has one college start on his resume (last season at Arizona State), Wood none. Both have played in out-of-hand losses over the past month and both have attempted 29 passes. Hirschman has hit 13 for 160 yards and one score, Wood 14 for 160 yards. Both have been intercepted twice.

In five games for Arizona, Denker has completed 13 of 23 passes for 123 yards and a TD. He struggled against the Bruins, completing two of five passes for 12 yards and rushing eight times for seven yards. He fumbled once.

In addition to the teams' QB questions, there are plenty of others hovering on what is expected to be a cool (low-60s) and possibly rainy afternoon here. For starters:

- After upsetting No. 10 USC 39-36 the previous weekend, Arizona was hammered 66-10 last Saturday at No. 25 UCLA. How to explain the night-and-day swing and are the Wildcats resilient enough to rebound, possibly minus Scott?
- At 5-4 overall (2-4 Pac-12), Arizona needs one win to become bowl eligible in Rodriguez's first season. The Wildcats' final two games are at Utah (Nov. 17) and against in-state rival Arizona State (Nov. 23). Guess which of the final three games the Wildcats believe will get them to the postseason?
- After losing five straight (badly) and dropping to 1-8 overall (1-5 Pac-12), how much do the Buffs have left in the tank? They defeated the Wildcats last season in Boulder (49-28), but there's little similarity this year on either team. Said Embree: "We're a way different team and I think they are, too . . . I think all those (CU) guys playing Saturday were getting ready for the state playoffs last year. So saying we beat Arizona doesn't mean anything to them."
- Will CU get DB Parker Orms back? He's also been out with concussion symptoms but returned to practice on Wednesday. Orms expects a game-time decision, but said, "I feel good and my head feels fine . . . but you can sure get out of shape quick."

Last season, Orms returned to the lineup against Arizona after serving a four-game suspension. Getting back on the field was reason enough to celebrate, then winning amplified that. Even though the Buffs haven't won this season since their Pac-12 opener at Washington State on Sept. 22, Orms said, "We're not going in there thinking we're going to lose; we're playing to win. That's how we approach every game."

Whether Rodriguez uses Scott or Denker at QB is immaterial, claimed Orms. "I think they're good with either guy," he said. "They're both good players and they've got good athletes at receiver and running back."

Sophomore Austin Hill needs six receiving yards to reach 1,000 for the season; he's made a team-best 59 catches for 994 yards and seven TDs. Hill is tied for fourth in the Pac-12 with USC's Robert Woods for number of receptions, and senior teammate Dan Buckner is seventh in the conference in catches (54, 678 yards, three TDs).

The Wildcats' ground game features sophomore Ka'Deem Carey, who averages 112.8 yards a game (199 carries, 1,015 yards, 13 TDs).

Embree believes his team matches up fairly well with the Wildcats in both lines. He has forewarned the Buffs that the 56-point loss last week at UCLA will still be eating at Arizona, and that the prospect of bowl eligibility also ups the afternoon's ante. "Know what they're playing for," Embree advised.

As for his team, Embree said sampling any success at this point would "mean a lot, especially going into these last three games for our seniors . . . they have been through a lot as a group."

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Football: Jon Embree likely to face tough decisions in offseason

By Kyle Ringo Buffzone.com Boulder Daily Camera

Posted:

Buffzone.com

Jon Embree could be two weeks from encountering one of the toughest parts of his job for the first time.

Colorado's second-year head football coach will likely make changes to his coaching staff when the season ends following Utah's visit to Folsom Field two weeks from Friday. Athletic director Mike Bohn hinted that significant changes will be made at the end of the season during an interview with the Camera following last week's 48-0 loss to Stanford on homecoming.

It was the Buffs' fifth consecutive blowout loss and one of a dozen in Embree's short time as head coach.

Bohn didn't directly say assistant coaches will be replaced. In fact he refused to comment on any coach's job security, including Embree's. But Bohn made it clear the status quo is not acceptable heading into the offseason.

"After the last game the intensity of reviewing all aspects of the program will increase dramatically with improvements and adjustments implemented," Bohn said.

It is believed Embree's job is safe, unless the final three weeks become an even bigger debacle on the field than the past three have been against teams ranked in the top 25. CU has been outscored 168-20 during that span. Any significant off-field issue could also lead CU officials to re-consider their current plan for keeping Embree, but that is seen as unlikely.

President Bruce Benson said earlier this fall he planned to keep Embree on as coach regardless of the results in the win-loss columns this season and maybe next. When contacted this week to see if anything had changed in his thinking, Benson's spokesman, Ken McConnellogue, said the president remains committed to Embree having at least one more season to show improvement.

Embree said this week he has had discussions with Bohn about possible changes and enhancements to the program in the offseason. He said he will wait to discuss any changes until after the season.

No head coach wants to be in the position Embree finds himself in this season, possibly having to fire men he cares for and respects.

However, fans want answers and accountability with the Buffs producing one of the worst -- maybe the worst -- seasons in the program's history. And holding everyone in the program to a certain standard and level of competitiveness is one of Embree's chief responsibilities.

Assistants losing their jobs for poor performance has been a rarity at CU, despite a lengthy history of turnover in the coaching staff from year to year over the past three decades.

Former CU coach Bill McCartney decided to shake up his coaching staff and completely change offensive systems between the 1984 and 1985 seasons. McCartney's teams had won only seven games

in his first three seasons in Boulder and he chose to abandon a more conventional offense and move to a triple-option attack.

Embree is wrestling with the idea of changing from a pro-style system to a spread system in the coming offseason and has already acknowledged trying to add elements of the spread to the Buffs' repertoire this fall.

It is just another similarity between the start of Embree's tenure and the beginning of the McCartney years.

When McCartney opted to change offenses, he shuffled his staff and coaching responsibilities, including switching Gary Barnett, a CU assistant coach at the time, from running backs coach to quarterbacks and fullbacks. He also added Steve Logan and Oliver Lucas to his staff.

Embree was also affected by McCartney's decisions. He was a star tight end who led the Buffs with 51 receptions for 680 yards in 1984. He caught 17 passes the next two seasons combined.

Colorado went 7-5 in 1985, beginning a run of success that led to the 1990 national title and a decade of dominance in the 1990s when the program produced 56 NFL draft picks.

Barnett can relate to what Embree is going through this season. Barnett, who was hesitant to be interviewed about CU because he didn't want to be perceived as criticizing Embree or his staff, said parting ways with an assistant is often a very difficult decision for college coaches.

"I think it comes down to your personality and how much of a business approach you take to the college football world," said Barnett, who was head coach at CU from 1999 to 2005. "I always believed that my success was mostly due to the assistants that I had.

"You go through wars with these guys and you watch their kids grow up. You have a bond and you have a friendship and you have a working relationship and you have a trust factor. Then all of a sudden you have to make a decision based on a particular performance or performances, and that's what made it hard I think."

Barnett fired an assistant coach only once in his career at the end of the 2003 season when he parted ways with former defensive coordinator Vince Okruch.

The Buffs implemented a 4-2-5 defense that season and gave up 34 points or more in seven games on their way to a 5-7 record two years after winning the Big 12 Conference title.

Barnett said his decision to fire Okruch wasn't based entirely on the results on the field.

"The kids just no longer believed in our coordinator," Barnett said. "Listening to our players and our other coaches, they just had lost confidence in him. That's really what put it over the top for me and made the decision for me.

"When that happens, I don't think you get that back over the course of the spring. That's not an indictment of what the coordinator knows or whether he can coach or not. That's just what happened there at that time in that situation."

Reflecting on the decision this week during a phone interview, Barnett said he and his staff came to a group decision to switch to the new defense the previous offseason. At the time the 4-2-5 defense was viewed as unconventional. CU switched to it in hopes of getting more speed on the field. Now it's routinely used across the nation, especially in games against spread offenses.

"I never want to be wrong as a coach," Barnett said. "And by making a change, then I had to say to myself that if I let this go on any further, then it's a matter of my ego and not a matter of what's right for our football team.

"By letting him go, I was also confessing that I had been wrong. However anybody wanted to read into it, I think that's what they would see as well. I couldn't let my ego become more important than the program."

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CU Buffs plan to target their younger receivers against Arizona

By Adrian Dater *The Denver Post* *The Denver Post*
Posted:

DenverPost.com

BOULDER — If the Colorado football program is to have any hope of a turnaround next year, things are going to have to get a whole lot better at the receiver positions.

And a whole lot faster.

That's why it is likely coach Jon Embree will start taking more of a look at freshmen such as Gerald Thomas over the team's final three games, starting Saturday against Arizona.

Thomas, a true freshman, has 14 receptions in nine games. He figures to be a big part of Embree's rebuilding plan.

"Gerald gives us a dimension of a guy who can do things like catch a pass in the backfield and take it a long ways, and just make guys miss," Embree said. "As we continue to build, he'll be an integral part of things. We're trying. We have some plays called and dialed up for him and whether we're not able to get him the football, whether it's a sack or pressure, we (haven't) gotten it to him as much."

Thomas, who moved from New Orleans to Texas with his family at age 11 because of his home being washed out by Hurricane Katrina, probably has more speed than any CU receiver. The lack of speed at wideout has been evident in the low reception numbers and lack of big plays.

The Buffs' top two receivers are Nelson Spuce, with 30 receptions, and Tyler McCulloch, with 24. Both are considered more possession receivers than breakaway threats.

"I definitely hope I can see more passes come my way," said the 5-foot-11 Thomas, who played at The Colony High School in Texas. "Obviously, we want to move the ball better down the field, through the air. But we just have to keep at it."

Thomas, who missed parts of practice time this week because of a stomach flu, figures to be part of a faster receiver corps next year with two other freshmen signed from the Dallas area this year. Neither of those players — Peyton Williams (knee) and Jeff Thomas (family issues) — was able to play this year, but they are expected back in the spring. Also, junior Paul Richardson, who sat out this season with a knee injury, is expected to make a complete recovery for next year. He was CU's top threat a year ago.

"We're going to have a better complement of players at that position," Embree said.

Said Thomas: "As younger guys, we have to be all about finishing up the season as best we can to build something for next year. We think we still have a bright future as a team, but we have to prove that."

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