



Offense on hot seat vs. FSU

Bufs face stout Seminoles defense today in Jacksonville

By Kyle Ringo Camera Sports Writer
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JACKSONVILLE, Fla. --- The answer to one question might be the key to the outcome of the Colorado football game today.

Do the Buffaloes have enough offense to beat Florida State? Or put in terms straight from coach Dan Hawkins this week, can they "complete the assignment?"

The verdict was a resounding no a year ago when the programs met in Boulder and the Buffs continually self-destructed with bad decision-making, missed assignments and a complete inability to run the ball. CU rushed 25 times for minus-27 yards that day, and it had a much more experienced offensive line then than it does now.

The starting guards in what is being billed as the River City Showdown --- redshirt freshman Blake Behrens and junior Devin Head --- could have been on the bench today for CU if not for injuries to Mike Iltis and Max Tuioti-Mariner, and the academic problems of Erick Faatagi.

Left tackle Nate Solder was a tight end the last time these teams were on the field together. He's now responsible for protecting quarterback Cody Hawkins' blindside against a fierce FSU pass rush on a neutral field in Municipal Stadium, where a crowd of about 50,000 heavily biased toward Chief Osceola and the Seminoles is expected today.

But every team must make due with the experience it has and Behrens, Head and Solder will need the best effort of their college careers to this point against a stout defensive front. The Seminoles rank fourth in the nation against the run, allowing a meager 1.4 yards per carry, and have already registered nine sacks.

"We've got to stay out of third-and-extra long," CU offensive coordinator Mark Helfrich said. "Those guys get teed up and ready to rush the passer and we don't want to get into a drop-back contest with them at all."

The Buffs are looking for the their first 4-0 start to the season since 1998, the final year of the Rick Neuheisel regime. CU hasn't won a game east of the Mississippi River since the first game of Neuheisel's tenure in 1995 at Wisconsin.

They hope to start some new history in legendary Florida State coach Bobby Bowden's 500th college game. "To be able to go down there and be a part of that will be something special," Cody Hawkins said. "Hopefully we can wreck the party for him, but we know they're going to come and play hard and be well-prepared."

While the fight seems to heavily favor the Florida State defense when CU has the ball, the Seminoles probably won't find the going much easier when they have possession.

The CU defense has been tough the majority of the time this season, though the numbers don't necessarily reflect it. The Buffs haven't given up more than 21 points on defense in any game this season.

Colorado faces a Florida State offense struggling to find its way under sophomore starting quarterback Christian Ponder and fellow sophomore D'Vontrey Richardson, who has played in every game. The Seminoles managed just three points in a loss to Wake Forest last week in the Atlantic Coast Conference opener for both teams.

It's difficult to gauge whether that performance was a more accurate gauge of the state of the Seminoles or if blowouts of Western Carolina and Chattanooga are to be trusted.

Ponder and Richardson combined to throw five interceptions last week and the Seminoles turned the ball over seven times. CU hopes more of the same is coming today.

"If we execute like we did last week, it'll be bad for us," Bowden told the Associated Press this week. "Our success the remainder of the year will be based on how successful we are at correcting those mistakes."



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Woelk: Time for CU to produce signature road victory

In his two-plus years at the Colorado helm, Dan Hawkins has notched some significant wins over teams with some great tradition.

Oklahoma, Nebraska and West Virginia come to mind.

Common thread? All at Folsom Field.

It means Hawk still has a big hole in his rebuilding résumé at Colorado: a signature road win.

Thus far, Hawkins' biggest CU wins away from home have been over Colorado State (neutral field) and at Texas Tech. While the win over Texas Tech last season was impressive, it's not what you call a "signature" win.

The Buffs can change that today.

(Yes, we know today's contest vs. Florida State in Jacksonville is technically a neutral site. But with roughly 47,000 of the anticipated crowd of 50,000 expected to be Seminole fans -- and just a couple hours down the highway from Tallahassee -- it's a road game in about every sense of the word.)

Today's game, the second for CU in what might be one of the toughest stretches on anyone's schedule this season, is the latest chance for the Buffs to send a message nationally.

The Seminoles without doubt have been one of the nation's premier programs over the last 20 years. They've won two national titles in that span (the most recent in 1999), they've been virtually a constant in the nation's top 25 (22 finishes since 1984), and their coach is an icon of the game in every sense of the word. Bobby Bowden will step on the sidelines today for the 500th time as a head coach, a number matched by only two other men (Amos Alonzo Stagg and Joe Paterno).

It's an opportunity that doesn't come along very often for a program eager to re-establish itself in the national eye.

But throw a damper on Bowden's 500th party and do it on national television, and you can bet that people around the nation will sit up and take notice.

Certainly, the Buffs turned some heads with their win over West Virginia nine days ago. Enough so, anyway, that they received more than a handful of votes in both the AP and coaches' polls.

But a win today would bump the prestige meter another notch.

No doubt, the odds are stacked against Colorado today. About a dozen Seminoles will be making their 2008 debuts after serving three-game suspensions. It means a good defense will be even better, and a struggling offense should get a shot in the arm.

Then there's the distraction of playing on the road, as well as the reputation of the team wearing the home uniforms.

Throw in the hoopla surrounding Bowden's 500th game, and the Buffs couldn't be blamed for going in a little wide-eyed.

Hawkins, though, says he expect his young Buffs to be star-struck.

"That's the benefit of the schedule that we play," Hawkins said earlier this week. "Playing at Invesco, playing on television, playing West Virginia ... We always talk about just having your 'A' game in life everyday.

"We're going to travel, play on the national stage and play a good team. They just look at that as being Colorado football."

There, however, some factors in CU's favor.

Because the game isn't in Tallahassee, only a small gathering of students is expected, rather than the regular 15,000 that attend games at FSU. And, while the crowd will definitely be heavily tilted toward the Seminoles, it will still be smaller than if the game were in Tallahassee.

But no matter where the game is played, the Buffs will need their "A" game. That means eliminating turnovers and penalties, and establishing more consistency on the offensive side of the ball. It means protecting quarterback Cody Hawkins, producing enough of a running game to keep the Seminoles honest up front, and creating more of the big plays that seem to already have become a staple of this team.

Defensively, it means another effort like the one that limited West Virginia to just 14 points. Buff defensive coordinator Ron Collins had a great game plan for the Mountaineers; if he can duplicate that today, the Buffs should be in the game down the stretch.

By no means is this a "must-win" for the Buffs. Lose, and they'll still have the entire Big 12 season in front of them.

But, if the Buffs want to truly put themselves in the national picture four games into the season, this is indeed an opportunity they can't afford to squander.

CU in 2008

Aug. 31 -- CU 38, Colorado St. 17

Sept. 6 -- CU 31 Eastern Washington 24

Sept. 13 -- Bye

Sept. 18 -- CU 17, West Virginia 14, OT

Sept. 27 -- Florida State (at Jacksonville), 1:30 p.m., ABC

Oct. 4 -- TEXAS, 5 p.m., FSN

Oct. 11 -- at Kansas

Oct. 18 -- KANSAS STATE

Oct. 25 -- at Missouri

Nov. 1 -- at Texas A&M

Nov. 8 -- IOWA STATE

Nov. 15 -- OKLAHOMA STATE

Nov. 28 -- at Nebraska, 1:30 p.m., ABC



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Buffs to seek redemption, revenge in Florida

*By Patrick Ridgell
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BOULDER — The Colorado Buffaloes rushed for minus-27 yards the last time they played Florida State. They were nearly shutout. They spent much of the game trying to show they had the athletes Florida State had.

Yet the Buffs believe they could've won that night in Boulder last September. After it ended, coach Dan Hawkins told his team he was disappointed, something he hadn't done before.

Today, CU gets a chance to purge lingering frustration from that 16-6 defeat.

"To lose that game, it kind of stuck with you for a little while," senior safety Ryan Walters said. "But you have to bounce back. I'm just glad we're playing them again this year."

Said quarterback Cody Hawkins: "It's definitely in the back of our minds that we could have won that game last year. Not to say that we should've because there were obviously a lot of plays that Florida State made that put us in bad situations. But we know that we have the ability to go out and play with anybody in the country if we go out and execute our game plan."

In some ways, there isn't a whole lot at stake today when CU faces Florida State in Jacksonville. Neither team is ranked. This isn't a league game.

But the Buffs are going for their first 4-0 start since 1998, the final season of the Rick Neuheisel era. A spot in the top 25 might await with a win. They're also trying to show they can hang with a traditional power away from home, and before a television audience that'll include much of the nation.

Will today's events gauge the team's rebuilding progress? Probably not.

If we think the Florida State game should reveal how far CU has come, wait until next Saturday when the Buffs take their first crack at Texas since a 70-3 loss in 2005 that prompted Gary Barnett's dismissal.

This is not your classic Florida State team. The defense looks good, and several Seminoles return from suspensions for academic misconduct, including four defensive starters. But the offense is a mess, as evidenced by their seven turnovers while losing to Wake Forest last Saturday.

The Seminoles flattered the Buffs all week when properly cued. They sound more occupied with their own problems, though.

"We played them last year and got 16 points," Florida State coach Bobby Bowden said. "They have nine of them back on defense; they've replaced guys well.

"But I know this — if we execute like we did last week, it'd be bad for us. We have to execute. We ain't as bad as we played last week."

According to the Buffs, they're much better than they played last September.

"Last year we let them get out of here," defensive tackle George Hypolite said. "They hit us. They have the kind of athletes where if they hit you on two plays, those two plays are going to the house. If they hit you on one long run and one big pass. Really, that's all we gave

up the entire game, but they made points out of it.

“I’m not saying it’s going to be easy or it’s going to be different, but that wasn’t us, that wasn’t the kind of football team we are. We’re the kind of football team that’s not going to allow someone to hit us on a couple of plays and beat us. If they’re going to beat us, they’re going to earn it every play.”

Patrick Ridgell can be reached at pridgell@times-call.com.



CU faces unusual triple option

Buffaloes spend week preparing for three Florida State QBs

By Paul Willis

Friday, September 26, 2008

The collective struggles of the Florida State offense made things a bit unique for the University of Colorado football team this week.

Instead of preparing for one quarterback, the Buffaloes prepared for three.

That's how many signal-callers the Buffs might see today at Jacksonville Municipal Stadium (1:30 p.m. MDT, KMGH-Channel 7), as sophomore starter Christian Ponder will be on a short leash after failing to produce last week in the Seminoles' 12-3 loss to Wake Forest.

Some doubt existed as to whether Ponder still would have his job this week after his 6-for-18, three-interception performance in which he produced only 52 yards passing.

After Ponder was yanked, speedy backup D'Vontrey Richardson posted nearly identical numbers: 6-for-18, two interceptions, 66 yards.

But don't forget, the Seminoles also have on the bench longtime starter Drew Weatherford, a senior who is nearing many team records but who was replaced in the latter stages of camp.

"We're prepared for whatever they do," CU safety D.J. Dykes said. "They have a guy who can run around. . . . Well, we just faced (West Virginia QB) Pat White. They have guys who can throw. . . . Well, we faced teams that can throw the ball, too."

In perhaps an illustration of how tenuous Ponder's grasp on the job is, Florida State announced this week at a news conference that defensive coordinator Mickey Andrews would speak first, then offensive coordinator Jimbo Fisher, followed by "the starting quarterback."

Not announcing the QB's name might have been a hint that a move was possible, but it was Ponder who stepped to the podium in Tallahassee, Fla. Predictably, he was grilled by the media.

"When you watch the film, it was bad, but not as bad as we thought," Ponder said. "Everything is correctable. There were definitely guys I missed, and I made a lot of mistakes."

Ponder, whose father, David, was a defensive lineman for the Seminoles in the 1980s, was mostly solid in the Seminoles' first two games, but those were blowout wins against Western Carolina and Chattanooga.

"He's our starting quarterback and he deserves to play again," said Fisher, who is expected to eventually replace

longtime Seminoles head coach Bobby Bowden. "I was going to put him back in the (Wake Forest) game, but D'Vontrey had some momentum and we were moving the ball. He didn't play as well as he needed to play, but he didn't play as poorly as it seemed."

Asked if he was inclined to use Weatherford, who has posted a 20-13 career mark and is the Atlantic Coast Conference's active leader in passing yards (7,429) and touchdowns (39), Fisher said, "Not the way it was going."

"Not out of any disrespect for Drew," Fisher continued, "but I still felt like we were one play away."

Weatherford is one pass from supplanting Chris Weinke in the FSU record books for most pass attempts in a career.

It seems to be anyone's guess whether he'll get the opportunity today or any time this season. If the struggles of Ponder and Richardson continue, that opportunity could increase exponentially.

CU had a firsthand look at Weatherford last season during a 16-6 loss in Boulder, but at most, he was one-third of the Buffs' focus this week.

"Whatever they do, our defense is

really adjustable," Dykes said. "We'll prepare for all of them and be ready for whatever they throw at us. We won't be surprised by anything."

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