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CU football: What went wrong?

Youth, injuries, breakdowns spawn a trying season in Boulder

By Tom Kensler
The Denver Post

Updated: 11/28/2008 12:52:00 AM MST



Dan Hawkins was blindsided by many of the troubles that have beset his team in a season that could end today.
(Kathryn Scott Osler, The Denver Post)

BOULDER — Even during the most pristine of afternoons on the practice field, one of those sun-splashed days worth a postcard, Colorado coaches and players must have thought that a perfect storm

had taken up residence.

Inexperienced roster. At least 10 season-ending injuries. Three academic disqualifications. Youthful mistakes. Missed field goals. Red-zone woes. Quarterback issues. Demanding schedule. A football season full of hope turned into disappointment, if not disaster.

To become bowl-eligible, Colorado (5-6, 2-5 Big 12) must upset Nebraska (7-4, 4-3) this afternoon in Lincoln. Even if the Buffaloes win today and then claim victory in the Insight Bowl or Independence Bowl, their final record would show an improvement of just one game over last season.

Even if the stars suddenly align for Colorado, this season is not what assistant coach Darian Hagan had in mind on national signing day in February, when he gleefully proclaimed that the Buffs were ready to play "big-boy football" again after the arrival of tailback Darrell Scott and fellow blue-chippers.

"Obviously, we wanted to have a better record," Hagan said this week. "We're struggling right now. At least we still have that carrot of a possible bowl game hanging out there. Coaches preach to never give up. You just keep fighting."

CU has defeated only one Football Bowl Subdivision team (formerly Division I-A) currently holding a winning record. That would be West Virginia (7-3). It seems like ages ago when T-shirt-clad students stormed Folsom Field to celebrate that 17-14 overtime victory over the Mountaineers, ranked No. 21 at the time.

Facing the murderer's-row portion of a demanding schedule, and losing two starters on the offensive line, the Buffs could not sustain any momentum from their 3-0 start.

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They arrive in Lincoln having won just two of their past eight games. Colorado averages 14.9 points in conference games. Seven Big 12 teams average more than 30 points, including Nebraska (34.9). For all games, Colorado ranks 105th — out of 119 FBS teams — in scoring offense (19.2).

Coach Dan Hawkins has not called this season his most challenging. He doesn't have to. His five Boise State teams averaged 10.6 victories and scored 45 or more points 30 times. Hawkins lost 11 games in five years at Boise State. In three seasons at Colorado, his record is 13-23.

"This whole venture has been a challenging thing for 'Coach Hawk' — but a good one," Hawkins said this week. "Again, that's why I came (to Colorado). I knew it wasn't going to be easy. I knew there were going to be a lot of curveballs and a lot of testing going on. That's part of throwing yourself in the fire."

If Hawkins is ready to bite through a chin strap, he doesn't show it on the field. He remains confident his blueprint will work. He believes the young players will provide a solid foundation. Good times lie ahead, he promises.



QB Cody Hawkins. (Denver Post file photo)

Staying positive

This season of disappointment never turned into one of despair.

"I think Hawk has handled it very well," offensive coordinator Mark Helfrich said. "He's done a good job of balancing demands, improvements, attention to detail and also staying positive. That's one of those tightropes that coaches can get caught on."

Hawkins has joked on more than one occasion this fall that he is not ready to crack a whip.

"I know a lot of coaches who would be ripping tail on the staff and making kids feel bad because you're

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getting down on them," said offensive line coach Jeff Grimes, who also serves as assistant head coach. "If you do that, you can lose individual kids. You can lose the team."

If one didn't know, those watching a Colorado practice for the first time might think the team must be BCS-bound. No frowns. No signs of senioritis or anybody coasting to the finish. There's a bounce in everyone's step.

"It's not been the year we wanted," sophomore offensive tackle Nate Solder said. "But we have a lot of tough guys, guys that like being together. So why not have fun?"

That's not to say that losing is fun. But there has always been another goal. First and foremost, it is for every player, every coach to get better each and every day. That's Hawkins' mantra.

The positive part of this trying season is that the players are trying, coaches say. But this is a bad year to compete in a loaded Big 12 with 27 sophomores or freshmen listed on the two-deep. That does not include sophomore tackle Ryan Miller, freshman tailback Rodney Stewart and freshman guard Max Tuioti-Mariner, all of whom started before being injured.

"You just have to keep reminding yourself that a young player is not going to play like he's a junior or senior; he doesn't have that experience," Grimes said. "We have to have a little bit of patience."

O-line a trouble spot

Attrition along the offensive line — including two academic casualties and a season-ending injury before the season even started — has been particularly disruptive. The blockers have been overmatched at times. The quarterback didn't have

time to set his feet.

Freshman Tyler Hansen burned his redshirt after six games to give the offense someone who could scramble out of trouble when the pocket collapsed.

Coaches had to devise new schemes that could overcome the inadequacies. Helfrich, regarded nationally as one of the bright young offensive minds, almost cringes when somebody mentions 19 points per game.

"It's been frustrating, and all that stuff is my fault," Helfrich said. "We've been trying to retool, rekindle. Part of it is (a lack of) experience. Parts of it are other things. But we have to find a better way."

Things could well pop in a positive direction for Colorado next season. Florida State is replaced on the schedule by Miami of Ohio. The home schedule includes Wyoming, Kansas, Texas A&M, Nebraska and even a Missouri team with a quarterback not named Chase Daniel could be beatable in Boulder.

The biggest challenge will be in replacing six senior starters on defense.

In any case, Colorado must relearn how to win, said George Hypolite.

"This team needs to understand how to not make games big, but just to play them," the senior defensive tackle said. "When USC played Ohio State, they didn't think of it as a big game. The country did. But USC just thought of it as another game."

"That comes from winning. And it's a mentality. Sometimes it can take a long time to change. It may take a while here. But I think we're heading in the right direction."

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The Buffs' trouble spots

Injuries on the O-line Two starters (Ryan Miller, Max Tuioti-Mariner) and two potential starters (Erick Faatagi, Mike Iltis) were lost by the fourth week. With substitute linemen lacking experience, running backs couldn't find holes, and pockets collapsed around quarterbacks.

Quarterback shuffle Yes, freshman Tyler Hansen gave CU a spark with his scrambling in the victory over K-State after burning his redshirt in Week 7. But he had to be relieved by incumbent Cody Hawkins, right, in the win over Iowa State; then Hawkins took every snap against Oklahoma State. Rotating QBs obviously did not solve the offensive problems.

Lack of playmakers at WR Coaches could not foresee the academic ineligibility of redshirt freshman Markques Simas or that sophomore Kendrick Celestine would quit in September for family reasons. But that's why it's wise to sign two or three wideouts each recruiting cycle. Chance Blackmon, the only receiver signed in February 2008, is redshirting.

Up-tempo, no-huddle offense Yes, it's been effective on occasion. But some of the younger players complained they did not have enough time to think through their assignments.

Wide right, wide left Who could have thought that CU, with its enviable special-teams tradition, would be entering the season finale at 5-for-16 on field goals? Opposing kickers are 16-for-20 against CU.

Tom Kensler, Denver Post

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cu football

Senior savoring next big shot against Huskers

Brad Jones would love to topple Nebraska and qualify for a bowl game.

By Tom Kensler
The Denver Post

Updated: 11/28/2008 01:09:05 AM MST



CU linebacker/defensive end Brad Jones has handled challenges like CSU's Gartrell Johnson. (Hyoung Chang, The Denver Post)

BOULDER — With Colorado needing a victory over Nebraska to become bowl-eligible, Buffaloes senior linebacker Brad Jones knows he had better play well today or his college career will end.

An upbeat, optimistic person, Jones tries to avoid any mention of that possibility. He's a guy who never places boundaries upon himself.

Jones feels that way now, and he felt that way five years ago while being recruited. Born and raised near Lansing, Mich., Jones had not yet turned 18 when he extended an oral commitment to Colorado.

"When you see the mountains and the beauty of this place, how could you not want to be at Colorado and take advantage of everything here?" Jones said after a practice this week. "I've had a great time."

At 6-feet-3, 230 pounds and light on his toes, Jones was among the members of Colorado's 2004 recruiting class that then-Buffs coach Gary Barnett pegged for stardom. That never happened.

But Jones, who will be making his 36th career start today, has improved each season. And he seems to come up big in big games.

Last year, Jones had a sack and another tackle for a loss in the 65-51 victory over Nebraska. Another sack, against Texas Tech on a two-point conversion try, helped key a CU win in Lubbock. This season, he recorded seven quarterback pressures — most by a CU player in a dozen years — and forced a fumble in a victory over Kansas State.

Defensive coordinator Ron Collins said Jones began to improve dramatically last year when he was given a variety of roles. This year, Jones has played about as much at defensive end as at linebacker.

A hurdler in high school, he leads the team with five sacks and 13 quarterback pressures.

"Brad has great football intelligence — that's his best attribute," Collins said. "So when we moved him around, he started to make more plays. To his

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credit, he's been able to handle everything we've thrown at him."

No boundaries.

"The coaching staff lets me do everything," Jones said. "I get to go in (pass) coverage. I get to blitz the quarterback. I get down in a three-point stance. I'll play in the box. That fits my skill set. I feel I'm versatile."

Senior defensive tackle George Hypolite called Jones "a friend for life."

"Brad is always there," Hypolite said. "No matter what happens on the football field, you know he is going to be there. Brad is one of those guys you can count on."

Considering Nebraska's multiple offense features a lot of shifting and motion, CU's linebackers figure to be tested.

"We got it rolling in last year's Nebraska game," Jones said. "We're going to do some things this year, too."

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CU's departing seniors

S Joel Adams: Special-teams cover guy came to CU from Steamboat Springs as member of ski team.

FB Maurice Cantrell: At 6-feet, 245 pounds, team captain is punishing blocker.

WR Cody Crawford: Former walk-on finally earned scholarship this fall and has responded with 29 catches.

SS D.J. Dykes: A two-year starter after transferring from Idaho, his career ended two weeks ago due to illness.

DE Drew Hudgins: Former J.C. transfer never played due to injuries.

DT George Hypolite: Quarterfinalist for the Lott Award, vocal leader could repeat as first-team all-Big 12.

LB Brad Jones: His seven quarterback pressures against Kansas State were most by CU player in 12 years.

DE Maurice Lucas: Has made starts in all four seasons, including every game in 2008.

CB Gardner McKay: A top backup for most of his career, has made nine starts this season.

WR Steve Melton: Walk-on has played in seven games this season.

QB Nick Nelson: Has maintained team-first attitude despite not playing.

DT Brandon Nicolas: Became three-year starter after transferring from Notre Dame.

C Daniel Sanders: Captain "Girty" has been Buffs' most consistent lineman.

P Tom Suazo: Transfer from Arizona State has become CU's regular punter for the past three games.

FS Ryan Walters: Captain is leader of the defense; has career-best 87 tackles this season.

WR Patrick Williams: Captain saved his best for last with a career-best 29 catches.

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Bufs take last shot at bowl eligibility

By Kyle Ringo

Thursday, November 27, 2008

The Colorado Buffaloes haven't looked like a postseason team for most of this college football season, but they have one last chance to change that perception on Friday.

And even if they don't alter opinions based on their performance, they can assure themselves of a bowl trip with a victory regardless.

They've had 12 days to prepare for a must-win meeting with rival Nebraska.

They made it through most of those days without getting into a war of words with a team that doesn't care to acknowledge the rivalry but sure talks like it's playing in one.

In the past few days, Nebraska players have let it be known they have revenge on their minds for last season's game, a 65-51 CU win in Boulder that kept the Huskers home for the holidays and out of a bowl game for just the second time in the past 40 years.

Plenty of these Buffs know that feeling all too well. They experienced it just two years ago in coach Dan Hawkins' first season, finishing 2-10.

To avoid another December to remember with strength and conditioning coach Jeff Pitman, the Buffs must overcome an emotional environment on Senior Day for the Cornhuskers in Memorial Stadium, as well as an improving defense and a Nebraska offense Hawkins this week referred to as a juggernaut.

"They are more multiple formations, shifting, motioning and that kind of thing," Hawkins said. "They have a mobile quarterback and probably, they are not at all like Oklahoma State, but they are more balanced like that. They are very productive."

Quarterback Joe Ganz leads the 7-4 Cornhuskers on the field and has been one of the big talkers off it this week as well.

Hawkins said he believes the senior from Illinois might be the most under-rated player in the Big 12, which is loaded at quarterback.

Ganz played an integral role in the game last season.

He led Nebraska to 35 points in the first half and a double-digit halftime lead before throwing it all away with three interceptions in a monster second-half meltdown.

Ganz said today is a redemption game for him and every one of his teammates involved in the contest last season.

While nothing would make him happier than to win the final home game of his career and return to the favor to the Buffs, it's clear he respects the CU defense.

The Buffs have been the best pass defense in the Big 12 much of the season and have been above average in most games when opponents drive into the red zone.

Opponents have been inside the CU 20-yard line 35 times this season and have been forced to settle for field goals or less 12 times.

"They're real stingy," Ganz said. "I think the one thing that sticks out to you is how stingy they are in the red zone and how they are able to limit teams to field goals.

"That's one of our big keys this week is once we get into the red zone we have to score touchdowns. We can't let them hold us to field goals. That's been one of the reasons they have been pretty successful on defense for that reason. You don't hear a lot of talk about them, but they're good."

Nebraska has been held under 30 points only twice this season, and that makes it imperative the CU offense finds success.

Offensive coordinator Mark Helfrich might have to get extremely creative and he doesn't mind doing so if it means his young players are rewarded with another month of practice time and a bowl trip.

The Buffs need their best outing of the season or at least in conference play. They have scored more than 17 points just once against Big 12 competition this season and have struggled with the run and the pass.

Both quarterbacks Cody Hawkins and Tyler Hansen are expected to play and freshman running back Darrell Scott might be as healthy this week as he has been since the season opener.

The Buffs know where they stand and what's at stake. Assistant coaches and Dan Hawkins have taken turns over the past two weeks laying out the details in emotional post-practice speeches. They have made it clear there are no alibis and no excuses.

The messages seems to have resonated with at least some members of the team, particularly seniors such as defensive tackle George Hypolite, whose career would end with a loss.

"At the end of the day we always want to play well because that's what we do at the University of Colorado," Hypolite said. "Wind, rain, sleet, snow, shine, good weather, bad weather, 10,000 fans, 70,000 fans, black uniforms on, white uniforms on.

"No matter what we play a good brand of football until the clock screams triple zeros."



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Woelk: One more chance for Buffs to get better

By Neill Woelk

Friday, November 28, 2008

Finished.

That's what Colorado coach Dan Hawkins encourages his team to do every play, every game, every season.

If the Buffs don't meet that goal today, their season is ... well, finished.

Certainly, there should be no lack of motivation for the Buffs.

Start with the seniors. They can become only the seventh group in CU history to win back-to-back contests against the Cornhuskers. When you consider that today's game will be the 67th in a series, and the Buffs have won two straight only six times, that's not a bad legacy to leave.

Then, of course, there's the possibility of a bowl berth. While the reward of a postseason game doesn't carry the same status it once did -- more than half of the teams in the Football Bowl Subdivision will earn a bowl bid this year -- it's nevertheless better than the alternative.

The real bonus of a bowl game, of course, is the additional practices such a game affords. A bowl game gives a team a big jump on the ensuing season, and those practices are particularly valuable to a young team. No doubt, these Buffs would benefit greatly from a few extra practices.

Today is also the last chance for the Buffs to get a road victory this season. At home, Colorado put up a respectable 4-2 record this year.

But in enemy territory, CU is 0-4. A win today would not only be CU's first road win of the year, it would also be Dan Hawkins' first "signature" road win of his tenure in Boulder.

But the biggest motivation for the Buffs today is the simplest of reasons:

One more chance to get better. One more chance to improve; one more chance to take a step forward and establish a foundation for the future.

Less than one-third of the players who are expected to start today -- just two on offense -- will be playing their last regular season game. At least eight of those players will be making their first appearance at Memorial Stadium, that Midwest sea of red that is one of the best venues in college football.

There would be no better time -- or place -- for CU's young players to make a statement and send a message that says they plan on becoming a contender again in the Big 12 North.

This is by no means one of Nebraska's great teams. But it is a good team, one that is well-coached and one that boasts plenty of experience. The Huskers already this year have made it clear that they plan on becoming more than an afterthought in the Big 12 North.

If the Buffs are going to answer in kind, it will require their best game of the season.

CU coach Dan Hawkins was cautiously optimistic earlier this week.

Cautious because he knows the reality: Hawk has a young team that has not managed to play well from the beginning to the end of a game since early in the season.

Optimistic because in CU's last outing, a loss to Oklahoma State, he saw indications that his young players were no longer star-struck by being on the field in a Division I game.

"The Oklahoma State game was a benchmark for a lot of those young guys," Hawkins said. "It's the first time that many of those guys had to play against a quality opponent at the same time and battle and scrap.

"There were points when I thought we were really good. ... I think that game they were starting to get back to where we were last year, where you kind of see them wondering, then having opportunities to win and saying 'I kind of have this thing figured out a little bit now.'"

They'll need more than a little bit today.

Finish or be finished. Simple as that.



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Longmont, Colorado
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 2008

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Buffs can salvage season with win at Nebraska

By Patrick Ridgell

Longmont Times-Call

BOULDER — Plenty of numbers will flow out of today's regular-season finale at Nebraska that'll reveal what kind of season it's been for the Colorado Buffaloes. Here are a few that shouldn't be overlooked.

Suspensions, ineligibilities and injuries have in 2008 cost them 109 "man games," which CU defines as the total number of games that could be possibly played by all Buffs not ticketed to redshirt. All but nine of those came from players who were expected to be on the two-deep roster. The figure will exceed 120 today.

According to research from the school's sports information department, 2008 has been among the program's worst for losing players. Looking beyond raw numbers shows things are even rougher.

Consider that CU's leading rusher broke his leg. Its star recruit was never healthy. Its starting quarterback was benched. Its offensive line lost five potential starters. Its kicking game became an eyesore. Its defense did its best, which frequently was not enough.

The results? In Big 12 play, the Buffs have been outscored by an embarrassing margin of 217-104.

Yet despite it all, a win today can put a whole different spin on a year otherwise marred by frustration.

"This whole venture has been a challenging thing for coach Hawk, but a good one," CU coach Dan Hawkins said.

For CU (5-6, 2-5 Big 12), a win, no matter how it's achieved, places a different spin on an autumn that's seen the Buffs deal with one headache after another. It's not just about reaching a bowl, though, which is only possible if CU wins. There's something more. Today is about showing what perseverance can do.

Hawkins this week lauded his team's resourcefulness and creativity. The progress in 2008 has not been as tangible as 2007, when the team tripled its win total from the previous year and upset Oklahoma and Texas Tech.

This year's gains are only as obvious to coaches. And Hawkins wants to see today if his team can continue to push.

"I think what you learn is about yourself and your staff and your team and what your character is," Hawkins said about 2008. "I think when you have the kind of mettle to be able to show up everyday and, you know, continue to strive and work and build on things and have some good moments, too, and not succumb to the pressure to the failings, that's huge stuff."

Assistants see it, too.

"Those guys will follow the tone you take as a coach, and if you're sitting around being negative or whining about the



Despite the suspensions, ineligibilities and injuries that have plagued CU's season, a win today will make coach Dan Hawkins, left, and the Buffs eligible for a bowl game berth. "This whole venture has been a challenging thing for coach Hawk, but a good one," Hawkins said. **Joshua Buck/Times-Call**

past, then they're going to do the same thing," offensive line coach Jeff Grimes said. "You have to be willing to learn from things that have happened, a loss or a bad practice of whatever, and then move on and keep a positive, upbeat mentality.

"The great thing about that here is that's how Hawk is. You can lose a team real easily if the head coach gets frustrated and starts ripping the staff, or ripping the team and they get down on each other, then they feel like the coaches don't like them and before long you don't have anything. And Hawk has done a great job with that, and that really trickles down with us as assistants. If he's positive with us, then that encourages us to be positive with them."

This is the fourth time since 1988 Colorado and Nebraska are unranked entering their annual date. Neither can win the division title. Nebraska is already bowl eligible. Stakes are small.

Still, players had curious, sometimes spiteful, things to say about the others in recent days. They couldn't seem to agree on whether this is a rivalry. Nebraska wants CU to suffer the indignity of a postseason without a bowl. A few Huskers even said so.

For CU, can a win purge a season's worth of frustrations?

Well, the Buffs downplayed things all week. Center Daniel Sanders even said they treat Nebraska "just like any other game." But anyone who believes beating Nebraska will trigger only a routine response has forgotten last year. After the win, fans and players trampled Folsom Field. Emotions gushed from all.

"This is awesome," former receiver Dusty Sprague said. "You couldn't have written it up any better."

Said quarterback Cody Hawkins: "This means a lot, for the seniors, for the program. This team's been through a lot this year."

A year ago, Buffs like Hawkins didn't know what going through a lot really was.

Patrick Ridgell can be reached at pridgell@times-call.com

Rocky Mountain News

CU report: Cody's close call

By **B.G. Brooks**, Rocky Mountain News ([Contact](#))

Published November 27, 2008 at 9:42 p.m.



David Zalubowski / Associated Press/David Zalubowski / Associated Press

Colorado receiver Cody Crawford fumbles as Oklahoma State's Jacob Lacey, bottom, makes a hit on Nov. 15. Turnovers have been one big reason CU's offense has struggled in Big 12 play.

Quarterback **Cody Hawkins** made the trip to Nebraska in 2006 as a true freshman, figuratively outfitted in the redshirt he'd worn for the season's previous 11 games.

But the redshirt was very close to coming off in the second half of the Buffaloes' 37-14 loss.

CU's starting quarterback in that game was senior **Bernard Jackson**, a capable runner and an average passer who, even at that late point of the season, had hardly mastered first-year coach **Dan Hawkins'** new offense.

But after Jackson and the Buffs closed the Cornhuskers' margin to 17-14 in the second half, Jackson suffered a slight concussion. CU's coaching staff began telling Cody Hawkins he might have to play if Jackson didn't emerge from the fog.

"I was on the sidelines telling him what to do - and I hadn't played all year," recalled Cody Hawkins, who will make his ninth start of the season today. "I'm glad I didn't have to play and burn the redshirt for one game."

Hype? What hype?

Nebraska quarterback **Joe Ganz** and guard **Matt Slauson** sounded off this week about the Buffs - Ganz saying he hopes to send them home for the postseason and Slauson painting them as "irrelevant."

Cody Hawkins contends it all went right past him.

"I don't watch TV unless I'm watching *Entourage* or *South Park*, so I really haven't heard any of the stuff," he said. "I guess somebody said something out there (in Nebraska). . . ."

"(Slauson) can say that, but I think the best way to go about it is speak softly and carry a big stick. Obviously, he's from Colorado and chose to

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Rocky Mountain News

go somewhere else. So he doesn't feel the same way about this program that a lot of guys here do.

"I know all of our guys are really pumped up and excited about this rivalry (but) people aren't throwing out bulletin board material. Our coaches have made no mistake about how important this game is; they've been talking about it since the preseason. So it's one we're really looking forward to."

Ready for Red

Anthony Perkins, a redshirt freshman safety, figures to be in CU's starting lineup today, opposite true freshman safety **Patrick Mahnke**

Both are Coloradans, and both know the significance of Nebraska.

"It's a rivalry game," Perkins said. "I grew up a (CU) fan, so every year on the day after Thanksgiving, I'd turn on the TV and watch CU-Nebraska. I'm pretty aware of the whole thing."

Subbing for senior **Ryan Walters** earlier in the season, Perkins has played significant minutes against West Virginia, Florida State, Texas and Oklahoma State. He said he merely is "trying to take advantage of every opportunity. . . . Really, just being able to go against the different situations that are going to happen in the course of the game, it's made me better prepared for this week."

Shifting into 'D'

Since late September, CU's offense has lurched more than cruised. The Buffs are last in the Big 12 Conference in every major team statistical category.

"It's been pretty tough," junior fullback **Jake Behrens** said. "A lot of the time we are moving the ball and feel like we have that capability. Then something happens - a dropped pass, a penalty, something that kind of kills our drive."

"We know we've just got to put it all together for one drive and get in the end zone. It's definitely been frustrating at times, but we try to keep regrouping."

Cody Hawkins believes a good game plan has been installed for Nebraska: "The coaches have done an awesome job - this week more so than others. We've had two weeks to prepare and our guys were able to do some different things."

"I think we've got run-pass plays that will get us in the right position to make plays. Our guys are playing with a lot of confidence."

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Rocky Mountain News

CU needs win to make bowl; NU eyes revenge for last year's knockout

By **B.G. Brooks**, Rocky Mountain News ([Contact](#))

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Photo by David Zaubowski / Associated Press

Nebraska quarterback Joe Ganz leaves the field after throwing the second of back-to-back interceptions during the third quarter of last year's 65-51 loss to Colorado at Folsom Field in Boulder. The Huskers, who were knocked out of bowl contention by the Buffs, have a chance to return the favor at Memorial Stadium in Lincoln today, when the rivals meet again.

For Colorado and its fleeting bowl hopes, it's deju vu. For Nebraska, it's an afternoon to pad the resume and celebrate Season 1 of the Bo Pelini regime.

But if desperation shadows the Buffaloes, redemption fuels the Cornhuskers.

Renewing what has been described and debated as a rivalry today at Memorial Stadium, CU finds itself on the same fragile perch it occupied in 2007 - needing a sixth win in the final regular-season game to qualify for postseason play.

Nebraska is already there, having won seven games for the volatile Pelini and is now seeking to polish its bowl attractiveness with win No. 8.

Last season in Boulder also found the Cornhuskers, playing in what would be coach Bill Callahan's final game, a game shy of bowl eligibility.

The Buffs won 65-51, and the Huskers haven't forgotten.

Today, Nebraska quarterback Joe Ganz said this week in the *Lincoln Journal Star*, is "an absolute redemption game for me, for the seniors, for everyone who was a part of it last year.

"That's one thing on our mind - to see how they'll like it, sitting at home watching everyone else play, like we did last year. . . . We want to do everything we can to keep them out of a bowl like we (were) last year."

It's not difficult to see where Ganz & Co. are coming from, but the senior also has some statistical redemption in mind. He passed for 484 yards and four touchdowns last season against the Buffs, but they also intercepted him three times, helping start a 34-0 run that ultimately doomed the Huskers.

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CU defensive tackle George Hypolite hopes to see Ganz intercepted that many times or more today.

"We've got to force turnovers, give our offense easy opportunities on their side of the field," he said. "If we give them opportunities, they'll score some points and make the game easier for all of us."

Statistics indicate the Cornhuskers could be willing participants in the turnover game. Nebraska is in a three-way tie for last in the Big 12 Conference in turnover margin (minus-12) after losing 23 turnovers (13 fumbles, 10 interceptions).

But scoring points has been a seasonlong challenge for this CU offense. The Buffs have averaged only 14.9 points a game in conference play.

Still, quarterback Cody Hawkins believes his offense has practiced well enough during the past 10 days to generate confidence that might not have been apparent on game days punctuated by missed opportunities.

"We're young and able to forget about that stuff," he said. "Our guys are still running around thinking they're awesome and are great playmakers."

"When we come out and play 'good on good' (ones versus ones) in practice, we can get a lot of confidence. We have a great defense."

Memorial Stadium, a blood-red venue on football Saturdays, will be a new experience for most of the Buffs. Today marks coach Dan Hawkins' second trip to Lincoln - CU lost 37-14 here in 2006, his debut season - but the majority of Hawkins' players are underclassmen who either didn't travel then or weren't enrolled.

"You're talking about not that many guys . . . maybe 15 guys who have been there before," he said.

Two who weren't on the 2006 roster are Patrick Mahnke and Anthony Perkins, who will open at the safety positions for CU. Mahnke is a true freshman, Perkins a redshirt freshman. They replace seniors Ryan Walters (ankle, knee) and D. J. Dykes (health issues).

Mahnke, of Mountain Vista High School, believes Ganz and Nebraska's offense "will probably try to come at us. . . . I won't be as nervous this week (as he was against Oklahoma State), but I've heard it's a hard place to play."

Perkins, of Northglenn High School, said he has heard the same thing: "It's going to be a challenge. We're still yet to get a win on the road. It's going to be a challenge just going out and staying focused and taking care of business up there. But it's going to be awesome."

No knock on their offensive teammates, but none of CU's defensive players believe today's game will evolve into the 116-point shootout that occurred last season at Folsom Field.

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Then again, Hypolite said, "It's unpredictable. It could be 77-71. As long as we have the 77, I'm good with that."

The Cornhuskers offense appears to have shifted gears during the past six games and now ranks ninth in the Football Bowl Subdivision in total offense (462.9 yards a game), 13th in passing (289.8 yards a game) and 18th in scoring offense (35.8 points).

"They're very explosive on offense. You've got to deal with calming that down and get some turnovers and be good in the kicking game," Dan Hawkins said.

But he believes his team "has been pretty focused this week. . . . We'll see when the game starts."

CU junior linebacker Shaun Mohler, who initially committed to Nebraska but changed his mind when the Cornhuskers changed coaches, said his defense's first priority is to "always stop the run. We need to make them throw, maybe make some mistakes.

"I feel like our pass defense is going to be all right. But we've got to stop the run."

The Buffs rank ninth in the league in run defense (165.2 yards a game) but are first in pass defense (214.1). The Cornhuskers aren't the ground-pounders that ruled the Big Eight Conference, but their 173.1 yards a game is good for a respectable fifth in the Big 12.

Coupled with Ganz's passing productivity, Nebraska's offense - former CU assistant Shawn Watson is the coordinator - has become a formidable challenge for any defense.

Still, Mohler and his teammates can't believe they'll allow 51 points. "We definitely don't want that on the road," he said. "We need to hold them to zero."

If that happens, the Buffs will have their bowl ticket.

But for Ganz and his guys, even scoring 51 points in a runaway win might not be enough. Redemption for staying at home last postseason apparently demands a very large payback.

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