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Building blocks for Buffs

Dazzling locker room is just a start as CU joins rush to upgrade facilities

By B.G. Brooks, Rocky Mountain News
September 15, 2007

BOULDER - It is a race with no finish line, but the competitors seldom slow down. If anything, the pace has been ratcheted past frantic.

In Division I-A football, facilities are foremost, although the schools with the most toys don't always stockpile the most wins. Still, expanded stadiums, indoor practice facilities, posh locker rooms, etc., have become near necessities to recruit successfully and stay in the race.

Winning it is another issue altogether. The distance between the "haves" and the "have-nots" is becoming a chasm. All 20 of the largest college football stadiums in the country either recently have undergone expansion and/or renovation, or have improvements scheduled.

At the University of Colorado, there has been no choice but to pick up the pace. Quickly. Dramatically.

Although CU's football facilities still remain more of a vision than a work in progress, when the Buffaloes suit up tonight for their home opener (8, ESPN) against Florida State, they will do so in a state-of-the-art locker room that this week received some finishing touches but will require more as the season progresses.

"It's just so cool to go in there and have that feel of a professional locker room," junior linebacker R.J. Brown said. "There's just an air about it that makes it feel it's like how Colorado should be. When I first saw it, I was getting goose bumps. It was just unreal."

That is in contrast with CU's old locker room, which, on first look, inspired this reaction from Brown: "Oh, my God. . . . Then you see something like this. I couldn't imagine being a freshman and walking in and seeing the dining hall and the locker room, the new carpet, the ceiling with the big 'CU' up there . . .

"It's going to be a real (recruiting) tool. A lot of guys were attracted here just by the knowledge that it was going to get done. Now that it is done, I'm sure it's going to be an even bigger sway."

The locker room renovation, included in an overall upgrade of the Dal Ward Athletics Center, is part of a two-phase project that will cost about \$1 million, all from donations, upon completion. Phase one centered on the locker room, which had not undergone any major improvement since Dal Ward was completed in summer 1991.

"It's been 15 years since the house was built, and we hadn't done anything to the family room," said Tom McGann, CU's director of game operations. "Yeah, you could say it was about time."

Past time, in fact.

But CU hasn't had a T. Boone Pickens (Oklahoma State) or Phil Knight (Oregon) to bankroll the athletic department's blueprints. Where donations might have flowed torrentially at those two schools, they traditionally have moved at a trickle in Boulder.

Pickens, an oilman, gave Oklahoma State a \$165 million gift, much of it earmarked for football. The stadium (Boone Pickens Stadium, of course) is being enclosed on the west end (\$120 million) and an indoor practice complex is under construction (\$50 million).



Photos By Evan Semon © News

Linebacker Jordon Dizon stands at his locker in Colorado's new locker room, a state-of-the-art facility that is part of an overall upgrade to the Dal Ward Athletics Center that will cost \$1 million. "It's just so cool to go in there and have that feel of a professional locker room," junior linebacker R.J. Brown said.

Oregon has benefited greatly from Knight's longtime devotion to the athletic program. The Nike honcho recently donated \$100 million, most of it going toward a new basketball and training facility, which includes more flat-screen televisions than most sports bars, a whirlpool large enough to accommodate the entire volleyball team, a juice bar and even dental and optometry offices, so the school can bring in specialists when needed rather than sending players off campus for those services.

The Ducks' lavish football locker room, largely financed by Knight and completed in 2003, raised the bar nationally. It left a vivid impression on CU freshman receiver Markques Simas, of San Diego, who visited Oregon before signing with the Buffs last winter.

Simas left Eugene believing he might "never see anyplace with as good a facility. . . . But after seeing (the renovated CU locker room), I'd say we're right up there with Oregon now. It's very exciting."

Give Simas high marks for exuberance, but while CU's new digs are indeed impressive, the edge still goes to Oregon. And that doesn't bother athletic director Mike Bohn or football coach Dan Hawkins.

Both see the revamping of Dal Ward as a starting point, "But it's not a cure-all or an endpoint . . . it's no panacea," Bohn said. "We've taken huge steps and done a major upgrade, but the work is not complete. We need to continue to hustle and inspire donors."

Added Hawkins: "It shows growth, interest, investment (and) that we are getting better. People care, and we're pointed in the right direction. Whether you're a fan or a recruit, you've got to see that in a tangible sense."

Soon to be on the horizon - it is scheduled to appear in October - is a long-awaited multipurpose bubble covering the lone artificially surfaced practice field. It will allow Hawkins' team to say goodbye to cramped and antiquated Balch Fieldhouse during inclement weather, as well as be used by the school's other teams.

Also, Dal Ward's varsity room/dining room has been upgraded, with several flat-screen TVs mounted on walls and a general upgrade in the décor. Hawkins' office now sports hardwood flooring, and his assistants' quarters have been spruced up.

Only 11 schools have played football for more seasons than CU, and Hawkins wants the Buffs' tradition, particularly from recent years, pushed front and center for Dal Ward visitors.

For acknowledgement of their contributions as well as recruiting purposes, Hawkins believes visitors to the building need to be able to identify CU's former greats (players and coaches), former Buffs in the NFL, the All-Americans, etc.

"Think about it," he said. "I mean coach (Brian) Cabral has had a number of great linebackers, two Butkus Award winners, and I dare you to search this whole building and find out who they were."

CU's administration "has been very supportive," Hawkins said.

But he and Bohn foresee the need for a permanent indoor practice facility and an expansion of Dal Ward. "We're on the way, but it's the tip of the iceberg," Hawkins said.

Among the athletic department's long-term goals is to have the country's No. 1 academic support program, which will require adding more academic advisers, computers and space to house them.

"We might never have a 109,000-seat stadium," Hawkins said. "But the kid that comes here goes, 'I'm going to get more personal attention than anywhere else in the nation.'"

Until that can become a reality, visiting prospects such as the dozen or so on campus this weekend - hotly pursued Ponderosa High School linebacker Jon Major is among them - will have to be content with a promise and a tour of what's already been done.

Bohn believes the new locker room is "certainly going to help us" in recruiting, but adds, "There are numerous efforts to help in that area. We hope to fill up the stadium. Our next three games are at home; we hope to show people Colorado football is something special."

That will require more than two wins a year, which is all Hawkins' debut season produced.

Hawkins said if his program "starts showing some growth, you get better and your team improves and your schedule improves, people start going, 'Yeah, I need to be there. I've got to be at that place.' So it all kind of has to step out there."

By most accounts, CU has taken the first step, and Bohn senses a genuine appreciation from football players.

"Probably one of the most satisfying pieces of all this is that 50 percent of the players I come in contact with say, 'Thank you,' " Bohn said. "They are very, very appreciative. They know there's a tremendous support base here, and it's gratifying to know they'll care for it and will enjoy it."

Dressing it up

This isn't your father's dressing room. Colorado's renovated football locker room includes the following amenities:

- Three 52-inch wall-mounted TVs
 - Six 32-inch wall-mounted TVs
 - Two computers
 - Four video game consoles
 - Eight lounge chairs
 - Three highboy tables
 - 116 individual maple lockers
 - Locker roomwide sound system
 - Game clock
 - Ability to transmit team messages and schedules on all video screens
 - New exit - coach Dan Hawkins calls it the "Thunder Chute" - directly to Folsom Field
 - Sandstone interior entryway to locker room that matches campus buildings' exteriors
- Source: University Of Colorado*

Florida State at Colorado

- **The game:** 8 tonight, Folsom Field (53,750 capacity), Boulder.
- **The records:** CU is 1-1; Florida State is 1-1.
- **The series:** Florida State leads 1-0.
- **TV/radio:** ESPN; KOA-AM (850).
- **Who's favored:** Florida State by 4 1/2.

- **Injury update:** Tailback Hugh Charles (strained hamstring) and receiver Josh Smith (bruised kidney) returned to CU's practice this week and say they will play. Ditto for Florida State tailback Antone Smith (concussion). CU linebacker Michael Sipili and defensive tackle Chris Perri will sit out the final game of three-game suspensions.

- **Scouting report:** The Buffaloes need to rejuvenate their ground game (32 yards at Arizona State), regain focus among their receivers (half a dozen dropped passes at ASU) and resume their takeaways (two fumbles recovered, one pass intercepted at ASU). Defensively, the Seminoles will pressure Buffs redshirt freshman quarterback Cody Hawkins. Offensively, they hope for a consistent performance from junior quarterback Drew Weatherford.

- **Stat that matters:** These aren't the sack-happy Seminoles of seasons past; they've registered three in two games. On the flip side, Weatherford has been sacked five times. In two games, Buffs inside linebacker Jordon Dizon has been a tackling machine; coaches have credited him with 39, with 31 of them unassisted. While Hawkins has suffered dropped passes, his completion percentage is 45.9 - well below what this offense needs.

Northern Colorado at San Diego

- **The game:** 7 MDT tonight, Torero Stadium (6,000 capacity), San Diego.
- **The records:** Northern Colorado is 0-2; San Diego is 2-0.
- **The series:** First meeting.
- **Radio:** KFKA-AM (1310) in Greeley and KRKS-AM (990) in Denver.
- **Who's favored:** No line.

Wyoming at Boise State

- **The game:** 6 tonight, Bronco Stadium (30,000), Boise.
- **The records:** Wyoming is 1-1; Boise State is 1-1.
- **The series:** Boise State leads 3-0.
- **Radio:** KEPN-AM (1600) in Denver.
- **Who's favored:** Boise State by 12.

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Young Buffs ready to test Seminoles

More freshmen likely to make their debut for Colorado tonight

By Kyle Ringo

Saturday, September 15, 2007

In nearly 50 years of coaching college football, there isn't much Florida State coach Bobby Bowden hasn't come across.

The winningest coach in major college history will walk on to Folsom Field tonight for the first time in his career for another in a long line of big games. Plenty of folks probably think the stadiums, games, players, assistant coaches and the years just sort of run together at this point for the 77-year-old southern gentleman from Birmingham, Ala.

They would be wrong.

Bowden has a remarkable memory. Ask him for details of any of his 367 wins, 114 losses or four ties and he can give them to you.

Years after tonight's nationally televised contest (ESPN 8:10 p.m.) is complete a few things will probably immediately come to mind when recalling his mile-high matchup with the Buffs.

Watching Ralphie the Buffalo circle the field before the game and at halftime will probably be high on the list. It always is for any first-timer. He might also recall the Buffs as young team building toward something under a young coach in whom he might see a little of himself.

CU coach Dan Hawkins has played two true freshmen and eight redshirt freshmen in the season's first two games, and more will likely debut tonight against Bowden and the 1-1 Seminoles.

Freshmen such as offensive lineman Ryan Miller, running back Brian Lockridge, defensive end Conrad Obi and linebacker Nate Vaionmunga are ready for their first action as the 1-1 Buffs try to match their win total from last season.

Bowden knows all about what his counterpart is attempting to do at CU. He coached plenty of young teams in building the Seminoles into a national powerhouse in the 1980s. He has seen over and over again the benefits and pitfalls of putting freshmen on the field.

Former FSU players Deion Sanders, Warrick Dunn, Derrick Brooks and Scott Bentley made an immediate positive impact for Bowden. Then there have been years, such as last fall when he played 17 freshmen and finished 7-6, that haven't gone so well.

Earlier this week he recalled his first season in Tallahassee 32 years ago when he decided to make a youth movement before a Week 3 road trip to Oklahoma.

"So I started seven freshmen against them, that's offense and defense," he said. "We started 6-0 and stayed close at the half, then they got us."

The Seminoles will have an advantage in experience when the teams take the field tonight in CU's home opener. FSU junior quarterback Drew Weatherford has started 25 of the past 28 games for Bowden, who has only one freshman starter listed on his depth chart.

Cody Hawkins, CU's redshirt freshman quarterback, has started two games for the Buffs with mixed results. **"Sometimes they'll play great, but I think your biggest realization is it's hard for them to do it consistently."**

FSU coach Bobby Bowden

On young players

He led his team to a come-from-behind victory in the fourth quarter of the season opener against Colorado State, but last week he and the rest of the offense were unable to do much right in a 33-14 loss at Arizona State.

The bar is raised again this week with an athletic FSU defense standing in the way. The Buffs were unable to run the ball effectively against the Sun Devils. They must make dramatic improvement on the ground tonight.

Hawkins will have a little more speed at this disposal with senior running back Hugh Charles returning from a strained hamstring and true freshman wide receiver Josh Smith ready to debut after a month off following a bruised kidney.

But athleticism wasn't the Buffs No. 1 problem last week. On multiple occasions, CU players were in position to make plays against the veteran Sun Devils, and they simply didn't make them.

"You know sometimes, they'll play great, but I think your biggest realization is it's hard for them to do it consistently," Bowden said of young players.

Dan Hawkins plans to begin a new tradition tonight, dropping players off outside the south end of the stadium and having them enter the building walking past the Buffalo statue and through fans.

The Buffs will also use their new locker room and new field entrance for the first time, but after all the ancillary details are attended to, what matters is whether the young Buffs will begin making plays between sidelines.

Coach Hawkins has been looking for a breakthrough victory since he took over in Boulder. He acknowledges tonight could represent a chance for one.

His players have grown up in an era in which Bowden's program was among the most dominant in the game, but Hawkins said he doesn't believe the Buffs will be in awe of the Seminoles or their history.

"I hope that we can continue to build and grow the program it doesn't matter who you play, the juices are always flowing," Hawkins said. "Again, develop that kind of program where you have that kind of consistency that it doesn't matter who you're playing or where you're playing you're preparing and are ready to go. We'll see how they respond to it."



Colorado vs. Florida St. matchups

CU RUN OFFENSE VS. FSU RUN DEFENSE — CU should be better in the running game this week with the return of starting tailback Hugh Charles and the possible addition of true freshman Ryan Miller to the offensive line. But expect the Seminoles to load up on stopping the run and challenge the Buffs to beat them through the air. CU needs a big game on the ground to win, unless quarterback Cody Hawkins and the receivers play out of their minds. The Seminoles have been decent against the run, except for a few big plays they gave up to a pair of talented Clemson backs. **Edge: FSU.**

CU PASS OFFENSE VS. FSU PASS DEFENSE — The Buffs need to get their tight ends more involved. It was considered a strength of the team coming into the season, but tight ends have caught only seven passes combined in the first two games. Look for Charles to get some passes out of the backfield as well. CU has to get creative here and its wide receivers have to make plays. So far redshirt freshman Scotty McKnight is the only one who has proven he can consistently do so. It will be interesting to see how true freshman Josh Smith fares. Hawkins also needs to make better decisions with the ball. Florida State has the athletes, speed and talent to shut the Buffs down just like Arizona State did last week. **Edge: FSU.**

FSU RUN OFFENSE VS. CU RUN DEFENSE — Most teams have had trouble running the ball consistently well against the Buffs over the past three years and this won't be any different. FSU tailbacks Antone Smith and Jamaal Edwards are very capable of gashing CU for big plays if the Buffs don't tackle well. Another point of interest will be how FSU offensive linemen hold up at altitude past their bedtime. It's tempting to give CU the edge here, but FSU ran for four yards per carry against a Clemson defense that is superior to these Buffs. So... **Edge: EVEN.**

FSU PASS OFFENSE VS. CU PASS DEFENSE — The Buffs fared better on third downs last week and they didn't allow Arizona State to complete an absurd percentage of passes, but the Buffs haven't really stopped anyone from having success throwing the ball either. They have given up six touchdown passes in the first two games to two veteran quarterbacks. They face another signal caller with experience tonight in Drew Weatherford, who has plenty of weapons at his disposal. The Buffs have shown they are capable of creating turnovers in the passing game, especially All-Big 12 cornerback Terrence Wheatley. But they have given up plenty of them, too. **Edge: FSU.**

SPECIAL TEAMS — This has been a strength for CU so far this season after a very mediocre season last year. The Buffs have given themselves good field position with good punt and kickoff returning from Chase McBride and Wheatley. They have created turnovers in the kicking game and place-kicker Kevin Eberhart proved he can handle the pressure of big kicks. FSU has a dangerous return game as well, but their punt team is averaging an abysmal 33 net yards per punt. Seminoles place-kicker Gary Cismesia is the most accurate kicker in school history and he's a senior whose no stranger to pressure situations. **Edge: EVEN.**

PREDICTION — Florida State 30-17

— **Kyle Ringo**