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cu football

Kiesau adapts dream to business of football

By Terry Frei
The Denver Post

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Eric Kiesau, 36, takes over as CU's offensive coordinator after Mark Helfrich left for the same job at Oregon. (Helen H. Richardson, The Denver Post)

BOULDER — After finishing his collegiate career as a savvy and undersized quarterback at Portland State, Eric Kiesau landed a job in the high-tech corporate world in Oregon.

"Wow," he thought. He had a corner office and a company car and was making good money for a guy straight out of school, while supporting his new wife, Wendy.

Yet, as Kiesau worked the phone discussing business matters, he noticed his doodling. He was diagraming plays.

Eventually, he realized he couldn't get the game out of his system.

Soon after that, Kiesau gave in to the pleas of his father, Gene, to return to Southern California and work in the family sporting goods business, Eclipse Specialties, on one condition: He would have flexible hours to be a part-time, volunteer football coach, somewhere.

For fun, he coached at Moorpark High School and Glendale Community College. He didn't even get into full-time coaching until he was 28.

Now, after a whirlwind spring, he's the man in charge of Colorado's offense entering the fourth year of Dan Hawkins' program.

"I've been preparing for this my entire life," Kiesau, 36, said recently in his office in the Dal Ward Center.

Gesturing to the laptop computer on his desk, he said: "Right here is my playbook. I've been working on this thing for 10 years. . . . I'd go to clinics or talk to coaches on the road and I'd say, 'Hey, that's a good idea,' and I'd throw it in the laptop and see where it takes us."

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Quick transition

Last month Hawkins promoted Kiesau after the sudden departure following spring practice of Mark Helfrich to Oregon. Kiesau had been Colorado's passing game coordinator and receivers coach after previous collegiate stops at Oregon, Utah State and California.

The transition is unusual for several reasons, most notably because Helfrich left *after* spring practice. Kiesau's goal of morphing CU's offense to a more traditional running game and a drop-back passing approach, albeit with allowances for quarterback Cody Hawkins' diminutive stature, is an acceleration of what the Buffaloes were shooting to do. But it's an acceleration nonetheless, with only the limited fall preseason workouts to try to work through the bugs.

"We're going to go back to more of the pro-style offense," Kiesau said, noting that the Buffaloes are deep and talented at tailback. "It's going to be more two-back, run it downhill. Last year, we went to the two-by-two spread stuff and started going sideways a bit. Nothing against what Mark likes and enjoys.

"I think that's one of the reasons he went to Oregon, because that's what they like to do. . . . We want to be a little more in line with what Coach Hawk and I are thinking now."

This all comes with the blessing of Dan Hawkins, a former offensive coordinator himself.

"The other day, I said, 'Hey, Coach, next week

I'm going to put together some things I want to change,' " Kiesau said. "He looked at me and said, 'Aw, just do it.' So I think there's a lot of trust there. That's the great thing about working for Dan Hawkins. He's not going to micromanage you. Now, he's going to be involved and I want him to be involved. It's a group effort, but he gives you a lot of freedom."

Dan Hawkins said of Kiesau: "He's really a detail guy, really a smart guy. He knows our offense, and he's been around a bit with other people as well. He deserves the opportunity, and I think the continuity thing is a big deal, having someone who knows our people, what we do and how we do it. He's still going to bring some new ideas to it, but you don't have to reinvent the language and all that.

"I have a lot of respect for him, and I know the players do, too. We've been lucky to keep him. I've had to stave off several attempts to scale the walls every year to get him."

Popular choice

There's a bit of an apparent contradiction here. Kiesau, on the one hand, is adamant the Buffs' recruiting focus will have to be on big, dropback passers, along the lines of incoming freshman Clark Evans (6-feet-5, 230 pounds) from Los Alamitos, Calif. Yet Kiesau's quarterback this season, at least at the outset, likely will be Cody Hawkins, the 5-foot-11 son of the head coach.

Can Cody Hawkins do what the new offensive coordinator has in mind?

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"Absolutely," said Kiesau, a former 5-11 college quarterback. "Because it's all going to come around to this: I need a smart guy. That's Cody's strength. Cody's not 6-5. He's not 230. He's not going to be able to stand in the pocket and gun it downfield. But his asset is something we didn't take full advantage of last year. He's very, very smart.

"He can look at a defense and get us in and out of plays. I'm going to put a lot on the quarterback mentally, and if we didn't have the guy to do that, a smart quarterback, the things I'm doing would be very, very difficult."

"Tears of joy"

The morning after Kiesau was promoted, Cody Hawkins and fellow quarterback Tyler Hansen met with Kiesau.

"When I found out Coach Kiesau was named offensive coordinator, I started crying tears of joy," Cody Hawkins said. "If Coach Helfrich had to leave, there was no doubt in my mind (Kiesau) was the first one who should have gotten the job. I came in at probably 6:45 that morning and we talked for about two hours, went to class, and then came back and we talked for another hour."

Cody said that Kiesau "understands the challenges you face when you're not a 6-foot-5 quarterback. He understands throwing lanes and making reads and how to find alleys."

Kiesau also told Cody that any quarterback who plays for CU would have far more responsibility

than in the past to call "packages" and audible into a better play.

"We'll be much more complicated before the snap, and try to be more effective after," Cody said.

The Buffs' likely top receiver in 2009, sophomore-to-be Markques Simas, also was happy with Hawkins' choice to replace Helfrich.

"He was a big part of the reason I came to Colorado," Simas said. "He's a good guy and a good coach. I think he has more faith in the receivers than Helfrich did, too."

Kiesau is one of those who generally is called by his last name, even by his childhood buddies. But after he was promoted, Simas mischievously came up with a nickname.

"I call him 'O.C.,' " Simas said with a laugh.

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Eric Kiesau bio

Colorado assistant head coach/offensive coordinator/ quarterbacks coach

Age: 36

Family: Wife Wendy, daughter Tayler, son Blake

Player: Glendale (Calif.) High School; Glendale Community College, where he was a junior

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college All-American in 1992; Portland State, where he started as a senior in 1995.

Private business: Aerotech in the Portland area; in the Southern California family business, Eclipse Specialties, Inc.

Part-time coaching: Moorpark High School, Glendale Community College

Got into coaching when a former Portland State assistant, Chris Peterson, then at Oregon, helped talk him into leaving the family business and volunteer coaching to become "teamwork coordinator" with the Ducks in early 2000.

- Utah State receivers coach, 2000-01
- California receivers coach, 2002-05
- Colorado receivers coach, 2005-08
- Named assistant head coach in March. Named offensive coordinator and quarterbacks coach on April 30.

Terry Frej, The Denver Post

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