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Tricks a matter of timing

Bufs wait for right occasion to unleash their gadget plays

By Patrick Ridgell

Longmont Times-Call

BOULDER — When University of Colorado offensive coordinator Mark Helfrich first surveys an opponent's defense, he looks at many things. But he's always wondering where it's most susceptible to trick plays.

Not only does the chance to create them enhance his job, Helfrich said, but sometimes they work, like the ol' fake-a-fumble-then-throw-to-the-tight-end play CU ran last Saturday against Kansas to score a third-quarter touchdown.

Rarely do they work as well as Saturday's did, Helfrich concedes.

He added that it'll be take about five years or so to get that one erased from most game film so don't expect to see it again soon, or at least Saturday when the Bufs play at Texas Tech.

But Helfrich added the Bufs usually draw up about five early each week, and whittle them to two or three for the game.

CU has had some unsuccessful halfback passes and a botched fake punt in 2007. But there are others still to be unveiled, he said.

And for Helfrich, it's a matter of waiting for the perfect time.

"Some of them we'll practice all year and the situation never comes up," Helfrich said. "We kind of have them in the hopper. ... We've had some we carry along; some are totally opponent-dependent.

"Some of those, you can carry throughout the season, then you don't get on the correct hash, or you don't get the right down and distance. That one the other day, we had to be in third-and-inches or fourth-and-inches, or we didn't have it."

Saturday's sprung from a warning head coach Dan Hawkins once received when he coached Willamette from 1993-1997. A colleague told Hawkins about how Pacific Lutheran ran the play.

Later, when Hawkins coached Boise State, he said one year he noticed Hawaii's safeties creeping up to the line of scrimmage in short-yardage situations. They tried the fake fumble play on the Warriors, but quarterback Jared Zabransky's pass went beyond the intended receiver.

During preparations for Kansas, coaches noticed safeties creeping up in short-yardage situations.

"We were kind of going, 'OK, reload it, it's ready,'" Hawkins said.

The Bufs practiced it last week, leaving some confused.

"The first time I saw it, I thought it was a mistake," defensive end Alonzo Barrett said. "I was like, 'We have to get that snap right.'" Hawkins and Helfrich said they don't consider the consequences of unsuccessful trick plays in this high-scrutiny era. Helfrich said if the situations is right, as it was for Saturday's pass, they're going to call it.

“And we’ve had some of those things backfire on us earlier this season and last year,” Helfrich said. “As Hawk would say, that’s living.”

NOT ENOUGH:Terrence Wheatley is second in the conference and 41st in the nation with an average kickoff return of 25.1 yards a try. CU’s field position benefits from his work, and he hasn’t suffered an injury yet in doing so.

But Wheatley isn’t satisfied. He said the goal remains to return one for a touchdown, something to which he believes he’s coming tantalizingly close.

“I’ve definitely had some frustrating moments. It always seems like I’m one guy away, and I’ve been saying that for two or three weeks,” Wheatley said.

Wheatley has returned 29 kicks in 2007. His long is 68 yards.

UNFRIENDLY DESTINATION:The Buffs have never won in Lubbock, Texas, not that most of the current Buffs have anything to do with that.

CU has lost four times at Texas Tech, most recently in 2003, 26-21.

Of CU’s 13 fifth-year seniors, only Wheatley played in that game. Even Hawkins said this week’s trip to Lubbock is a “first time for me.” CU’s other defeats there came in 1962, 1976 and 1999. Asked if the history matters to players, Hawkins said, “A little bit.

“But it’s funny with these guys, and maybe with this generation, but five years ago is like dinosaur days to those guys,” he said. “We have a whole roster that has never been to Lubbock.”

ANNOUNCEMENT LOOMING: According to Rivals.com, Ponderosa High linebacker Jon Major, the state’s top-ranked recruit, will announce his college of choice Saturday.

The site reported Major received 50 scholarship offers and visited CU, Oklahoma and Wisconsin. He is expected to choose from the three.

EXTRA POINTS: Linebacker R.J. Brown said he met with team doctors Wednesday regarding his concussions and intends to discuss his situation with them more today. He said no plan has been made and that he remains “in limbo.” Brown’s multiple concussions, the last one coming Sept. 15 against Florida State, forced doctors to advise him to stop playing for several weeks before reassessing his health. ... Hawkins said tight end Riar Geer (left knee) is starting to come around from the injury he suffered in early September. Geer put a move on a defender in practice Wednesday that left teammates hooting and hollering. Geer led CU in receptions last year but has only seven in 2007. ... After Kyle Black quarterbacked the scout team last week to impersonate Kansas’ Todd Reesing, Matt Ballenger is trying to do a good impression of Tech quarterback Graham Harrell. It’s not easy. “Graham Harrell, if he’s not the best quarterback in the country, he’s one of them, so that’s a tough simulation,” Hawkins said.

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football

Harrell having a ball with spread offense

By Tom Kensler
The Denver Post

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Prolific Texas Tech freshman wide receiver Michael Crabtree (5) and quarterback Graham Harrell have connected for 17 touchdown passes in just eight games this season. (AP | LM Otero)

A similar question probably has been posed regarding every Texas Tech quarterback since Mike Leach began coaching the Red Raiders in 2000: Is Graham Harrell really talented, or should his success and statistics be attributed mostly to Leach's spread offense?

Leach said Harrell, a 6-foot-3, 197-pound junior from Ennis, Texas, is immensely gifted and ranks at the top of the QBs he has coached.

"I think it's a dumb question; teams that don't have a system don't need coaches," Leach said during this week's Big 12 coaches teleconference. "If Graham personifies his system better than the other guy, that's why his numbers are better. And the reason his numbers are better has something to do with the fact that he's a better



Texas Tech quarterback Graham Harrell leads the nation in total offense at 434.8 yards per game. (Getty | Lavne Murdoch)

player."

In his second season as a starter for the Red Raiders (6-2, 2-2 Big 12), Harrell enters Saturday's game in Lubbock against Colorado (4-4, 2-2) ranked first nationally in

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total offense (434.8 yards per game), completions per game (37.75), passing yardage (3,548) and touchdowns (32).

Despite putting up gaudy numbers, Harrell isn't listed among top Heisman candidates. Don't look for him on postseason All-America lists.

"I think it's an unfortunate thing that comes with playing in this offense," Harrell said this week. "There have been some great players who have come out of here, and they haven't gotten the credit they deserve because everybody wants to label them 'a product of the system.'"

"I don't think that's fair. Look at Wes Welker," Harrell added, referring to the former Tech receiver now with the New England Patriots. "If anybody could have been labeled a product of this system, it would have been Wes. He doesn't have any size at all. He's not blazing fast. But if he was only a product of our system, why is he putting up great numbers in the NFL?"

Colorado coaches believe Harrell is the real deal.

"You're talking about a guy with anticipation, an arm, touch," said Greg Brown, who coaches CU's defensive backs. "He has a commanding presence out there. He's an impressive guy."

Tech's spread offense, which employs at

least four receivers on every down, reflects Leach's "gunslinging" personality, Harrell said. Leach was raised in Cody, Wyo.

"He tells us stories about Cody all the time," Harrell said. "He tells us about walking around the street shooting at cans as a kid, and nobody thought much about it. He likes to tell us that he grew up in the 'Wild Wild West' and loved it there. I guess you could say he's carried that over to his offense."

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CU sack slump not easy to end

By Joshua Lindenstein
Thursday, October 25, 2007

Compared to the past couple of quarterbacks the Colorado Buffaloes have faced, Texas Tech's Graham Harrell is a sitting duck.

Unfortunately for the Buffs, that's no guarantee they'll break out of their recent sack slump this week.

After registering nine sacks in their first three games of the season, the Buffs have just two in their last five games. While part of the discrepancy has come from the threat of a mobile quarterback slowing the pass rush, much of it has also been due to the fact that the Buffs have faced quarterbacks in spread offenses who get rid of the ball quickly.

Harrell fits into the latter category, with possibly the quickest draw of any of the Big 12 Conference gunslingers.

"He gets the ball out of his hand within three seconds of the ball being snapped almost every play," said CU defensive tackle George Hypolite, who is tied for the team lead with three sacks.

Mix in a host of screen passes and draw plays the Red Raiders run as part of their nation-leading passing attack to keep the defensive line honest, Hypolite said, and getting to Harrell isn't as easy as simply selling out to go after the immobile quarterback.

"Now what is a consequence of (the passing onslaught) is they're going to throw the ball in some places they probably don't want," Hypolite said. "In a couple of games we did convert and get some interceptions but haven't been lately, and that's what we've got to do if teams are going to get the ball out of their hands quick."

Despite just one combined sack in wins over Oklahoma and Baylor, the Buffs forced six total turnovers. In losses to Kansas State and Kansas the past two weeks, CU grabbed just two takeaways.

"If you can't get to the quarterback, you've got to find other ways to be successful," CU defensive coordinator Ron Collins said.

That's something Collins' crew managed to do well last year in a 30-6 victory over Texas Tech.

Even with Big 12 sack leader Abe Wright last season, the Buffs sacked Harrell just twice. But they did manage to force him into three interceptions and caused two Red Raider fumbles.

"Obviously, that's kind of been our Achilles heel the last couple of weeks and we need to generate turnovers to be successful," Collins said. "I don't think you're going to fool him at all. You've got to create your own magic in this game. We've got to get after the ball."

Do that, Hypolite said, and the lack of sacks will be easier to swallow for the guys chasing the quarterback.

While he acknowledged hitting Harrell is certainly key to keeping him from getting in a rhythm, Hypolite said just as important last season was how the Buffs swarmed to the ball and prevented Tech receivers from turning short catches into big plays.

"You want to get the sacks, but if you're getting the ball back and getting turnovers like we have in a few of the other games, you really can't be too mad," Hypolite said.

Packing a wallop

For better or for worse, CU kickoff specialist Tyler Cope hasn't been one to shy away from making tackles when the opportunities come his way.

The 6-foot-1, 180-pound redshirt freshman from Portland, Ore., has six tackles on the season. That's four more than any other Buff kicker has had in a season since special teams tackles began being tracked separately in 1987.

Mitch Berger had two in 1993 and Crosby equaled the feat in 2003. Crosby never made another tackle in his final three seasons.

North vs. South

With a win Saturday, the Buffs can lock up their third-ever sweep of Big 12 South opponents.

The Buffs also won all three of their games against South teams in 1996 and 1998, and have had winning records against the South in eight of 12 seasons, including this fall.

Overall, the Buffs are 20-15 against the South since the conference started football play in 1996, tying them with Nebraska for the best mark among North teams.

Injury update

Fullback Jake Behrens, who sprained an ankle during conditioning on Sunday, is questionable for Saturday. ... Linebacker R.J. Brown (concussion) is out. ... Running back Kevin Moyd (illness) is day-to-day. ... Cornerback Jimmy Smith, who sprained his knee against Kansas, is probable. ... Cornerback Terrence Wheatley, who bruised his elbow against Kansas, is probable.

Notable

The date for the memorial service for former CU tight end Tennyson McCarty was listed incorrectly in Wednesday's Camera. The service will be held Nov. 4 at 1 p.m. at Macky Auditorium on the CU campus. ... Texas Tech is one win shy of clinching its 13th winning season in a row and is the only Big 12 school without a losing season since the conference began. ... At 540 miles from Boulder as the crow flies, Texas Tech, located in Lubbock, is CU's closest Big 12 neighbor.





Bufs buck trend with packages

Hawkins not worried about rhythm when rotating players

By Kyle Ringo

Thursday, October 25, 2007

Rhythm is valuable on the football field.

Offenses try to find it and keep it. Defenses try to steal it or sabotage it.

It can be hard to find for young players in the Colorado system. Coach Dan Hawkins and his assistants differ from some of their competitors around the country because they like to use many different personnel groupings, which leads to players running on and off the field quite a bit.

Freshman wide receiver Josh Smith might put together back-to-back catches for significant gains, but that doesn't necessarily mean he will be on the field for the next play.

Ditto for running back Hugh Charles.

"It's something you have to adjust to," Charles said. "With coach Hawk, I believe his deal is playing the best players in that particular best play."

Charles said it took him much of last season to find his comfort zone in Hawkins' approach. In his freshman and sophomore seasons under former coach Gary Barnett, he was used to one running back playing the majority of the time.

Charles said it is important for a running back to find his rhythm and constantly switching personnel groupings can make it more difficult. But Charles also pointed out that he found out this season, during his string of four consecutive 100-yard games, that Hawkins has no problem leaving a hot hand in the game.

Prior to a game earlier this season, Hawkins said the coaching staff had installed a game plan with 40 different personnel groupings. Players say that number might be a little above average but not out of the ordinary for a typical game plan.

Hawkins explained his philosophy this week.

"I think it has to do with several factors. One is being able to utilize each guy's skills because they all do have different skills," he said. "If you have one guy who is great in all those areas that has tremendous strength, tremendous experience, tremendous speed and can do all those things, then he plays in more of those groupings.

"But a lot of it is trying to get each guy in a spot where they can do what they do best. I think there is

obviously a chemistry component to the thing as well."

This week the Buffs face Texas Tech, an opponent that makes far fewer changes in a game. The Red Raiders line up and try to win the game with their best players on the field running their offense at a high level of efficiency and chemistry.

The Red Raiders have led the nation in passing in four consecutive seasons, in part, because of their level of comfort with one another.

It's an approach that allows freshman wide receiver Michael Crabtree to catch 15 balls a game and average 165 yards receiving each week. But it also has its drawbacks. When Texas Tech is not in rhythm and the chemistry isn't good, things can get ugly, as they did last week when Texas Tech quarterback Graham Harrell threw four interceptions and the Red Raiders were routed 41-10 at Missouri.

Hawkins also values the multiple personnel groupings because it builds a better team top to bottom and a large number of players feel included in the game plan. That helps team chemistry in the locker room and keeps everyone working hard.

It took Smith only a few practices in his first training camp in August to establish himself as one of the top play-makers on the team. He has the speed and size coaches covet in a wide receiver and will only get better in his time at CU. Smith admitted he believes he would get better faster if he was on the field more often, but he also said he sees the benefits of the system.

Smith, like just about any player, prefers to be on the field as much as possible.

"Definitely, I feel like I've got more of a feel of the game," Smith said. "The more I'm out there, the more things really start to slow down for me."

Hawkins doesn't believe his system stunts the growth of young players such as Smith or fellow true freshman wide receiver Kendrick Celestine. In fact, he sees it working to benefit those players.

"He could never handle the whole offensive package," Hawkins said. "He's not there yet and neither is Kendrick. From that standpoint, it helps 'em, because there is no way they could go back to square one and do everything we do in the passing game every week."



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