



Injury rehab will be key to offseason

Lengthy list of Buffs recovering from surgery

By Kyle Ringo
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A nightmarish season of injuries for the Colorado football program has produced a challenging offseason of work for head athletic trainer Miguel Rueda.

Nine players underwent season-ending surgeries during the 2008 campaign and five more have gone under the knife in the past month. Two more players are scheduled to undergo surgery in the next two weeks, giving the program an ugly total of 16 players forced into the operating room this season.

Rueda is in his third year as head athletic trainer at CU after spending five years in a similar position at Fresno State. He said this year was the worst rash of injuries for one team he has experienced in his career.

"I guess you could look at one of two ways," Rueda said. "It could be more challenging, but it also could be easier because I've got less guys on the field to get hurt.

"From a rehab standpoint, we're going to be busier than we've been since I've been here."

Injuries that ended in surgery were just the most difficult on the Buffs, but not the only ones that took a toll on the team.

Serious concussions ended the career of defensive end Jason Brace, who played his final game in mid-October at Kansas. True freshman offensive lineman Bryce Givens also suffered serious concussions that led to health problems and him withdrawing from classes late in the fall semester.

Givens is feeling better and is working out again with teammates after missing the final weeks of practice this season. He is enrolled in spring classes and is expected to compete for a starting job at tackle or center, a position he played in middle school and his freshman year of high school, when spring practices begin.

CU lost more than 120 games this season due to injuries, the vast majority of which came from players listed in the two-deep depth chart or others who contributed significantly on special teams.

Now it's Rueda's job, along with assistant athletic trainer Leila Almahdy, to get those players back on the field.

"I think we have some quality individuals here," Rueda said. "You don't have to track them down or hold them captive to do this. They all want to participate.

"That part makes it easier because we put together the rehab programs, but those guys have to show up and do them. If they're doing that then they're going to get better. So far, everyone we have done surgery on has really met the challenge."

Head coach Dan Hawkins is pushing back spring practices this year to begin in late March or early April to give players more time to recuperate. Rueda said he believes all the players who have undergone surgery or who will have surgery will be able to participate in spring drills. Some will be capable of more than others.

Players such as offensive lineman Mike Iltis and linebacker Jon Major, both of whom were hurt in training camp, will be further along in their recovery and closer to full participation than players who were injured late in the year.

"They're working their tails off right now," Rueda said. "I don't see any reason why those guys who got hurt in the fall shouldn't be back participating in spring ball in some way. It's tough to take a kid who tore his ACL and stops playing and you rehab him. You can't just throw him right back in to spring football. You've got to let them start doing some individual reps and one-on-one reps to get them used to the contact and used to lining things up again. We'll work them in somehow and get them involved."

Senior cornerback Ben Burney has undergone five separate surgeries since the end of the 2007 season and missed the entire 2008 campaign. He is rehabilitating from the last of those procedures and is expected to compete for a starting job at cornerback or safety beginning on the first day of spring ball.

"He's always been a very focused individual," Rueda said. "He knows what he needs to do and he knew that going into the first of several surgeries, and I know he's paying very close attention to the work that he is doing. He's invested a lot of time, energy and effort into his whole return."

Rueda said one of the players he has been most impressed with in rehab is running back Rodney Stewart, who suffered a fractured leg on Nov. 1 at Texas A&M. Rueda said Stewart approaches his recovery like a man who can't stand the fact he is injured and wants nothing more than to get back to running between the tackles again.

"There is no doubt in his mind," he said. "He's pretty focused on coming back and playing."



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