



Ringo: Memorable moments for CU on gridiron

By Kyle Ringo

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The college football bowl season continues tonight with a painful reminder for Colorado fans, who didn't get to join in the festivities this year and might be suffering through cabin fever.

Nearly a year has passed since the Buffaloes lost to Alabama in the Independence Bowl in Shreveport, La., ending the 2007 season. Louisiana Tech and Northern Illinois meet tonight in this season's edition of that game while CU fans continue to count down the days to spring football and next season.

With the end of the year arriving later this week, it seemed like an appropriate time to take a look back at some of the most significant moments and developments that shaped a topsy-turvy year for the Buffs.

If we learned anything this year, it might be that in some years, some of the most significant moments for a college football team occur off the field.

1. Nebraska beats the Buffs -- Coach Dan Hawkins' team watched a 57-yard field goal from Nebraska place-kicker Alex Henery clear the crossbar in Lincoln, Neb., on Nov. 28, giving the Cornhuskers a lead in the final two minutes of the regular season finale.

The Buffs had to win to become bowl eligible, but they were unable to mount a game-winning drive. Quarterback Cody Hawkins had a pass batted into the air at the line of scrimmage -- a familiar sight in his two years under center. It was intercepted and returned for a touchdown finishing the Buffs and assuring a third consecutive losing campaign under coach Dan Hawkins.

2. Florida State week -- The Buffs were 3-0 heading into their rematch with the Seminoles in Jacksonville in late September and feeling confident. Then a series of events occurred that led to the downfall of the offense and made the season a much more difficult challenge.

In practices leading up to the game, freshman offensive lineman Max Tuioti-Mariner suffered a torn ACL, ending his season. Fellow starting offensive lineman Ryan Miller suffered a broken leg during the game, finishing his year and leaving coaches with less talent, depth and experience heading into the Big 12 slate.

The Buffs also lost what was a winnable game that day by failing to take advantage of plenty of opportunities and making some crucial errors late in the first half.

3. Tyler Hansen debuts -- After falling to 3-3 with a three-game losing streak, Dan Hawkins proved he would put his team ahead of his son by pulling the redshirt off true freshman quarterback Tyler Hansen before a mid-October game against Kansas State.

Hansen surprised the Wildcats with his play-making ability when he came into the game and began sharing playing time with Cody Hawkins. The CU defense also played well as the Buffs nipped the Wildcats in Folsom Field. Getting Hansen involved proved Hawkins wasn't favoring his son in quarterback competition and might prove to be the

beginning of the end of Cody Hawkins' run as the CU starter.

4. Hawkins sets the bar high -- Two weeks after that disappointment in Lincoln, Dan Hawkins raised expectations for next year considerably by ending his remarks during the senior banquet by saying "10 wins and no excuses" when looking forward to next season.

As soon as those words left his mouth, they became the standard by which the 2009 Buffs will be judged. If the Buffs come through in the coming year and achieve Hawkins' stated goal or come close to doing so, the coach could look like a prophet. If not, the words could dog him in the same way some mocked former coach Gary Barnett with his "Return to Dominance" mantra that was never fulfilled.

5. Ineligibility stings -- Days before training camp, coaches were handed news that wide receiver Markques Simas, offensive linemen Erick Faatagi and Sione Tau, linebacker Nate Vaiomounga and defensive back Lamont Smith would be academically ineligible for the 2008 season.

Coaches previously learned freshman linebacker Lynn Katoa also was not eligible because of a spring-semester suspension for an off-campus fight.

Losing Simas and the two linemen proved to be an even more painful blow later in the year when other injuries occurred and those players could have filled in. The others all likely would have played on special teams at least and could have improved the overall speed of those units.

6. The injuries began in camp -- The season didn't begin well, starting with the first practice of training camp when redshirt freshman offensive lineman Mike Iltis suffered a season-ending torn ACL injury.

Iltis was expected to contend for a starting job at one guard position and learn from senior center Daniel Sanders all year before competing in 2009 to fill Sanders' shoes.

Freshman linebacker Jon Major, a smart, fast playmaker, suffered a torn ACL midway through camp, putting an end to his season and any chance of him getting a year of experience under his belt.

7. Signing Darrell Scott -- At the time, back in the first week of February, winning a recruiting battle with Texas for the services of the No. 1 rated prep running back in the nation appeared to be a huge step forward for the program. It still could prove to be a benchmark moment in recruiting for the program in Hawkins' tenure.

However, Scott remained in California all summer taking an algebra class to make himself eligible at CU. He arrived out of shape for training camp and early in camp began dealing with a rash of injuries that led to him spending more time on the bench than on the field in his freshman season.

Fellow true freshman Rodney Stewart became the star and the team's leading rusher, but suffered a broken leg at Texas A&M on Nov. 1.

8. Beating West Virginia -- The Buffs hosted the No. 21-ranked Mountaineers in mid-September on a Thursday night with a national television audience watching. CU won to move to 3-0 and students stormed the field, lifting Cody Hawkins to their shoulders in footage that continues to be shown on ESPN.

It was a high point for a team that hadn't yet suffered some of the key blows that led to a long fall from inflated expectations.

9. Beating Colorado State -- The Buffs started the season with a convincing victory over their in-state rival at Invesco

Field. The victory gave CU wins in five of the past six in the series and just beforehand, the schools announced the next two games in 2009 and 2010 would return to campus sites.

The Buffs will host the Rams in Folsom Field next fall, providing a significant advantage as CU looks to improve to six wins in the past seven games.

10. Installing no-huddle offense -- Coaches opted to change their offensive approach at the start of spring ball in March by operating almost exclusively out of the shotgun formation and using hand signals to call plays and audibles from the sidelines.

The Buffs fared well in the system, for the most part, in the first three weeks of the season, and the decision might have been significantly higher on this list had it not been for all the attrition.

About midway through the season, coaches opted to move away from the no-huddle and back to using more position groupings and huddles because the offense was struggling so badly with so many young and inexperienced players in action, particularly on the offensive line.



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