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2009 Colorado Buffaloes Preview

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Hopes soared at Colorado last summer, and a 3–0 start that included a rousing, nationally televised overtime victory over West Virginia did nothing to deflate them. Things unraveled, though, and if the Buffaloes thought they were snake-bitten, they had ample cause. In 2008, what could go wrong, did go wrong.

By season's end, the battered Buffaloes started a safety with a separated shoulder and an offensive guard who needed shoulder surgery so badly he could barely move, according to head coach Dan Hawkins. That those two were even on the field that cold night in Nebraska epitomized what the program endured.

The Buffs lost a total of 121 player games due to injury or illness. Six players were arrested or cited with charges including off-campus fights, DUIs and first-degree criminal trespass. And receiver Markques Simas and offensive linemen Sione Tau, two players who could have played key roles, especially considering all the attrition, were academically ineligible.

When spring ball commenced, the Buffaloes were a jumpy bunch.

"We're ready to go. We just wish it was September or August instead of spring," offensive lineman Ryan Miller said. "We wish we could strap it up and unleash some of this aggression."

Hawkins is 13–24 in three seasons. He received an extension last September, so it would take a colossal collapse in 2009 for the school to consider a change. Patience among fans is starting to wear thin, though, and the kind of collapse that would prompt change might not be out of the question.

The Buffaloes enter 2009 believing they have the talent to contend in the Big 12, yet they were a one-point win over Kansas State and a goal line stand against Iowa State from going 0–8 in league play. To contend, they need better performances from players and coaches across the board. Keeping players on the field will help, too. The depth is better, yet still lags. A manageable schedule helps, but only 13 seniors on scholarship make leadership pivotal.

After trying a no-huddle scheme that produced the Big 12's worst offense in 2008, coaches in spring said they would emphasize a power-running attack behind a physical offensive line in 2009. The defense is expected to be more aggressive, using a new 3-4 scheme. Maybe those changes will work.


That's the deal with Colorado. In Year 4 of Hawkins' tenure, the search for a successful formula continues.

Quarterbacks

Junior Cody Hawkins has the experience — 23 career starts. Sophomore Tyler Hansen has a stronger arm and better mobility. Hawkins did not improve in 2008 on a solid redshirt freshman season in 2007. His passing yards, touchdowns and wins all dipped. Eleven of his 27 career interceptions have been tipped at the line of scrimmage, and fast, aggressive defenses expose his lack of speed and arm strength. Hansen played in five games as a true freshman, helping engineer a defeat of Kansas State in his debut. But defenses solved him, and Hawkins rallied the team past Iowa State in the 10th game and took the bulk of the snaps from there. Both could play again in 2009, though coaches would like to settle on one guy. If Hansen can overcome Hawkins' experience edge, it'll be his job. That's a big if, though.

Running backs

The Buffaloes believe they are deep and talented at tailback and intend to prove it. Better health from sophomores **Rodney "Speedy" Stewart** (broken leg) and Darrell Scott (knee, ankle injuries) will be pivotal. Stewart was on his way to a 1,000-yard season when he broke his leg at Texas A&M on Nov. 1. He looked good in the spring and is eager to prove his freshman season was not a fluke. Scott battled conditioning and injuries as a freshman, falling short of the hype that followed his signing. He's talented. He just needs to stay healthy and produce. Sophomore Brian Lockridge is back from a sports hernia, and junior Demetrius Sumler is the most experienced of the group.




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Big 12 living up to expectations in football

By Chuck Carlton Dallas Morning News
Thursday, July 2, 2009

Fifteen years after its creation, the Big 12 stands on the brink of fulfilling all the great expectations predicted at its birth.

Back in February 1994, the combination of the Big Eight and many of the top programs from the Southwest Conference seemed like great football synergy.

Texas. Oklahoma. Nebraska. Texas A&M. Colorado. While the conference has been more than competitive since its inception -- producing three outright or shared national champions since it began play in 1996 -- its best may be directly ahead.

There's just one obstacle: the Southeastern Conference. Or maybe two, if you count conventional wisdom.

Florida's 24-14 win gave a factual basis to the perception that the Big 12 wasn't ready to leapfrog the SEC. Ole Miss' 47-34 win over Texas Tech in the AT&T Cotton Bowl Classic also didn't help the Big 12's case.

That said, Texas coach Mack Brown believes the Big 12 has never been more competitive.

"The difference is that the entire league is better," Brown said. "Everybody talks about the SEC. You can actually lose to anybody in this league. That wasn't the case 12 years or probably not even four years ago."

So 2009 might be the year when the Big 12 takes the final step in performance and perception.

"We could be there," said Nebraska athletic director Tom Osborne, who went 255-49-3 and won three national titles as a coach.

He understands the conventional wisdom about the SEC.

"But I tell you it (Big 12) is going to be comparable this year," he said.

Working in the Big 12's favor:

Three teams -- Oklahoma, Texas and Oklahoma State -- will probably open next season in the top 10. And excellence hasn't been limited to a few. Since the conference's formation, eight of the 12 teams have been ranked in the Associated Press poll's top five during November.

The conference featured four of the five vote-getters for the 2008 Heisman Trophy, including winner

Sam Bradford of Oklahoma and runner-up Colt McCoy. Both return this season.

“The offensive firepower and the quarterback capability in the last three years have been tremendous,” Osborne said. “It seemed like every team had a great quarterback and really moved the ball.”

Seven Big 12 players were selected in the first round of this year’s NFL draft, a high-water mark. That total might just be the beginning. Todd McShay’s 2010 mock draft for ESPN, released in late April, suggested the waiting area in New York could resemble a Big 12 media day. His projection: a jaw-dropping nine of the first 10 picks coming from the conference.

Steve Hatchell, the first Big 12 commissioner, remembers the early optimism in the mid-90s.

“I don’t think there was one doubting voice for the present and future strength of the conference,” Hatchell said.

For now, the SEC holds the bragging rights with wins in the last three BCS title games and unmatched fan fervor. Even Osborne acknowledged that he had never seen anything as intense as an in-state recruiting battle between Auburn and Alabama.

“If the benchmark is the SEC, the Big 12 has done great things,” said Tony Barnhart of CBS and the respected Mr. College Football blog. “But they aren’t there yet. The top of the league — Texas and Oklahoma — is very competitive.”

But the conference has a couple of problems in Barnhart’s opinion. One involves the struggles of some traditional powers.

“Texas A&M ain’t Texas A&M, and Nebraska ain’t Nebraska,” he said.

The bottom of the conference could be stronger, Barnhart said, although he noted Baylor’s recent improvement.

Echoing a complaint frequently heard in SEC country, he thinks the defenses need to improve. Texas, at 51st nationally, possessed the Big 12’s best defense.

The conference will get a chance for an early on-the-field statement this season. Oklahoma State hosts traditional SEC power Georgia in its season opener.

It will give a glimpse at how much the conference has evolved since 1996.

Back then, Nebraska and Texas A&M were dominant.

Then Texas hired Brown away from North Carolina in 1998 after a 10-1 regular season. A year later, Florida defensive coordinator Bob Stoops replaced John Blake at Oklahoma. And two historic programs began resurgences that would lead to national titles.

Stoops’ first offensive coordinator in Norman, Okla., an untraditional coach named Mike Leach with an untraditional offense, became the godfather of the passing game that has transformed the conference.

The success of Oklahoma and Texas has caused other teams to increase their resources for football. Texas high school recruits who had bypassed the old Southwest Conference because of its NCAA issues

began returning to state schools. If they left Texas, the primary destinations became other Big 12 schools.

Case in point: The recent revivals at Missouri and Kansas have been fueled by Lone Star recruits.

Then, as now, the ingredients were in place.

“We had a lot of like-minded institutions making the heavy commitment to football,” Hatchell said. “No one is surprised given how good the athletic directors are, how good the coaches, how good the facilities are.”



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WVU looks to avenge OT loss at Colorado

Buffaloes' pay first-ever visit to Mountaineer Field on Oct. 1

By JIM BUTTA, jbutta@newsandsentinel.com

POSTED: July 2, 2009

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BOULDER, Colo.-West Virginia plays the first of five games in the month of October against a University of Colorado Buffaloes team that ended any hope of a Mountaineer run for a national title by dumping a lethargic WVU squad by a 17-14 overtime score in 2008.

Senior quarterback Patrick White (19 carries, 148 yards) and sophomore runningback Noel Devine (26-133) became the first pair of backs to eclipse the 100-yard plateau in the same game against the Buffaloes since the 2002 season, but a missed 23-yard field goal by senior Pat McAfee to open the overtime period doomed the gold and blue to its second loss of the season.

Ironically, the two programs headed in different directions following that game as Colorado proceeded to drop seven of its final nine to fall out of any postseason play while WVU went on to capture a 31-30 win over North Carolina in the Meineke Car Care Bowl.

The following is a breakdown of what Mountaineer fans can expect to see from the Buffaloes in 2009:

Offense (Multiple Set)

The good news for fans of the University of Colorado football is that 10 starters return for the Buffaloes. The bad news is that they are the same ones that ranked No. 95 in total offense (318.5 yards per game) and No. 100 in scoring (20.2), averaging only 124.5 yards per contest rushing (No. 86) and 194.0 passing (No. 81).

Gone from last year's unit are center Daniel Sanders and wide receiver Patrick White, who started eight games in '08.

Returning for his junior season under center is quarterback Cody Hawkins, who completed 183-of-320 attempts for 1,892 yards and 17 touchdowns, but also tossed 10 interceptions, as well as sophomore Tyler Hansen (34-of-65, 280 yards), who finished the spring neck-and-neck with Hawkins for the starting nod.

The running game appears to be in great hands as well with the return of sophomores Rodney Stewart (132 carries, 622 yards) and Darrell Scott (87-343) as well as junior Demetrius Sumler (63-251) and sophomore Brian Lockridge.

Whoever wins the quarterbacking duties will also have an experienced group of receivers led by juniors Josh Smith (29 catches, 387 yards) and McKnight and will have a veteran front line to protect them anchored by junior left tackle Nate Solder (6-9, 300).

Defense (4-3 base)

A major, major concern for the Buffaloes' coaching staff as only five starters return from a unit that ranked No. 78 in total defense in 2008 (381.6 yards per game).

Colorado, which surrendered 166.3 yards per game rushing (No. 86), will have to replace all four starters up front and return cornerbacks Cha'pelle Brown, Jalil Brown and Benjamin Burney from a secondary which gave up an average of 215.3 yards per outing (No. 72).

A plus is the return of inside linebackers Shaun Mohler and Jeff Smart, but things could go bad very quickly for the Buffaloes against a Mountaineer offense which showed marked improvement during Bill Stewart's first year as head coach.

Special Teams

The hero of last year's overtime win, placekicker Aric Goodman, is back

But, other than the 25-yarder he connected on to beat the Mountaineers, the Buffaloes' specialist made good on only 5-of-14 attempts in 2008 and led CU in scoring with a measly 45 kicking points.

Gone is punter Tom Suazo leaving the duties to fifth-year senior Matt DiLallo, who averaged 40.49 yards per punt on 41 attempts a year ago.

The return game appears to be in solid hands with the return of junior Josh Smith