

Football: Finding positives in CU's 1-4 start

By Kyle Ringo Buffzone.com Boulder Daily Camera

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Plenty of Colorado football fans would rather poke their eyes out than relive the first five weeks of the season.

The Buffs aren't quite at the halfway point, but they have reached the bye week, which seems like as good a time as any to review some of the positive developments so far this fall. There will be plenty of time over the coming months to dissect the problems and point fingers at those to blame.

Besides, there are seven games left on the schedule. It's obvious the Buffs won't win many of them, if any, but are you really ready to begin picking over the carcass this soon?

If you didn't think there were any positives that came during this 1-4 start, you weren't looking hard enough. Here is our list in no specific order:

Coaches willing to adapt

Unlike his predecessor, coach Jon Embree has proven he isn't the stubborn sort, or at least he is not so stubborn he refuses to adjust on the fly.

When the running game clearly wasn't effective in the season opener, he moved freshman fullback Christian Powell to tailback and made him the starter. Powell has been the Buffs' most consistent rusher to this point.

Embree also chose to give backup quarterbacks Connor Wood and Nick Hirschman playing time during recent games, both to prevent Jordan Webb from getting too comfortable and to get those players some meaningful experience.

Embree approved offensive coordinator Eric Bieniemy's request to move back to the sideline where he feels he is most effective as a coach and play caller.

The Buffs were having trouble in the passing game because of a lack of speed at wide receiver and poor protection up front. Embree adjusted by using more short passing plays and favorable formations, including three wide receivers bunched on one side. The Buffs have been a more effective passing team the past two weeks.

Crawley making plays

For the second straight season a freshman cornerback is making plenty of plays for the defense. Kenneth Crawley led the team in tackles against UCLA and is the third leading tackler this season behind senior linebacker Jon Major and safety Terrel Smith.

Crawley has plenty of room to grow, but it's difficult to argue with Embree who said he is excited to see Crawley as a junior and senior. Crawley also is returning punts and while that endeavor has been an adventure at times, it's obvious he has the talent to become a game-changer in that role.

Steady young

linebackers

With senior Doug Rippy missing most of the past four games, sophomore Brady Daigh has played well in his absence, and he's not alone.

Kyle Washington and Paul Vigo were both moved from defensive back to linebacker in the offseason and both have been steady contributors and have had starting roles against different opponents.

Obviously both have made mistakes along the way, but considering they were thrust into prominent roles so soon after switching positions, they have been bright spots for a struggling defense.

Finding ways

to make plays

Wide receiver became a concern in late August when Paul Richardson opted to sit out the season and focus on rehabilitating his injured knee and freshman Jeff Thomas was sent home to Texas by coach Embree after several off-the-field issues in camp.

Sophomore Tyler McCulloch and redshirt freshmen Nelson Spruce have proven they can make big catches and help the offense move the ball even if they are hard pressed to make big plays down the field the way Richardson does.

McCulloch and Spruce both have caught two touchdown passes and have combined for 33 catches and 403 yards.

Kasa finds his role

Eyebrows raised in the middle of last season when Nick Kasa moved from defensive line to tight end. Kasa worked hard in the offseason to prove he can succeed at tight end and there is little doubt he can five games into his senior season.

He is as responsible as anyone for the Buffs' only win, making a stellar 70-yard touchdown catch and run and recovering a fumble on the game-winning drive at Washington State. He is improving as a run blocker and has coaches wishing they had another year or two to work with him.

"He can be a match up problem and I'm glad that we have him," Embree said last week. "Like I said, he gets better every week, he does, he makes his share of mistakes. The thing I love about Nick, he doesn't make the same mistake twice and as a coach that's really what you love, because it's so important to them. He's a prideful guy, he wants to do it right and I look for him to continue to have more impact on the games."

Poston up

A year after playing just six snaps as a defensive tackle, third-year sophomore Kirk Poston has earned more playing time, including several starts, at defensive end. He is second in sacks and is coming off the best game of his career, in which he made three total tackles for a loss against UCLA.

Poston is one of a handful of young defensive linemen to earn their first significant playing time at the college level. Josh Tupou, Justin Solis, Tyler Henington and Samson Kafovalu have all had positive moments on the field in the first five games that bode well for the rest of this season and beyond.

"Their effort, without a doubt, has been good," Embree said. "They are hanging in there, for the most part, from a physical standpoint too. So that's been good."

And finally

Bufs fans have to feel good for veterans such as Parker Orms and Nate Bonsu who have had a hard time staying in the lineup battling injuries earlier in their careers. Both have played in all five games and are among the team's top-10 tacklers.

Follow Kyle on Twitter @KyleRingo