

Football: CU Buffs set to face Washington State's high-powered offense

By Ryan Thorburn *Buffzone.com Boulder Daily Camera*

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A pirate looks to hang 40 on the Buffs.

Mike Leach couldn't have scripted a better opponent for his Pac-12 debut.

A reeling Colorado program visits Pullman on Saturday to begin conference play against Washington State (2 p.m., FX).

The Cougars (2-1) have righted the ship after a lopsided loss at BYU (30-6), finding ways to beat Eastern Washington (24-20) and UNLV (35-27).

The Buffs (0-3) are off to a brutal start to Jon Embree's second season and coming off a humiliating 69-14 defeat at Fresno State.

"The clock doesn't stop. We've got to keep going, grinding, find a way," Embree said. "We'll see what happens with our leadership, how we respond as coaches.

"It's on all of us; we have to come back on Monday and find a way to fix whatever it is that's ailing us and keep moving forward."

Last season, CU allowed Washington State to steal a last-minute 31-27 win in Boulder. It wasn't enough to save Paul Wulff's job as the Cougars finished 4-8.

Washington State lured the colorful Leach, an offensive savant and pirate aficionado, with a five-year deal worth over \$11 million.

"Leach is a tremendous offensive mind," CU defensive coordinator Greg Brown said. "He's got his system down, all the nuances down. He knows how to attack and the guy's record speaks for itself."

As Dan Hawkins' secondary coach, Brown had some success against Leach's high-scoring passing offense during the Big 12 days. The Buffs beat Texas Tech 30-6 at Folsom Field for their first win of the 2006 season and 31-26 in Lubbock in 2007.

The Red Raiders were 84-43 with 10 bowl appearances during Leach's 10 seasons.

Right now Brown is relying on three true freshmen in the secondary due to injuries. CU allowed Fresno State to pile up 516 yards of offense in the first half before putting in backup players.

The Buffs are last in the Pac-12 in scoring defense (40.3 ppg) and total defense (476.3 ypg).

Washington State, despite an injury to starting quarterback Jeff Tuel, ranks third in the conference in passing offense (284.7 ypg) but only ninth in total offense (346.7 ypg).

Backup Connor Halliday completed 26-of-45 passes for 378 yards with four touchdowns and two interceptions at UNLV.

"I'm not a guy that tells people the ending to a movie if they haven't seen it and I'm certainly not going to share

that with you," Leach told the Spokane Spokesman-Review when asked if Tuel or Halliday will start against CU. "If you want to know how it turns out, you've got to come see the movie."

CU's horror flick at Bulldog Stadium featured three quarterbacks -- Jordan Webb, Connor Wood and Nick Hirschman. The trio combined to complete 11-of-30 passes for 173 yards with one touchdown and four interceptions.

It's hard to imagine the Buffs winning a Pac-12 shootout in Pullman.

"They'll be passing the ball. My freshman year (at Texas) we played Texas Tech over at their place and I remember just watching their offense and seeing how they throw the ball," Wood said before the season on the subject of keeping up with the conference's elite offenses. "We have to stay on the field as an offense to not let teams like Texas Tech and Oregon score so quickly."

Fresno State scored seven unanswered touchdowns in the first 22 minutes and 14 seconds of Saturday night's game.

Arrr!

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Colorado players voice support of coaching staff despite 0-3 start

By Tom Kensler The Denver Post The Denver Post

Posted:

DenverPost.com

FRESNO, CALIF. — The endorsements arrived unsolicited.

Colorado's players emerged from the locker room after Saturday night's 69-14 flogging by Fresno State and, without any prompting, told reporters that the embarrassment was not the fault of the coaching staff.

Colorado (0-3) begins Pac-12 play Saturday at Washington State (2-1) after the Buffaloes fared worse than anyone could have imagined during the nonconference portion of their schedule. Including losses to Colorado State and FCS-level Sacramento State, the Buffs fell three times to schools outside the power conferences, a first for the program in the post-1950 modern era.

Beyond that, Colorado established new lows for futility against Fresno State in several statistical categories, including most yards yielded in a quarter (322) and in a half (516), and points allowed in a quarter (35).

Also, CU allowed two plays of at least 80 yards from scrimmage in a game for the first time in school history. And both nearly went the entire length of the field — a 97-yard pass play and 94-yard run in a span of three minutes late in the first quarter.

"Ugly" is not a strong enough description for the egg laid by Colorado on a CBS Sports Network telecast aired nationally.

CU players pointed at themselves, and not at coach Jon Embree or their position coaches.

"These coaches know how to win," said junior offensive tackle David Bakhtiari, who addressed the team in the locker room after the humiliation. "They're the best coaches I've ever played for, and I am just completely distraught that we cannot execute what they set out for us.

"I just see it as a rut," Bakhtiari added. "There is something in the turbines that does not let it spin. I'm sick of it."

Colorado is relying on inexperienced players on nearly every position unit, and coaches said last week they intended to simplify the player responsibilities on both sides of the ball.

That helped, junior linebacker Derrick Webb said. But "in the first half, we had some missed assignments, some missed gaps," he said. "That's all it takes sometimes."

The Colorado coaches, senior linebacker Jon Major said, haven't "gotten what they deserve. We have a lot of respect for them and the work they put in. It's not exaggerating when they put in 16 hours a day. They're some of the best coaches we've ever had.

"It sad that, if the players don't put it together, something (may) happen with the coaching staff. We're going to do everything we can to get what they deserve."

Major foresees changes in the defense this week, perhaps in preparation or in schemes. Revisions to the depth chart are always a possibility.

"When somebody goes 69 points against you, something has to happen," Major said. "We'll see what (the coaches)

come up with.

Embree said he still believes in his coaches when asked if he would consider making in-season changes to his staff, as Wisconsin did after the season opener.

The Buffs coach said he plans to show the game tape to the entire team "so they see which of their teammates were still out there fighting ... and which mailed it in." Embree added that he wasn't aware of any player that quit.

Each of the three quarterbacks used by Colorado struggled. Embree said he would review the film of Jordan Webb (5-of-13, 85 yards, one touchdown, two interceptions), Connor Wood (5-of-14, 47 yards, two interceptions) and Nick Hirschman (1-of-3, 41 yards) before announcing a pecking order for this week's game at Washington State.

Athletes, and perhaps football players especially, are innately resilient. But ignoring the scars from this start can't come easy. It hurts.

"All I can do is take these losses as a positive, even though that may sound crazy," Derrick Webb said. "If you have any kind of pride at all, you're going to find a way to fix it. That's going to be our next challenge."

Footnote. The Pac-12 Network picked up the Sept. 29 Colorado home game vs. UCLA. Kickoff will be 4 p.m.

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Colorado assistant coaches

Eric Bieniemy, offensive coordinator, running backs coach — CU legend as a player, was a Minnesota Vikings running backs coach for five seasons before returning to his alma mater. This is his first stint as an offensive coordinator.

Greg Brown, defensive coordinator, defensive secondary — In his third stint at CU but first as a coordinator. Co-defensive coordinator at Arizona in 2010. Fifteen years coaching in NFL.

Rip Scherer, assistant head coach, quarterbacks — 33 years of full-time coaching experience, including six at NFL level. Was QB coach under John Fox with Carolina Panthers.

Brian Cabral, defensive run game coordinator, linebackers — Backed up all-pro Mike Singletary on Chicago Bears' 1985 Super Bowl winner. In his 24th year on staff of his alma mater.

Steve Marshall, offensive line — One of the veterans of the staff, his 33 years of coaching experience include stops at 11 major-college programs (including 2000-01 at CU) and two NFL teams.

J.D. Brookhart, passing-game coordinator, tight ends, special teams — Native Coloradan, was head coach at Akron for six seasons and assistant at Pittsburgh.

Bobby Kennedy, wide receivers — His 22 years of college coaching experience includes a seven years at Texas under Mack Brown, where he coached receivers and was co-recruiting coordinator.

Kanavis McGhee, defensive line, special teams assistant — A Buffs All-American on its 1990 national championship team, this is his first college coaching position.

Mike Tuiasosopo, defensive line — Joined Jon Embree's staff in 2011 after seven years at UArizona. Was previously on Urban Meyer's staff at Utah, and also made stops at Utah State and Nevada.

Eye on ... The Cougars

Colorado (0-3, 0-0 Pac-12) at Washington State (2-1, 0-0), Saturday, 2 p.m., FX

For the record: WSU won its first road game under first-year coach Mike Leach with a 35-27 victory Friday night at UNLV. Saturday's home game vs. CU will be the Pac-12 opener for both teams.

Who's hot: Playing in place of injured regular Jeff Tuel, backup quarterback Connor Halliday, a 6-foot-4, 185-pound sophomore, finished 26-of-45 passing for 378 yards and four TDs.

Who's not: WSU's defense allowed 460 yards of total offense by UNLV. That was just 1 yard shy of the yards amassed by the Cougars' offense.

Key stat: Halliday has thrown for 13 touchdowns in his first six games. That's four more than former Cougar and NFL QB Drew Bledsoe recorded in his first six games.

FYI: Former Colorado coach Dan Hawkins failed to produce a winner in five seasons but won both meetings against Mike Leach, then at Texas Tech — 30-6 in Boulder in 2006 and 31-26 at Lubbock in 2007. The latter stood as CU's most recent road victory until the Buffs won last November at Utah under Jon Embree.

Injury report: Senior QB Tuel (knee). Status unannounced.

Coachpeak: "I thought (Halliday was) really calm for a guy that hasn't played a lot. His demeanor with his team was good." — Leach on his QB's performance vs. UNLV

Tom Kensler, The Denver Post