



CU's Johnson ready to establish running game

Bufs O-line coach believes rushing is key

By Kyle Ringo
Tuesday, March 24, 2009

BOULDER, Colo. — A deep pool of offensive linemen and running backs and respectable group of tight ends led Colorado football coaches to the decision this winter to get back to a more straight-forward approach to offense.

When spring practices begin next week, the shotgun formation won't be the only one seen as it was most of the time last spring. The Buffs will take the first steps toward establishing what they hope will be a dominant downhill running game while also keeping some of the no-huddle, four and five-receiver looks of last year.

The man leading the charge is perfectly suited to the task.

If new offensive line coach Denver Johnson believes in anything more than what he hears in sermons on Sundays, it would be that to win on Saturdays, you have to be able to run. "I think I'm right in tune with where we're going on offense," Johnson said. "We want to put a great emphasis on running the football.

"I can tell you from doing this most all my life as a player and a coach. If you cannot run the football, you're going to have a tough time being very productive offensively not matter if you're a two-back team, a one-back team, a spread-em-out team or bunch em up."

Johnson was hired last month as the third offensive line coach in coach Dan Hawkins' short tenure in Boulder. He is the fourth man to hold the position in the past five years, but Johnson said he plans to put a stop to that revolving door and stick around for awhile.

"I'm ultimately committed to being here and helping build this program and watching it grow," Johnson said. "To me there is no such thing as a short-term commitment. You're either committed or you're not committed, and we were excited about this because we felt like it could potentially be a very long and successful tenure."

Johnson spent the past 12 years as a head coach -- nine at Illinois State and three at Murray State -- but was an offensive line coach earlier in his career. He said the decision to re-commit to the running game in Boulder came before he was hired but the approach meshes perfectly with his background and philosophies.

"That's not a change that I brought about," he said. "I think that change brought about me."

Johnson speaks with a warm southern drawl that will easily fit in in southern Texas where he has been assigned to recruit. Johnson grew up in Seminole, Okla., where he first began to develop his mentality of

attacking and wanting to play on the defense's side of the line of scrimmage on every play.

That style was buoyed at Tulsa where he played for four years under former Ohio State and Arizona State coach John Cooper, who is just one of several notable names Johnson counts as heavy influences on his career. His college position coach John Wittenborn was another, and former Miami coach Larry Coker is someone Johnson calls a role model and mentor.

The single biggest influence on how Johnson views the game is Pittsburgh Steelers offensive coordinator Bruce Arians, whom he worked with in the past along with Pat Jones, Dave Wannstedt and former Dallas Cowboys and Miami Dolphins coach Jimmy Johnson.

"I think he's a great fit for our staff and for our team," Hawkins said when Johnson was hired. "When we started looking for someone, his name kept cropping up and from a lot of different sources. And even more so, he really wanted to be a Buff."

Johnson replaces Jeff Grimes who coached the offensive line the past two years at CU before taking the same position at Auburn in early February. Johnson said he has met with all 15 returning offensive linemen on an individual basis and in group meetings and he is beginning to get familiar and comfortable with their personalities and backgrounds.

"We didn't go back to the womb, but we went back to their senior year in high school and the recruiting process and how they came here and then what their career has been up to this point," Johnson said.

Johnson said the group is still young and is bound to have some growing pains, but he doesn't believe players will have significant problems adapting to the nuances of the techniques he teaches. He said he and Grimes are very similar in a lot of ways. Johnson said he is excited to get on the field with his new players.

"I think there is a huge upside to this bunch," he said. "We have some really significant talent."

Eleven of those players figure to learn a lot from Johnson because they are either freshmen or sophomores. Others, such as senior-to-be Devin Head, will only spend a year with the new coach. Johnson is the fourth offensive line coach in Head's five year's in the program.

Head said the one piece of advice he offers his younger teammates about dealing with a change in position coaches is just to work as hard as they can. He said every coach appreciates that from players.

"It's definitely difficult because it takes awhile to feel out a new coach and learn what he likes you to do," Head said. "You start feeling one out and finally start doing all the things he wants you to do, and then all of a sudden he's gone and you've got to start all over again."

Johnson said every position will be open to competition this spring and again in the fall. One of the biggest issues facing Johnson will be finding a center to replace Daniel Sanders, who started the past three years, two at center. Players such as Mike Iltis, Keenan Stevens, Blake Behrens and Evan Eastburn will compete for job while learning what Johnson likes and dislikes.

Sione Tau, a sophomore-to-be in the fall, said he believes the Buffs will be a more aggressive line under Johnson.

"Most of the things are pretty similar to what coach Grimes teaches, but I think the thing that Denver

Johnson wants to emphasize is getting off the ball as fast as we can to re-establish the line of scrimmage," Tau said.

Head said to this point, he hasn't detected much in the way of philosophical changes between Johnson and Grimes, but spring practices will give him a much better idea of what Johnson is all about.

Head said he has taken something away from each coach he has worked with at CU, and he still uses tricks of the trade taught to him by Dave Borbely, who served as offensive line coach in the final years of the Gary Barnett era. He expects Johnson to have an influence as well.

"As far as major differences in how he goes about doing things, it's kind of hard to tell right now, but there are definitely no complaints," Head said. "He's a great guy. He's all about his players. He seems like he knows what he's talking about, and he's going to be a really good coach."



© 2006 Daily Camera and Boulder Publishing, LLC.