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Hawk thinking big

By Chris Dempsey
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FBCC31-- Head coach Dan Hawkins and University of Colorado football team are back on the field during the first day of spring practice in Boulder. RJ Sangosti/ The Denver Post (THE DENVER POST | RJ SANGOSTI)

BOULDER — With roughly six weeks before training camp of a season of high expectations, Colorado football coach Dan Hawkins is battling perceptions about his program.

Four scholarship players, including the team's most talented wide receiver, Josh Smith, as well

as five-star linebacker Lynn Katoa, left the program during the offseason. The new outside linebackers coach, Bob Foster, was brought out of retirement and will be in Boulder for one year only. Hawkins himself will coach wide receivers this fall. Head coaches normally don't coach positions. And former wide receivers coach Eric Kiesau has taken over as the offensive coordinator.

So, after all of this, why is Hawkins, entering his fourth season and coming off a disappointing five-win campaign, more bullish about this team than any other he's had at CU? He said it starts with a team grade-point average last season that was the highest for the Buffs in 12 years and continues with the belief that after three years, he's put the foundation in place for big things this fall.

He talked about the state of his program in an interview with The Post last week.

Q: Is Josh Smith officially going to USC?

A: Don't know.

Q: Is his scholarship release to anywhere in the nation?

A: No.

Q: Just USC?

A: Yeah.

Q: Do the four scholarship players leaving the

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program recently — a couple big names — worry you at all?

A: You can't ever lower the bar. You can't. There has to be a cultural norm and standards that are met. And that's football-wise, that's school-wise, that's person-wise. You can't ever compromise on that. And so, sometimes you'll have (transfers). And I think as we continue to get better, as we continue to raise the standards, you continue to breed a new standard and a new mentality, and sometimes that becomes harder for other guys to buy into or adhere to.

Q: Your running back, Darrell Scott, is related to Smith. Are you worried about Scott leaving?

A: No.

Q: Did you have to talk to him and convince him to stay?

A: No.

Q: So, he will be on the team in the fall?

A: Yes.

Q: Are any other players on their way out?

A: There's always stuff on the horizon. Just the complexity of guys' lives and things that go on.

Q: You hired Bob Foster out of retirement to coach outside linebackers for a year. Why?

A: Bob Foster might be one of the finest human

beings I've ever been around. He was defensive coordinator at UC Davis when I played there. I coached with him for three years (at Willamette). He spent time with Buddy Ryan when they were running the "Bear" defense. He spent time with Ernie Stautner and ran the flex. He spent time with George Perles and ran the tilt defense. He tapped into the greatest defensive minds of his time. Extremely thorough, great teacher, one of those guys that you could be the fourth-team outside linebacker but you would jump on a spear for this guy in a second.

Q: Why will he be here for just one year?

A: I actually tried to get him over here when we first came. But he had all these other things going on. So, I've always sort of had in the back of my mind that if it worked out right, getting that guy here around our guys, around our coaches, you can't put money on that. And he kind of wanted to coach again. I told Coach, 'You don't have to do summer camps, you don't have to recruit. You just come in here and just do ball for the season.' And after we get the national championship, Ashley (Ambrose) will be the receivers coach. It worked out great for everybody. Ashley will get mentored a little bit at the wide receivers slot (as an intern). I'll get to coach, and Foster will be here.

Q: Are the players buying into you coaching the wideouts?

A: Thing I told the receivers is, I said, "Guys, let me tell you something. You know what position I played in college? I played running back. You

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know how many times I've coached running backs in 26 years of football? None. Never been a running backs coach. But I've coached linebackers, I've coached quarterbacks and I've coached tight ends, and I've always done a good job because I'm a good teacher. We'll be fine.

Q: Talk about your promotion of Eric Kiesau to offensive coordinator.

A: I've had to battle every year to keep Kiesau on our staff. I've had two or three teams come in here and try to raid him every year. I've been very fortunate to hold them off. Kind of the way we've always game-planned, is everybody has a say in what goes on. Obviously, the coordinator is putting it all together. But we've never been an outfit where the coordinator sits down and comes up with all the schemes and says this is what we're doing and everybody else just nods their head. I've never done that. So he's been very involved in everything we've done, on some level. So it's not like you're just stepping in and going, 'I have no clue.' And it's also not like he's stepping in and doing it all by himself, because he's not.

Q: Is the program close to where you want it to be?

A: That word has been used a lot. And I think it's pretty appropriate. I really do think we're close. I really do. Now, I've said this before: You don't want to be close to having a good marriage, you don't want to be close to making the basket. But I do think we're really poised. This talent, depth, experience thing, and when you talk about the culture, our whole balance of life, the excellence

with class, guys figuring the whole thing out. I just think we're really knocking on the door.

Q: This is a big season for you. Do you believe in the three-, four-, five-year progression that coaches are judged by?

A: What I don't like about that is I think to some degree you limit yourself. You have to be knocking on that door a little bit and be ready to go. Does it ever happen soon enough? No. The people that know us and know what we're about and know the things we're putting in place and see the progress; and when I say that I'm talking about our big supporters and (athletic director) Mike Bohn, and (CU chancellor) Phil DiStefano. They know the infrastructure and what's going on and where we're at. To me, that's what's most important, because those people make that call. They all want to win games too. But Mike knows exactly what's gone on and what's going on and where we're at and why we're there and what's the next move. That's all you can really do."

Chris Dempsey: 303-954-1279 or
cdempsey@denverpost.com

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