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cu football

Influx of reinforcements buoys Buffs

By Tom Kensler
Denver Post Staff Writer

Article Last Updated: 08/04/2007 11:50:25 PM MDT

Boulder - There's a smart-alecky saying about college football teams coming off a disastrous season: "The good news is they have a lot of starters back. The bad news is they have a lot of starters back."

Second-year Colorado coach Dan Hawkins said he believes it's much better to have 16 returning starters off a 2-10 team than the alternative of starting over from scratch.

"You don't want to be close to getting a raise. You don't want to be close to graduating, but we were close (to winning)," Hawkins said. "We just couldn't quite finish in a few games last year. But I think our leaders know which direction we're going in. There's a lot of momentum. I feel very good about that."

Even if each of the five losses by nine points or fewer had gone the other way, Hawkins wouldn't have done cartwheels over a 7-5 mark. For an eager achiever who averaged almost 11 wins a season in five years at Boise State and never had a losing record in 10 previous seasons as a head coach, 2-10

was tough to take.

That's why, in addition to all the returning experience, Hawkins is excited about the newcomers. Ranked as high as fifth among recruiting classes in the Big 12 Conference and led by Parade All-American offensive tackle Ryan Miller (6-feet-8, 310 pounds) from Columbine, it's a strong, athletic group that can provide help at a variety of positions.

"I talk to the older players all the time and they like a lot of the new guys," Hawkins said. "They're really, really impressed."

Hawkins then goes a step further.

"I really could see maybe eight true freshmen really in the mix," he said.

In Hawkins-speak, "in the mix" means working their way into the two-deep and making an impact. The best part, Hawkins said, is that newcomers can provide an infusion of talent - he likes to use the word "fortify" - in several areas of need. Most freshmen arrived in June to work with returning players and get a jump on class work.

His assessment of the incoming class at key positions:

Wide receiver : "All three freshmen (Kendrick Celestine, Markques Simas and Josh Smith), everybody seems to like a bunch," Hawkins said.

Offensive line : "All those guys are putting up good numbers in the weight room," Hawkins said. "You've got to feel that somewhere, because of our (low)

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numbers at that position, there's going to be one or two or three guys that are going to be in the two-deep."

Defensive line : "You have to feel like somewhere in that D-line area that there's going to be a guy like Conrad (Obi) or Lagrone (Shields), or maybe both, that will emerge there," Hawkins said.

Secondary : "There's some (incoming) talent there," Hawkins said. "Again, because of numbers, some of those guys can help."

Of course, CU also will have a new quarterback. Cody Hawkins, a redshirt freshman who ran the scout team last fall, is competing for the starting job with junior-college transfer Nick Nelson. Last year's starting quarterback, senior Bernard Jackson, was moved in the spring to a "slash" role and will play mostly at wideout or running back.

The only disappointing news in the offseason was the loss of two highly touted junior-college transfers. Running back P.T. Gates, whom Hawkins compared to Reggie Bush in terms of explosiveness, failed to qualify academically and plans to enroll at CU in January. Defensive end Drew Hudgins, a sack specialist, ruptured an Achilles tendon during summer conditioning and might be out for the season.

Losing Gates opens the door for freshman Brian Lockridge to challenge senior Byron Ellis and redshirt freshman Demetrius Sumler for time behind tailback starter Hugh Charles.

"It's not like we had to have that guy," Hawkins said

of Gates, who rushed for 1,338 yards last fall at Saddleback College in California.

"We've got more talent this year," Charles said.

CU/At a glance

Coach: Dan Hawkins, 2-10 at CU, 55-21 overall in six Division I-A seasons

Last year: 2-10, 2-6 Big 12 (fifth in Big 12 North)

Returning starters: OFFENSE (9) - WR Alvin Barnett, Sr.;

FB Maurice Cantrell, Jr.; TB Hugh Charles, Sr.; TE Riar Geer, So.; G Edwin Harrison, Sr.; QB Bernard Jackson, (moved to WR or RB) Sr.; T Tyler Polumbus, Sr.; G Daniel Sanders, Jr.; WR Patrick Williams, Jr. DEFENSE (7) - LB Jordon Dizon, Sr.; SS Lionel Harris, Sr.; DT George Hypolite, Jr.; LB Brad Jones, Jr.; NT Brandon Nicolas, Jr.; FS Ryan Walters, Jr.; CB Terrence Wheatley, Sr.

Key practice dates: Practices begin Monday with newcomers in the morning and veterans in the afternoon; first combined practice is Friday (first day in pads). The public is invited to watch practices through Aug. 18. Morning sessions generally begin by 9:45. Afternoon workouts begin at 4. Scrimmages are set for 10 a.m. on Aug. 12 and Aug. 18 (fan appreciation day); closed scrimmage Aug. 24.

2007 schedule

(Date, Opponent, Time)

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Sept. 1 *Colo. State 10 a.m.

Sept. 8 at Arizona St. 8:15 p.m.

Sept. 15 Florida State 8 p.m.

Sept. 22 Miami, Ohio 1:30 p.m.

Sept. 29 Oklahoma TBA

Oct. 6 at Baylor TBA

Oct. 13 at Kansas St. TBA

Oct. 20 Kansas TBA

Oct. 27 at Texas Tech TBA

Nov. 3 Missouri TBA

Nov. 10 at Iowa State TBA

Nov. 23 Nebraska 10 a.m.

*at Invesco Field at Mile High

Staff writer Tom Kensler can be reached at 303-954-1280 or tkensler@denverpost.com.

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college football

Coachspeak: Q&A with CU's Dan Hawkins

A season lost is experience gained

By The Denver Post

Article Last Updated: 08/04/2007 11:46:33 PM MDT

Editor's note: This is the first in a Sunday series of one-on-one Q&As with Division I football coaches along the Front Range. Denver Post staff writer Tom Kensler sat down with Colorado's Dan Hawkins to discuss the upcoming season and the beginning of August drills.

Post: The toughest part about living through a 2-10 record in your first season in Boulder?

Hawkins: Just not being able to push enough of the right buttons to win more games. I really believe, in every kid and in every team, if you're creative enough and inventive enough and arduous enough, you can eventually find the right buttons to push to get people to achieve. When you don't, that's a humbling thing.

Post: Sounds like you didn't see it coming.

Hawkins: I never do. I really don't. And I'm not just saying that. It's part of my nature of being successful and finding solutions. I don't know that I've gone into

any game thinking, "Well, maybe we can keep it close." By the time the kickoff comes around, I'm pretty firmly convinced that we can win this football game. You never picture (2-10) in your head. That being said, things are going to happen and you just have to continue to adapt.

Post: Other head coaches coming off a 2-10 season might burn the game films. But you've told your team countless times to never forget 2006. Why?

Hawkins: There are a couple of things that successful people do, and I'm trying to teach these guys to be successful - not just in football, but in life. When bad things happen, you need to embrace those things and learn from them. You need to carry that message forward and not say, "Well, it was circumstance," or "Well, I wasn't lucky." To me, that would be a recipe for disaster. If you take all the emotions of adversity and put that in the burner of your soul, you can use that energy to get to a better place.

Post: Anything surprise you during your first tour through the Big 12 Conference?

Hawkins: The strength of the teams, how tough it is to play at places, we knew that coming in. It's more what I learned about the coaches. I knew some of the coaches beforehand, and it's a very solid group of guys - very professional, very collegial, very much interested in getting a Big 12 team in the national championship picture. There is a lot of camaraderie and chemistry and energy in that direction. That's really impressive.

Post: Keys that you'll look for during the next few weeks in the quarterback battle between your son

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Cody and junior-college transfer Nick Nelson?

Hawkins: It comes down to who can move the club and score points. There's obviously the execution part of it. There are things we want to do on offense, being able to have the quarterback do some things mentally. There's always a little chemistry, a little bit of energy with the right person. There's a spark. Great quarterbacks make everybody around them better. So you've got that intangible to it.

Post: Which departed player will be toughest to replace?

Hawkins: That's hard. I guess you'd have to say (defensive end) Abraham Wright on the basis of his production (conference-leading 11 1/2 sacks) as a stand-alone pass rusher. Because we felt Abe always had a chance to get to the quarterback, that allowed us to do some things in pass coverage and not have to bring extra guys.

Post: Without Wright, might we see more blitz packages this season?

Hawkins: Yeah. You've got to pressure the quarterback. You can't just let him stand back there and throw.

Post: Having to play 11 consecutive weeks until the bye before Nebraska can't be ideal.

Hawkins: It's not. You'd love to have an open date about Week 5 or Week 8 or something. But you just get in and go. You have to develop the mind-set that "we go." That being said, what we've typically done with a schedule like this is scale back practice as

time moves along.

Post: Biggest overall concerns entering August drills?

Hawkins: For me, and I've talked to a few of our guys about this, it's that when you're so hungry to win you need to translate that into investing in the process. If you're hungry to win, then don't eat a pizza at 11 o'clock at night when you're trying to cut your body fat. Get eight hours of sleep. I know all of that stuff sounds corny sometimes, but it's really at the heart of the matter. I mean, I could also see another scenario where we get off to a good start and then guys are going, "All right. The schneid is off." It's never off. You need to be mature enough to realize that the score is a result of taking care of all the little details in your life - go to school, watch game film, get enough sleep, do the right things, take care of the details. We really have to continue to hammer on that. I tell people, "You're never there. You're on the way."

Post: Is it easier to convince players at a place such as Colorado that they can win?

Hawkins: I think tradition is big. That's one of the reasons I came here. They've won a national championship. So the media, the fans, the administration, community, alums, people expect that. I used to throw that out at Boise State and they'd say, "What's wrong with you?" But with this school, having accomplished that, it's easy for them to realize last season was just a blip. It's not us. That's not Colorado. That's not who we are.

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