



Bufs break camp happy with progress

By Kyle Ringo
Sunday, August 24, 2008

Fall camp officially ended Saturday for the Colorado football team with an 80-play scrimmage that focused on specific game situations and produced no significant injuries.

The Buffs begin the 2008 season a week from today in Denver against Colorado State at Invesco Field feeling better about themselves than they have at the outset of either of the first two seasons under coach Dan Hawkins.

"This training camp really isn't even comparable to last camp, both in execution and overall productivity," quarterback Cody Hawkins said. "We got a lot done. We got a lot better as a team. We developed a lot of team chemistry, and I thought we became much better football players."

Dan Hawkins said he is happy with the way his players approached camp and how they progressed over the past three weeks, but much remains to be done in the final week of preparation.

"We've got way more in and we're further along than we have been before," Dan Hawkins said. "But there is still a lot of cleanup to do between now and Sunday."

Coaches have some decisions to make after assessing film of the scrimmage. They will likely name starters at guard sometime this week, but several players are likely to see playing time until two begin to standout.

Redshirt freshmen Blake Behrens and true freshmen Max Tuioti-Mariner are listed as co-starters at right guard and junior Devin Head and redshirt freshman Shawn Daniels are co-starters on the left side.

While not every position battled is settled, the Buffs have found some answers.

Players voted four fifth-year seniors as team captains, naming wide receiver Patrick Williams, fullback Maurice Cantrell, center Daniel Sanders and safety Ryan Walters earlier this week.

They identified two starting cornerbacks in junior Cha'pelle Brown and senior Gardner McKay. As many as four other cornerbacks will push them for those jobs throughout the season.

Junior Jason Brace will start at right defensive end, but coaches expect Marquez Herrod to see plenty of action there, too.

Coaches plan to use a handful of running backs, but sophomore Demetrius Sumler was identified as the starter. Junior Kevin Moyd, and freshmen Rodney Stewart and Darrell Scott will also get playing time.

The Buffs came into camp wanting to refine their new no-huddle offense, focus on limiting or creating

turnovers and improving in third and fourth-down situations on both sides of the ball. They believe they did well in those areas in camp, but how they do during the season remains to be seen.



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Healing hearts

Buff family tragedy inspires the Walters to help others

By Kyle Ringo
Sunday, August 24, 2008

The nursery was almost complete. The family had spent most of the day working on it. All that was missing was the soft cry of a tender little one.

A baby shower had come before. Pink was the dominant color. She was just a month away now.

Ryan and Tara Walters were married in February. They knew by then they would soon be parents. They couldn't wait.

Their friendship began in the seventh grade when they first met dating each other's best friends. After a six-year relationship that began as juniors in high school when Ryan was the star quarterback and Tara was a cheerleader, they were ready to begin a family.

They were expecting a daughter to arrive by May 21. It was April 13 and Tara had been concerned throughout a busy day that the baby wasn't as active as usual.

After eight months of pregnancy, she was keenly aware of every small change going on inside her. Tara had just been to the doctor the day before and underwent an ultrasound that showed nothing unusual. Yet, she was worried.

"I just knew something was wrong," she said.

They left for the hospital late on that Sunday evening, hoping to return relieved and ready for bed.

They found heartbreak instead.

Audrey Lynn Walters was stillborn April 14 about 24 hours after Tara and Ryan arrived at the hospital. Doctors performed myriad tests, none of which provided an answer to why her tiny heart had stopped short of her first breath.

Enough time has passed and the Walters are now comfortable talking about the tragedy.

"It has put life into perspective," said Ryan Walters, a senior captain on the Colorado football team. "Football really isn't everything. So you enjoy the minor miracles in your life, and you learn how to bounce back from a tragedy.

"I've been awestruck from my wife and how she has handled things. It just lets me know that I can get through anything."

The couple held their daughter in the hospital that night. It was a scene Ryan's mother, Nicole, described as "holy ground." They watched as nurses recorded every physical detail about Audrey, including taking her footprints. Ryan later tattooed one of those tiny footprints, along with an angel's wings, on the right side of his chest.

Ryan and Tara leaned on each other, their faith and the overwhelming support that surrounded them from their families and the entire Colorado football program. They began to plan a funeral just two months after their wedding.

"It definitely makes me look at life completely different," Tara Walters said. "I just want to cherish every moment I have with my loved ones and family. It just makes me feel grateful. People have complaints and everything about their lives, but really when it comes down to it, life is so short and you should be with the people you love."

CU coach Dan Hawkins' eyes tear up and he exhales an enormous breath as he begins to talk about what he has seen Ryan and Tara endure. Hawkins spent part of that April night at the hospital feeling helpless but wanting to be there for the couple.

"It rocked him," Hawkins said of Ryan. "It rocked all of us. I mean, that's just a tragedy. But I mean, as well as a young man could handle it, he's done a great job."

"Those things are never easy. All you can do is be there for them and there is never the right thing to say or the right thing to do, you just have to be there for them and let them know you care. It's just sad. It really is."

Ryan and Tara said holding Audrey and making a physical connection with her at the hospital helped them with their grief. It allowed them to reach a level of comfort with telling their story and sharing their sorrow in order to help others who might endure similar experiences.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, about 25,000 stillbirths occur every year in the U.S. The World Health Organization estimates about 4 million occur around the world each year.

A stillbirth is defined as the loss of a fetus after 20 weeks or more of gestation. The effects on parents are obviously devastating, and many are lacking the support system surrounding the Walters.

"Don't keep anything in," Tara Walters said, voicing the advice she wants to share with others in her shoes. "Verbalize how you feel. There are always people who want to talk to you. Don't think that you are alone or you are the only one. People can help you with their experiences."

The Walters didn't need to look far to find empathy.

Ryan's parents, Marc and Nicole, lost twin boys 19 years ago in the sixth month of pregnancy. They had Ryan during Marc's career as a quarterback at Colorado in 1986. They discovered they were supposed to have twins three years later, but they never got to experience the joy of those boys.

"I wish there was a different common ground that Tara and I had, but I was grateful that I could speak to her from a place of knowing," Nicole Walters said.

Marc and Nicole Walters survived the loss of their boys in the same way Tara and Ryan are coping now. They relied on each other, family and faith. They went on to have another son, Cole, and have been

married for 21 years.

Their example has helped Ryan and Tara. In the immediate aftermath of losing Audrey, they didn't want to try to have children again. They have since changed their minds.

"I think sometimes people don't like talking about it because of the magnitude of the situation," Ryan Walters said. "There are a lot of people that go through it and something that has helped us is seeing other people that have gone through the same thing. There is light at the end of the tunnel so to speak. You can get through it and you can grow from it."



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Fourth and 7

The Colorado roster is loaded with young talent, but seven senior defenders have four years experience on their side -- and the Buffs' season may hinge on their success

By Kyle Ringo
Saturday, August 23, 2008

The voice barking instructions and dishing praise to Colorado defensive linemen toiling on the practice fields during training camp wasn't always defensive line coach Romeo Bandison. Much of the time senior defensive tackle George Hypolite played task master.

When young CU defensive backs need to get a coverage straight in their head or refine their footwork, they don't always seek out secondary coach Greg Brown or defensive intern Ashley Ambrose. Senior safeties D.J. Dykes and Ryan Walters can teach them, too.

While the perception of coach Dan Hawkins' 2008 team as young is an accurate one overall, it doesn't necessarily hold up when it comes to the defense. Sure, the roster is loaded with 72 freshmen, redshirt freshmen and sophomores, but there are seven senior defenders who figure to begin the season as starters.

Hypolite, Brandon Nicolas and Maurice Lucas are well established on the defensive line. Dykes and Walters will probably team with cornerback Gardner McKay in the secondary and linebacker Brad Jones has played more games at CU than any of them.

In a season such as this surrounded by youth and inexperience, they might be the heart and soul of the team and the difference between a winning and losing record.

"Those guys have all been to war for us," defensive coordinator Ron Collins said.

Collins begins his third year in Boulder with a defense he says is further along in its development at the start of the year than any since he coached at Boise State. He said he is also beginning to see more of the characteristics of his Boise State defenses emerging in the Buffs.

Those Bronco defenses were generally pretty good at sacking the quarterback, creating turnovers and limiting big plays in the passing game. The Buffs were not good in those areas a year ago, finishing 103rd in the nation against the pass, 95th in sacks and 70th in forced turnovers.

Collins' defenses have always focused first on stopping the run and the past six years -- four at Boise State and two in Boulder -- his units have ranked no worse than 31st in the nation against the run. He believes the Buffs have a chance to be good in that area once again this fall, in part because of the four seniors he will have in his front seven and three more in the secondary.

Collins also became accustomed to his defenses regularly winning the turnover battle while at Boise State. The Buffs have been decent at taking the ball away since he took over, but after three training camps of emphasis on attacking the ball and finishing every play, he and his players are hoping for a breakthrough year similar to the one the Kansas defense produced last season.

"A lot of times your defense is what holds it together," Dykes said. "If your offense isn't playing well, your defense can keep you in a game. I'd love for our offense to do some great things this year, but even if they don't, I put it on our defense to win some games. If we become the backbone, then we become the backbone."

The Buffs are coming off their first consecutive losing seasons in more than 20 years. But they also played in a bowl game last season and it represented a step forward for these seniors, who believe they can lead the program back into the conference title hunt with an everyone-does-his-job approach to each week.

While the seniors are the leaders, they are only part of the experience returning on defense. Juniors Jeff Smart, Cha'pelle Brown and Jason Brace and sophomores Jalil Brown and Jimmy Smith have all played. Smart and Cha'pelle Brown have considerable experience to compliment the seniors.

"With the whole experience thing, people kind of understand where they can and can't kind of cheat within the defense," Walters said. "I think just knowing what's going on and where you can and can't try to go make the play is going to help us a lot this year. I think we can definitely be one of those bounce back teams like Kansas was last year. I really see it within our team and our leaders that we have."

Hey, crazy stuff happens in this game. Take the entire 2007 college season as one example. A sophomore won the Heisman Trophy. Notre Dame lost nine games. An unranked team beat a top-five team 13 times. Kansas scored 76 against Nebraska. Appalachian State won at Michigan.

Teams have certainly made bigger turnarounds than the Buffs would require this season to get into the conference championship and Bowl Championship Series hunt.

And, CU has done it before. The Buffs were 3-8 in 2000 and probably should have taken part in the 2001 National Championship game. They finished 10-3 that year with a loss in the Fiesta Bowl.

Who would have picked Illinois as the Big Ten representative in the Rose Bowl at this time last year? The Illini were coming off a 2-10 season in 2006.

"There are a lot of things we can do now that we couldn't do my first two years here," Hypolite said. "We can call things on the field or go on the field with kind of two calls.

"We can do a lot of things on the run because we have a lot of guys who have been in the system for awhile and generally know what we're doing. It's going to help when you play against a lot of spread offenses that stare at the sideline and are constantly changing plays. Now we can play some games with them."

They have played in a total of 195 games combined. They each have their strengths and weaknesses, but they understand the game and how the subtle details can make the difference.

One of those subtleties is recognizing every opportunity. The Buffs have emphasized improving on third and fourth downs this year. They allowed opponents to convert 36 percent of the time on third downs

and nearly 60 percent on fourth downs in 2007.

By comparison, the best defenses in the country last season surrendered first downs in those situations less than 30 percent of the time.

"We're getting there. It's been a long transition, but we're getting there," Collins said. "The guys are getting the idea that we've got to stop the run and run to the ball and be on top of our game and execute. You know all the clichés They're starting to understand what we're trying to get across to them."

Seven seniors on one side of the ball adds a maturity to the entire unit that is impossible for some teams to replicate. When those seniors are leaders as they appear to be at CU, it shows up on the field, in the locker room and in the approach taken to going about business.

It also provides the wisdom to know that just having seven older, more experienced guys around doesn't necessarily guarantee results. Players have to make them happen.

"Young, old, what does it really matter?" Hypolite said. "You can't depend on experience all the time and you can't use youth as an excuse all the time. We've got to play football. We have to line up every day, get after it in practice, work on what we need to work on and put a group product on the field.

"It really doesn't matter how young or how old we are on either side of the ball. What it's going to come down to is can we make plays? That doesn't change regardless of what age you are."



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Hawkins still growing

Bufs QB getting bigger physically, improving his game at same time

By Ryan Thorburn
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Cody Hawkins says there is a typo in the 2008 Colorado football media guide.

It lists the sophomore quarterback at 5-foot-11.

"I grew a half inch," Hawkins said of his offseason. "Which was nice. And I got bigger and faster."

Of course, all of the players' listed heights are rounded off to the nearest inch. But every millimeter counts when you're trying to stand (tall) and deliver in the pocket.

"So Cody's 5-11½? I love it," CU passing game coordinator Eric Kiesau said with a smile during the team's media day. "Keep drinking that milk. Whatever it takes."

Hawkins did more than just pay attention to his diet in preparing for the season. The coach's son spent as much time in the weight room as anyone else on the team and is walking around campus with a noticeably more chiseled upper body.

"It's tremendous," starting tackle Ryan Miller said of having the starting quarterback and other skill players pumping iron with the rest of the team. "You get to see the people you're working for working with you. It's a team effort and it's nice to see."

Hawkins' first season as CU's starter, much like the team's 6-7 record, was an encouraging first step. He set freshman school records in passing yards (2,693), completions (239), attempts (424), touchdown passes (19) ...

And interceptions (15).

"Now I'm not trying to force stuff as much," said Hawkins, who made a commitment to avoiding turnovers after breaking down the film of the 2007 season. "I'm just kind of letting things come to me and taking what the defense gives me. Being a leader and putting guys in position to make plays instead of trying to worry about making plays myself."

"We have a lot of good athletes, but I think eventually you just have to trust the system and trust your reads. And then when plays are there to be made then you'll make them."

Hawkins started all 13 games last season, including the Independence Bowl against Alabama in which

he completed 24 of 39 passes for 322 yards and three touchdowns in a 30-24 loss.

Hugh Charles was CU's leading rusher in the bowl game with 69 yards. This year's offense -- with the addition of freshmen Darrell Scott, Ray Polk and Rodney Stewart in the backfield -- is expected to be more balanced and explosive.

And Josh Smith, Scotty McKnight, Patrick Williams and Riar Geer make up a much more experienced unit for Hawkins to work with in the passing game.

"Across the board, we're smarter and better," CU offensive coordinator Mark Helfrich said. "Certainly at quarterback that's the case and hopefully that will continue. ...

"I think Cody should do nothing but get better and that will hopefully spur our younger guys to compete more."

The coaching staff feels great about quarterbacks Nick Nelson (senior) and Matt Ballenger (redshirt freshman).

As backups.

Everyone on the team understands a healthy Hawkins will be breaking the huddle for the foreseeable future based on his work ethic, knowledge of the offense and improved play.

During the three major scrimmages in spring drills, Hawkins made good on his pledge to stop throwing silly picks by completing 42 of 70 passes for 523 yards with six touchdowns and one interception (numbers that would add up to a 148.2 passer rating).

"I think a lot of the guys have a lot of faith in me. I really thank them for that," Hawkins said. "I just tried to work as hard as I could to be a leader in the offseason and I'm trying to transfer that to the field this fall."

The Big 12 has suddenly turned into a league dominated by big-name quarterbacks.

Chase Daniel (Missouri) and Todd Reesing (Kansas) took their programs to new heights last season and made the North Division relevant on the national stage.

Joe Ganz (Nebraska) and Stephen McGee (Texas A&M) are hoping to turn around the fortunes of slumping but once proud programs.

Zac Robinson (Oklahoma State) and Josh Freeman (Kansas State) have the talent to give their teams hope on any given Saturday.

The three best teams in the powerful South Division -- Oklahoma (Sam Bradford), Texas (Colt McCoy) and Texas Tech (Graham Harrell) -- believe they have the experience and skill that will be required under center to win the Big 12 in 2008.

And the Buffs? Well, they think their 5-11 (and growing) signal caller fits right in with his peers.

"The great thing about it is Cody is going to be here for the next three years. Probably the biggest asset that he has is he's such a competitive leader and a competitive person," Kiesau said. "He's not the 6-4

guy, but he can make the throws and he's a very special 5-11 quarterback.

"If you just get past that, he'll be fine. I think the players are definitely past that and now he can kind of use that leadership role and get guys motivated and do positive things."



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CU schedule breakdown

By Kyle Ringo

Saturday, August 23, 2008

A look at what lies ahead for the 2008 Buffs in one of the more difficult schedules in recent CU history. All rankings are from the Associated Press Top 25.

Aug. 31, vs. Colorado St.,

Invesco Field, Denver

This is the ninth meeting in Denver and if dwindling attendance in 2007 is any indication (68,133), it might be time to move this scrum back to campus, or at least to Boulder in years when the Buffs are the home team. CU will be a double-digit favorite and has won four of the past five in the series. The Rams are in rebuilding mode but this is always an emotional battle and it will be televised nationally. Darrell Scott debuts and attempts to spoil the start of CSU coach Steve Fairchild's tenure.

Sept. 6, vs. Eastern Wash.,

Folsom Field

This is the first meeting between the programs and just the second time the Buffs have played a team from the Football Championship Subdivision (formerly Division I-AA). The Eagles are not to be taken lightly. They finished 9-4 last season and lost in the national quarterfinals 38-35 to three-time defending national champion Appalachian State. Maybe you heard of them and their win at Michigan last season? There are still fresh wounds from the Buffs' 2006 loss to Montana State. Could they be surprised again?

Sept. 18, vs. No. 8 West

Virginia, Folsom Field

The Buffs have a chance for a benchmark win on national TV in a rare weeknight contest on a Thursday. The Mountaineers finished 11-2 last year, including a Fiesta Bowl victory over Big 12 champion Oklahoma. First-year coach Bill Stewart has perennial Heisman Trophy candidate and four-year starting quarterback Pat White running his offense. White alone makes WVU tough. The Mountaineers are loaded with speed, strength and talent on par with anyone in the Big 12. But this team also lost a lot of players to graduation, suspension and the NFL and two-thirds of the coaching staff changed when Rich Rodriguez bolted for Michigan.

Sept. 27, vs. Florida St.,

Municipal Stadium,

Jacksonville, Fla.

When the Seminoles visited Boulder last season and escaped with a 16-6 victory, the Buffs felt like they allowed a win to slip away. It had a direct effect on their upset of then-No. 3 Oklahoma two weeks later. CU hasn't won east of the Mississippi River since former coach Rick Neuheisel's debut in the first game of the 1995 season at Wisconsin. The Buffs are going to feel like they can compete for a change because of last year and it's not a true home game for the Seminoles. It is a homecoming of sorts for Scott and wide receiver Josh Smith who grew up down the road in Tallahassee.

Oct. 4, vs. No. 11 Texas,

Folsom Field (Homecoming)

The last time these programs met, the Longhorns spanked the Buffs 70-3 in the 2005 Big 12 championship game. Part of the aftermath of that game was the firing of Gary Barnett and the hiring of Dan Hawkins. CU folks also charged that Mack Brown kept blitzing late in the game and it led to former quarterback Joel Klatt suffering a serious concussion. There is some lingering animosity, at least between the fans of these teams if not the teams themselves, over the recruitment of Scott. Some in Texas accused CU of cheating to get the talented tailback. The Longhorns could be a top-five team by this point.

Oct. 11, at No. 14 Kansas,

Memorial Stadium

This is another opponent the Buffs feel they let off the hook last season in Boulder. CU turned the ball over three times, including once in the red zone, in the 19-14 loss. Kansas has a few holes to fill this year after losing some key members of last season's 12-1 Orange Bowl team, but the Jayhawks will be tough. KU quarterback Todd Reesing has killed the Buffs the past two years in a pair of five-point victories. The Buffs haven't had an answer for his scrambling ability.

Oct. 18, vs. Kansas State,

Folsom Field

The coaches of these programs entered the Big 12 together in 2006, but Dan Hawkins hasn't come close to beating Ron Prince yet. The Wildcats have beaten the Buffs by double digits the past two seasons. Prince signed a recruiting class in February that included 19 junior college players in an effort to add some experience to the roster. The plan could be a stroke of genius or a giant misstep and we should have a pretty good idea of which by the time this one arrives. KSU quarterback Josh Freeman is extremely talented and told reporters this summer he believes he is the best signal-caller in the Big 12. It should be pretty clear by mid-October whether he's coming through on the claim or if he's all talk.

Oct. 25, at No. 6 Missouri,

Faurot Field

The past three editions of this old Big Eight Conference rivalry have ended in blowouts, including a 55-10 loss for the Buffs last season that revealed just how far they have to go to catch up to the Tigers. Mizzou is loaded with talent once again with two preseason Heisman candidates in QB Chase Daniel

and WR Jeremy Maclin. The Tigers are a national championship caliber team and the defense might be their strength with 10 returning starters. The Buffs should close some of the gap on last year's margin of victory, but they might be a year away from beating this team.

Nov. 1, at Texas A&M,

Kyle Field

Week 8 brings the Buffs to one of the best venues in the nation in which to watch a college football game. There is nothing picturesque about Kyle Field or College Station, but there are few places that compare with this intense environment. When 82,600 Aggie fans lock arms and sway, the stadium moves with them. New A&M coach Mike Sherman should have a good feel for his team by this point. Senior quarterback Stephen McGee is another dual-threat in his third year as the starter. In a league filled with passing offenses, this might be the best rushing offense with tailback Mike Goodson and bruiser Jorvorskie Lane. The Buffs lost in overtime here in 2004.

Nov. 8, vs. Iowa State,

Folsom Field

This looks like the light at the end of the tunnel following a brutal seven-week stretch. The third and final installment of the "One that got away" in 2007. Losing at Iowa State after holding a 21-0 lead at halftime, might have been the worst loss of last season. The Buffs are going to want some redemption. The Cyclones finished 3-9 in coach Gene Chizik's first season a year ago. The Cyclones have won in Boulder just once since 1982.

Nov. 15, vs. Oklahoma St.,

Folsom Field

CU allowed OSU to nab former Chatfield High School quarterback Zac Robinson out from under it three years ago and Robinson is showing star power in Stillwater, Okla. He leads the Cowboys into Boulder for a contest that could be pivotal to both team's bowl hopes. This is the first time Dan Hawkins and 41-year-old OSU coach Mike Gundy square off. Both attracted plenty of attention in 2007 for "rants." The Cowboys problem in recent years has been an inability to stop most teams from scoring. If they make serious improvements defensively this season, they could be nationally ranked by this point.

Nov. 28, at Nebraska,

Memorial Stadium

The first meeting between these programs occurred 110 years ago, but the rivalry hasn't always come on the day-after Thanksgiving. The Buffs have sent the Cornhuskers home for the holidays without a bowl trip in two of the past three meetings. One team could have the opportunity to keep the other team out of the postseason again this year. New Nebraska coach Bo Pelini is hoping to shore up a defense that was torched to historic proportions in 2007. The Cornhuskers won't forget a 65-51 loss in Boulder last year in which they had the Buffs on the ropes before an inexplicable second-half collapse.



Woelk: Big 12 guarantees plenty of surprises this year

By Neill Woelk
Saturday, August 23, 2008

College football has reached an entirely new level of absurdity.

Case in point: Kansas coach Mark Mangino will be paid \$2.3 million this season. This is the same Mangino who has put exactly two winning records in the books in six seasons at KU, and the same Mangino who has never won so much as a Big 12 North Division title, let alone a conference title.

Of course, nothing should surprise us anymore. Remember, the man Missouri almost fired -- with the idea of replacing him with former CU coach Gary Barnett -- is now a hero in Columbia. Gary Pinkel took the Tigers to the Big 12 title game last year and fans expect him to go a step farther this year.

You know, actually win a conference championship.

Win or lose, however, it doesn't matter in one regard: Pinkel will be guaranteed at least \$1.8 million this year, with another \$500,000 possible in incentives.

Given those numbers, Colorado's Dan Hawkins -- whose guaranteed money this year is roughly \$1 million -- is a bargain.

But the era of rapidly escalating salaries also means an era of rapidly escalating expectations. Athletic directors, boosters and fans have little patience. They expect their million-dollar coaches to produce million-dollar results, overnight.

If not, throw da bums out and pay someone else even more money.

(Here's where we give CU athletic director Mike Bohn a little credit. He's actually paying his current coach, Hawkins, less than the last CU coach, Barnett, was paid. Say what you will, but that's at least a small sign of fiscal responsibility in a world otherwise gone mad. Of course, this much is also certain: if and when the day comes that Hawkins has built a consistent winner in Boulder, the price will either go up dramatically or Bohn will be searching for another coach. That's just the way the world works.)

But even absurd salaries can't take away from the fact that college football is one of the best games going. The tradition can't be beat, the atmosphere in a college stadium on game day is unparalleled, and because there's no national championship playoff at the end of the year, it means every week counts.

No playoff means two 6-5 teams still have something to play for down the stretch. It means those teams' fans can look forward to at least the possibility of a bowl game -- and for lesser-tier programs starving for a little attention, any bowl will do.

It means a great season from opening kickoff.

What to look for this year? We'll keep it in the neighborhood and offer up a prediction for each team in the Big 12:

CU's Hawkins will shun conventional wisdom and go for the gusto on fourth down on a regular basis. Sometimes it will work (remember Oklahoma?) and sometimes it won't (Iowa State anyone?). Fans will praise his courage when it works and curse his foolishness when it doesn't. Neither will sway Hawkins from his strategy.

Kansas fans will wonder where the magic has gone when Mangino's Marvels lose six games this year -- five more than last year. By November, order in Lawrence will be restored, which means KU fans will be looking forward to basketball season.

Missouri will win the Big 12 North, but not before losing at Texas. The Tigers will survive a variety of suspensions and arrests, and immediately after losing in the Big 12 title game, Pinkel will leave Columbia for another job. Then, MU athletic director Mike Alden will spend his time avoiding all calls with "Gary Barnett" on caller ID.

Oklahoma will win the Big 12 title again, by beating Missouri in the title game, again. Then, to keep up with the pattern the Sooners have established over the last few years, they'll forget to show up for their bowl game and will be thumped, again.

Texas Tech, which opens the season No. 12, will win its first eight games, roll up astounding numbers and climb into the top 10 (the Raiders, by the way, open against Eastern Washington). But Mike Leach's team will lose two of its last four -- against Texas and Oklahoma -- and once again be relegated to third in the Big 12 South.

Oklahoma State coach Mike Gundy will not scream at a reporter, "I'm a man. I'm 40." This is because Gundy turned 41 on Aug. 12.

Texas will win 10 games, again, and fail to win the Big 12 South, again. And, Mack Brown will be the highest paid coach in the nation with only one conference title on his résumé -- again.

Baylor will regret that Colorado isn't on the schedule this year. The Bears have won seven Big 12 games in the last five years -- two of them coming at the hands of the Buffs.

Nebraska fans will start the season with great expectations from a man who has been a head coach in exactly one game. By season's end, after the Huskers have lost eight games, Corn fans will be longing for the days of Frank Solich.

Kansas State, the school that recruited 19 juco players this year, will switch affiliations to the Jayhawk Conference and begin next season against Hutchinson, Dodge City, Garden City and Coffeyville.

Iowa State will open the season with a big win over South Dakota State (the Jackrabbits, since you asked), and will beat Nebraska on Oct. 18. But there won't be many other bright spots, and Gene Chizik will be wondering why he ever left Texas.

New Texas A&M coach Mike Sherman will be better than his predecessor (Dennis Franchione), but only slightly. Aggie fans will be wondering why they ever let R.C. Slocum go.

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cu football

A B-tacular, Hyp-tastic duo

Senior defensive tackles from California get ready for one last season together in Big 12.

By Tom Kensler
The Denver Post

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Colorado defensive tackles Brandon Nicolas, above, and George Hypolite form one of the Big 12's most effective DT tandems. (Noah Rabinowitz, The Denver Post)

BOULDER — Colorado All-America candidate George Hypolite does not know how fortunate he is. If the Buffaloes' other senior defensive tackle, Brandon Nicolas, had grabbed the appropriate high school

game video from his home in Southern California, a whole lot of razzing might still be going on.

Nicolas starred as a two-way tackle at Mater Dei High School in Santa Ana. Hypolite, then at least 60 pounds lighter than his current weight of 290, spent most of his time at fullback for Loyola High School of Los Angeles.

Yes, they played against each other.

"I tried to bring the game film here this summer, but I brought the wrong year," Nicolas said. "I want to take a look at that to see if I ever got a good hit on him."

With

Colorado Football

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- [Play](#) Pick'em for the upcoming CU football game

a chuckle, Hypolite pleads sudden memory loss when asked about that game. "I don't remember if Brandon tackled me or not," said Hypolite, who was a year behind Nicolas. "But everybody knew who he was."

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Fast-forward a year and a half later. CU coach Gary Barnett approached Hypolite, an incoming Buffs freshman, and mentioned that Nicolas had sought his release from Notre Dame. Nicolas decided to leave South Bend, Ind., after head coach Tyrone Willingham was replaced by Charlie Weis.

"I told Coach Barnett, 'We've got to get him. He's a great player,'" Hypolite recalled.

After settling in Boulder, Nicolas sat out the 2005 season as required under transfer rules. That gave his surgically repaired shoulder time to heal and allowed him to get comfortable with yet another coaching staff, after the arrival of Dan Hawkins.

In their third year together, Nicolas and Hypolite have become perhaps the most effective defensive tackle tandem in the Big 12 Conference.

Hypolite, a returning all-conference honoree, is on the official preseason watch lists of five major national defensive awards. Nicolas was projected to be a third-team all-league selection by at least one preseason publication (Phil Steele's College Football Preview).

The 2008 spring game marked the only time they haven't played together. Nicolas sat it out with a shoulder strain.

"That felt strange," Hypolite said. "There were just so many plays that I was so used to making, but the running back wasn't there. It was because '94' wasn't next to me.

"He makes my job so much easier. We depend on each other to keep the ball between us."

Nicolas (6-feet-3, 290 pounds) and Hypolite couldn't differ much more in personality and style of play. Hypolite has become the vocal leader of the

team. Nicolas rarely opens his mouth. ("I think George does enough talking for both of us," Nicolas says jokingly.) Hypolite almost dances inside, using flashy pass-rushing moves. Nicolas is more of a push-the-pile, straight-line-from- point-A-to-point-B kind of guy.

"They're total opposites. That's why it works so well," defensive line coach Romeo Bandison said. "They play off each other. They complement each other."

While Hypolite gets much more media coverage than his compadre, nobody should get the idea that Nicolas isn't also quick or explosive, senior center Daniel Sanders said.

"If you give Brandon an edge, he'll take it right past you," said Sanders, who often lines up opposite Nicolas in practices. "He never takes a play off."

Bob Simmons, the former Colorado assistant and Oklahoma State head coach, has returned to the Denver area and saw Nicolas this spring — for the first time since the 2004 season when Simmons was on Willingham's Notre Dame staff. Simmons said he almost didn't recognize Nicolas, who has gained almost 50 pounds since he signed with the Irish.

Nicolas redshirted during his one year in South Bend.

"He has really transformed his body," Simmons said. "I always liked him at Notre Dame. I thought he'd become a good player. But he's really gotten bigger and stronger."

Things certainly could not have worked out much better for Nicolas and his decision to transfer to Colorado. Hypolite calls him "B-tacular," as in Brandon-spectacular.

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The next order of business is for Nicolas and Hypolite to pressure and contain all those talented quarterbacks in the Big 12. That could be vital in ensuring a successful send-off season for the CU seniors.

"That's definitely why we're working on our pass rush so much and the coaches are really stressing it," Nicolas said. "It's been a big emphasis this camp."

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There will be no rest for the defense

By Patrick Ridgell
Longmont Times-Call

BOULDER — It's a wonder any defensive coordinator in the Big 12 Conference ever gets a wink of sleep.

The league flips passing records like months in a calendar. A slew of talented quarterbacks in schemes perfectly suited for them return in 2008. And that's just the beginning.

What's it like to be a glutton for punishment, make that a defensive coordinator, in the Big 12?

"Well, you know, in any conference any more," Colorado's Ron Collins sighed as he sat behind his desk, surveying statistics and seeking solutions. "They're changing the rules so much, and everybody is going to the no-huddle, and now they've changed the facemask rule, even if you touch it, it's 15 yards.

"People want to see points, but I think we'll evolve back to where we'll catch up. If everybody starts doing the same thing on offense, you tend to get used to that. You start to identify the type of people you need on the defense to help you be successful, and you recruit to that end."

Collins' optimism might bring hope to anyone who still buys the old adage that defenses win championships. Is this the year in the Big 12 where defenses finally slow the spread and no-huddle offenses? Maybe. Or we could be on the verge of another season where scores like 65-51 are the norm.

What's clear is that the team that devises the best way to play defense will be in an enviable position. That's what CU seeks.

"The No. 1 thing in the Big 12 is offense," CU cornerback Jimmy Smith said. "You don't hear too much about defenses. So if you have a stout defense and you can compete against any offense out here, and you have an OK offense, you're going to win."

The CU defense was middle of the pack in terms of yards and points allowed last year, and so were the Buffs. One big reason — a reason that hasn't been discussed much — they're going to a no-huddle offense this season like other Big 12 programs is so its defense sees it every day.

CU head coach Dan Hawkins said it helps "a ton" for the defense to practice against the no-huddle in camp and spring. He answered "totally" when asked whether that played a factor in the decision to go no-huddle.

Still, improving looms formidable.

The Big 12's passing numbers in 2007 ranked as the highest in any conference this decade. Seven Big 12 quarterbacks threw for more than 3,000 yards. The league has 10 starting quarterbacks returning. CU faces six of them.

And that's not counting Nebraska's Joe Ganz, who started the final three of 2007 and threw for 484 yards and four touchdowns while losing to the Buffs.



Senior end Maurice Lucas and his CU defensive teammates will have their hands full this season contending with the Big 12's prolific offenses. **Joshua**

Buck/Times-Call

Collins may say it's difficult working in any conference, but numbers reveal times have changed in the Big 12 in startling ways.

In 1999, Kansas State's defense led the league, allowing 235 yards a game. Last year, Kansas led it by allowing 317.3 per outing.

In 1997, CU led the league in passing yards with 232.4 per game. In 2007, that figure would have ranked 11th.

Five teams averaged more than 285 passing yards per game in 2007.

Coaches say each spread — which puts play-makers all over the field and spreads the defense thin — and no-huddle attack in the Big 12 is unique. That renders each week's preparation a unique challenge. And now there are some new rules that don't bode well for defenders.

In 2008, horse-collar tackles are prohibited. Players cannot grab a call carrier inside the back collar of the shoulder pads or jersey to pull him down.

There's no more 5-yard facemask call. Twisting, turning or pulling a facemask is a 15-yard penalty, every time. And no one can hit with the crown of his helmet, or initiate contact with a defenseless opponent above the shoulders.

CU's George Hypolite smells a conspiracy.

"You're like, 'What can we do?'" Hypolite said. "As a defensive guy, that's the sport we live in. People like watching touchdowns. They like watching quarterbacks. Quarterbacks and running backs win the Heisman because they're glamour positions. People don't like seeing the dirty work inside the trenches from offensive linemen and defensive linemen. That's the way it goes.

"Any way we can sell more tickets, because at the end of the day, this is a business."

Hawkins doesn't dispute Hypolite's point.

"I don't think there's any question, by and large, the rules favor the offense," he said. "How many times do you see offensive pass interference? Not very many.

"It's like the NFL. They've made it more offensive friendly. If you coach defense, you're just going to have to understand that."

Hawkins admits to being curious how officials will interpret another new rule — hitting a defenseless player — in the heat of a game, but he says the new rules are there to make the game safer, which he condones.

His players aren't sold.

Hypolite says he won't denounce the new facemask rule, but he wants officials to notice when offensive linemen grab defenders' masks. He also says the collar and defenseless player rules reside in a "huge gray area."

"You have to be conscious when you're running down the field to tackle (Missouri All-American) Jeremy Maclin, who's faster than you," Hypolite said. "That's a real hard thing as a football player to do."

CU linebacker Brad Jones isn't so diplomatic.

"The only rule I have a problem with is the horse-collar rule, which is bull, and I'm not afraid to say it's bull," Jones said. "You're pulling somebody down, and they're at the goal line and you can't grab him and pull him?"

"That's basically the rule just saying you can't be yanked down, and that's bull."

Hawkins said defending the spread is similar to defending the option, college football's former offense of choice before

defenses caught up. If everyone handles his assignment, things will be fine.

The coach refuses to say CU's success hinges on its defense. He says the offense, defense and special teams must work together to keep the others from bad situations.

But Hawkins expects to see adaptation in 2008.

"People are going to sit down and say, 'Let's do this' and they'll start getting more creative in terms of having less big guys in the game and dropping and rushing and mixing up your blitzes and where you're coming from," he said.

The Buffs, like everyone, are seeking answers.

The first ones they might try lie with the quality of athletes they can field. The Buffs have more bodies this year, and coaches plan to use them.

"In the age of everybody having a tight end outside as a wide receiver and things like that, you have to get the fastest guys you can on the field," Collins said. "So that's kind of what we're aiming for: to identify those guys who can get on the field and run."

Safety Ryan Walters said playing smarter football will help a lot.

"Everybody here has been in the system three years now," Walters said. "We're not putting in a whole lot of new stuff, just a few new calls here and there. But if everybody just plays smarter and understands the concepts and the schemes of the defense, that allows you to go smarter and make plays."

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