

Coaching, confidence key to CU's turnaround through first two games

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Two games isn't a huge sample size. Just about any team can make magic for two weeks against the right opponents in a favorable atmosphere.

So the fact that the Colorado defense appears to be much improved this season after victories over Colorado State and Central Arkansas has fans energized, but cautiously so.

The Buffs have been better on first downs -- big time. They are better at getting off the field on third downs. They're taking the ball away and even scoring points. And they're doing it with many of the same players as last season.

So what has been the difference?

"I honestly think it's the coaching," senior captain Chidera Uzo-Diribe said. "Guys are reacting a lot better to this coaching and a lot of the guys that are back, now this is the second coaching change and they realize after the first coaching change in order to be successful, you have to buy in right away. I think a lot of the guys have done that."

The Buffs allowed nearly 8 yards per play on first down in 2012. It's one of the uglier statistics produced by the program in recent years and an obvious reason why the Buffs went 1-11 and ranked as one of the worst defenses in the nation.

So far this season, they are allowing 4.17 yards on first downs, making those second and third-down calls a little tougher on opposing offensive coordinators.

The success on first downs is probably a significant part of why the Buffs have been much better on third downs. So far, CU opponents have converted just eight of 33 times or 24 percent of the time on third downs.

Senior linebacker and co-captain Derrick Webb said there are a lot of contributing factors to the improvement. It's a combination of coaching, schemes being used, improved attitudes from players and experience.

"It's a lot of things. I can't really put my hand on just one thing, but obviously we're an older team and guys kind of got thrown in the first last year are a lot more mature this year," Webb said. "We weren't so good last year, but we want to make plays. We want to get better. So it starts with the want-to and then you put a lot of work in to it. ... When you start playing for each other, it starts making a difference."

CU used a lot of true freshmen on defense in 2012 and that lack of experience was often the biggest excuse cited for the team's inability to stop people. It's true that coaches aren't using as many greenhorn Buffs so far this fall, but it's not as if this defense is all veterans, all the time.

In fact, true freshman linebacker Addison Gillam and true freshman defensive back Chidobe Awuzie have been invaluable contributors in the early going. Gillam leads the team in tackles and Awuzie is tied for fifth in total stops.

Webb said while the defense is different under coordinator Kent Baer, it uses a lot of the same concepts used last season by the former coaching staff. What is different is the attention and time paid to teaching players.

"We put a lot of time in just teaching and learning," Webb said. "We do so many repetitions. That's what coach Mac is all about. Do it over and over and over again and you get in the game and it's just second nature."

Uzo-Diribe said the number of repetitions the Buffs are getting in practice has players feeling more confident and prepared going into games. For instance, all those repetitions helped him make the key play in forcing a fumble against Colorado State that helped the Buffs win the game.

"It's a huge deal," Uzo-Diribe said. "Coach Mac always says, 'Practice makes permanent.' So if we keep getting a lot of repetitions, when we go into the game and we see something we've seen in practice tens of times before and be able to react to it."

The Buffs allowed 220 yards rushing per game last year. So far this season they're giving up just 77 yards a game on the ground. While there is plenty of improvement to celebrate, the Buffs feel like they can be better across the board. One area they need to improve on is pressuring opposing quarterbacks in an era in which quarterbacks get rid of the ball in just a few seconds.

CU sacked the quarterback just 21 times in 2012, averaging fewer than two per game. They've only managed three sacks in the first two games this fall.

Uzo-Diribe said defenders need to be more conscious of disrupting passing plays in other ways. He said if defensive linemen aren't going to get to the quarterback, they need to do a better job of getting their hands up in passing lanes and knocking the ball down.

The competition will improve dramatically in the coming weeks with Pac-12 Conference opponents such as Oregon State, Oregon and Arizona State looming on the schedule. It's difficult to believe the CU defense will continue to be able to boast this kind of improvement after those games. But confidence is a big part of that success and the Buffs' confidence right now is as high as it has been at any point in recent years on defense.

"We've been having a lot of fun out there," Webb said. "We've been working hard and that's a credit to the players as much as it is to the coaches. When you get guys playing hard, the game becomes a lot more fun and we're making plays. It's just awesome how it comes together like that."

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