



## 20 years later Aunese's influence still strong at CU

By Kyle Ringo  
Sunday, April 5, 2009

BOULDER, Colo. — Siasau 'Sal' Pepa Aunese is still an influence on the Colorado football program 20 years after his brave battle with cancer inspired the 1989 team to an undefeated regular season and run to the national title game.

Each time a player visits the team meeting room they see a large picture on the wall taken the week after Aunese's death in September that season. The Buffs were in Husky Stadium before a game at the University of Washington pointing to the sky with their left arms because they're closest to the heart. The gesture became the Buffs' way of honoring their fallen teammate that year.

It's not the only spot in the Dal Ward Center where memories of Aunese and tributes to him can be found.

Each time a player steps inside running backs coach Darian Hagan's office, a custom-made wood replica of Aunese's No. 8 jersey is displayed prominently on the wall in back of Hagan's desk.

Hagan, who replaced Aunese as the starting quarterback in 1989, had the jersey made.

"I think about him a lot," Hagan said. "I always use him when my guys are feeling down, underappreciated and all that stuff. I always refer to Sal and things he had to endure in his short life. I always tell them, 'You think you have it bad, but there are a lot of guys who have it way worse than you.'"

Hagan said he has a plan for honoring Aunese. Each season beginning this fall, he will hang the jersey in the back of the locker of the player who wears No. 8. This year that player will be junior tailback Demetrius Sumler, who fittingly hails from the San Diego area, where Aunese was raised and is buried.

### Never far away

There is a room in the lower level of Bill McCartney's Boulder home filled with memories of his life in football. Some of the most special are from Aunese and the 1989 team. McCartney said he takes pleasure in reliving those memories and the accompanying emotion with visitors.

But the McCartney family doesn't need old photographs, newspaper clippings or trophies to remind them.

The year before his death, Sal fathered a son with McCartney's daughter, Kristy.

Timothy Chase McCartney was born April 24, 1989, just five months before Aunese lost his fight. T.C.

McCartney is now nearly 20 years old and a 6-foot-3, 227-pound walk-on tight end at Louisiana State University. He wants to follow in his grandfather's shoes and become a college football coach.

"My grandson is a living memento," McCartney said. "We have a Samoan in our house. Sal's memory is never very far from us."

## **20 years ago**

Two decades have come and gone and players and coaches from the 1989 team can hardly believe it. In many ways the overwhelming emotions from that fall are still fresh. Members of that team remain very close, despite being dispersed around the nation. Many of them get together one weekend each spring in Las Vegas to watch college basketball and reminisce.

Spring, after all, is when Aunese was first diagnosed with a rare form of stomach cancer that was inoperable. He was given six months to live.

"A tragedy like that forces you to communicate with each other," former CU wide receiver Jeff Campbell said. "It forces you to probably have deeper communication than you would if you weren't rallying around a certain point. Probably the best friends in my life are from that team."

Campbell was in the hospital room along with other teammates, McCartney and Sal's family on Sept. 23, 1989 when Aunese died. He spoke about his fallen friend two days later at a memorial service attended by more than 2,000 at Mackey Auditorium on the CU campus. He said Aunese is still never far from his thoughts.

"I will never forget him," Campbell said. "I can promise you that. I will never, ever forget that guy."

## **National spotlight**

Campbell said he still speaks to five or six of his 1989 teammates on the phone at least once a week. He is living in Southlake, Texas, these days and wasn't able to make it to this weekend's reunion in Las Vegas, but he has been to many in the past.

The season put Colorado football in the national spotlight for two years and touched off a decade of success that included the 1990 national championship a Heisman Trophy, 17 first-team All-Americans, 91 victories and nine bowl games.

It all began with Sal, one of McCartney's early high-profile victories in recruiting.

He came to Colorado from Vista High School where he became a sought-after player who ultimately chose CU over rival Nebraska. He became a two-year starter for the Buffs and led them to the 1988 Freedom Bowl before becoming ill.

The day he died he wrote a letter to his teammates that concluded: "I love you all, go get 'em and bring home the Orange Bowl."

The Buffs fell just short 2½ months later, losing 21-6 to Notre Dame and finishing the season 11-1. They had dedicated the season to him. They had SAL sewn on the sleeves of their jerseys and drew broad attention as they knocked off every team on their schedule, including Oklahoma on the road and Nebraska at home on consecutive weeks.

They were fueled by emotion and a love for one another.

"They accomplished something very significant, and you can only do those type of things, turn the corner like they did, if you have unity," McCartney said. "The fact they were bonded is the reason they did what they did. If they hadn't had that special unity and that special closeness and resolve that comes with that, they would never have accomplished that.

"They had the kind of character where they trusted each other and that allowed them to get very close. When you get trust and honor and loyalty and commitment, all bets are off. Anything is possible."

Some criticized the program and the players themselves for "exploiting" Aunese's death. The Omaha World Herald published an editorial on the subject just days after CU had beaten the Huskers that season. A Chicago Sun Times columnist followed along.

"I think it was classless," Hagan said. "I think you have to have walked in our shoes to have the sense to make a comment like that. If you haven't walked in our shoes and been around coach McCartney and how he perceives things, you shouldn't be talking. Everything we did was from the heart. What we did was no different from those guys putting Bob Devaney on their jerseys."

### **Feelings still strong**

Longtime linebackers coach Brian Cabral was in his first season on the coaching staff in 1989 as a graduate assistant after a successful pro career that included a Super Bowl victory. He hardly knew Aunese, but seeing how the team reacted to the young man still makes him emotional 20 years later.

Sitting in his office, Cabral became misty eyed in a matter of moments reflecting on what he said was an unmatched emotional experience during his life in football. He said he is reminded of Aunese each time he steps foot in the team meeting room where he sees the picture from the game against Washington.

"That was probably the moment where they let go of the tragic part and bought into the life part and what he meant to the team," Cabral said. "That was a very powerful, emotional time.

"There was a connection with that team and Sal Aunese that I don't know if words can describe. Love could probably be the strongest word to describe that relationship."

McCartney said he only occasionally sees members of the 1989 team these days, but those times are a rare treat. He is steadfast in his belief that the 1989 team led by captains Michael Jones, Bruce Young, Bill Coleman and Erich Kissick laid the foundation for winning the championship the next year. Aunese was an honorary captain.

"We have a bond," McCartney said. "It's a special bond. It's very rewarding and satisfying and gratifying. It's the kind of a thing where even though it's 20 years ago, it doesn't lose any of its significance."



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colorado football

## Five surgeries later, CU's Burney is back

By Tom Kensler  
The Denver Post

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CU cornerback Benjamin Burney hopes the pads stay on in 2009 after he missed all of last season. He started all 13 games in 2007. (Andy Cross, The Denver Post )

BOULDER — Football teams tend to keep orthopedic surgeons busy, but it's a wonder Dr. Eric McCarty did not have to keep a separate appointment book for Benjamin Burney.

What makes the Colorado senior cornerback's situation unusual is that, during an eight-month span in 2008, he underwent five surgeries — each on a different area of his body.

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"Ben is a tough kid and has been able to endure through quite a bit," said McCarty, chief of sports medicine for the University of Colorado School of Medicine and a former CU linebacker-fullback.

A starter two years ago, Burney redshirted in 2008 to get his body fixed up. Not having fully regained his conditioning, Burney is participating in spring drills with some restrictions.

## Colorado Football

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He rattles off his 2008 surgeries like a laundry list.

Right knee: January

Left shoulder: March

Right shoulder: June

Left wrist: July

Right wrist: August

"Sometimes you start thinking you're a science

project," Burney said.

Four of the five were reconstructive surgeries that required months of rehabilitation. Only his right wrist was able to get by with a less-invasive arthroscopic procedure.

Screws have been removed from his left wrist. But nine surgical staples remain in his left shoulder, and seven staples still hold things together in his right shoulder. The knee problem was the most severe, Burney said. Chronic tendinitis had eaten away a portion of his patellar tendon, and it had to be rebuilt.

Surgeons recommended the knee be repaired first so Burney could walk without the use of crutches. Maneuvering on crutches would have been tough following the surgeries to shoulders or wrists.

"It is challenging to do rehab on five different areas of the body, with overlapping time frames," McCarty said. "The surgical procedure is just a small part of that athlete getting better. Most important is the mental attitude and the hours upon hours performed in rehabilitation. Ben has done a terrific job in his hard work."

After the shoulder surgeries, Burney resembled a bionic man. Each time, the shoulder was immobilized by a metal brace that extended the arm at about a 45-degree angle, with the elbow bent slightly. "Joystick" became his new nickname, in reference to the rigid arm. Sleeping was a challenge. Burney had to stack pillows to support the rigid arm.

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"We knew what Ben was going through," junior cornerback Jimmy Smith said, "but seeing that arm stick out, we couldn't help it. It was funny."

Each injury was football-related. Doctors told Burney he likely developed knee tendinitis from years of running, jumping and weight lifting. Known as a defender who likes to hit, Burney remembers dislocating the left shoulder during the Oct. 6, 2007, game against Baylor.

"I fell over, and it felt like my shoulder was in my heart before it popped back in," Burney recalled. He injured his right wrist two weeks later while making a tackle against Kansas, and then hurt his left wrist three weeks after that, at Iowa State.

As football players are apt to do, Burney continued to play. He was among eight players who started all 13 games in 2007, including the Independence Bowl.

"Football is kind of like life, you go into it head-first," Burney said. "If something happens, you have to overcome it. All football players go through trials and tribulations."

Burney made sure he stayed mentally active through all that rehab. A film studies major, Burney wrote a 500-page book and shot a feature-length movie. The book is about seeking love on a college campus, he said. The movie, titled "Memories of Heaven," intertwines religion with inner-city temptations.

A Mullen High School graduate, Burney has

always been one to look beyond football.

"I know the ratio of players that go from college to the NFL is slim, so I have other things in mind," Burney said.

His father, Jacob Burney, was the Broncos' defensive line coach for seven years before being let go by new head coach Josh McDaniels.

"After going through all these surgeries, even my dad wondered if I really wanted to get back to football," Benjamin said. "The way I look at it, I was born to be an entertainer. There is no bigger stage in America than football."

Can Burney regain his old form?

"We'll see," said CU defensive backs coach Greg Brown. "But the makeup of this guy, and with that smile on his face, he knows what it takes."

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## Under the knife

*CU senior cornerback Benjamin Burney underwent five surgeries while redshirting a season ago.*

**RIGHT KNEE, January 2008:** Reconstructive surgery to repair patellar tendon. Rehabilitation time frame: four months.

**LEFT SHOULDER, March:** Nine staples needed in reconstructive surgery to close a tear. Rehab:

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four months.

**RIGHT SHOULDER, June:** Seven staples needed in reconstructive surgery to close a tear. Rehab: four months.

**LEFT WRIST, July:** Reconstructive surgery. Rehab: three months.

**RIGHT WRIST, August:** Arthroscopic procedure to "clean out" scar tissue, bone chips. Rehab: three months.

*Tom Kensler, The Denver Post*

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