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cu football

## Eric Bieniemy is back with the Buffs

By Natalie Meisler  
The Denver Post

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BOULDER — Up and down, up and down. Colorado's running backs, in full pads, dropped to the ground after nearly each practice this spring, only to get up, run a few steps and drop again. When not suffering through 100 yards of "up-downs," they crawled across the field like tarantulas with extended arms and legs.

Amid the torment, their position coach paced quietly alongside, channeling the image of his CU strength and conditioning coach two decades ago, Jeff "Mad Dog" Madden, a man the players feared during the national championship era as much as anyone except the head coach, Bill McCartney.

Yes, Eric Bieniemy, the dynamic former All-America tailback, is coaching a new stable of Buffaloes, as the team's offensive

coordinator and running backs coach. As he made clear during recently completed spring practice, you do it his way or . . .

"If one person doesn't do it right, the whole group will do it," Bieniemy, 41, said of his draconian drills. "It's all about being disciplined. I learned that from Coach Mac. Regardless of where I have coached or what I learned as a player, discipline is knowing what to do, knowing how to do it and doing it the right way all the time."

If CU's players thought spring ball was tough,

they haven't seen anything yet. Wait until this fall.

"It's funny because they don't know how intense he is," said recruiting coordinator Darian Hagan, who played quarterback when Bieniemy was in the CU backfield.

Much has changed for Bieniemy since those halycon days. Two decades of football and life lessons, as a husband and father, have matured him. "Each and everything that happened in my life happened for a reason," Bieniemy said. "If it wouldn't have happened, it wouldn't have helped shape the person who I've become."

### "Where it all started"

As his NFL career neared its end in 1999, Bieniemy told his wife, Mia, he was returning to Boulder to finish 40 credits

for his degree. It wasn't a condition of employment to join Gary Barnett's CU coaching staff.

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mccartney shot.jpg ormer CU coach Bill McCartney hugs his former player Eric Bieniemy. This was the 1990 Championship team ceremony at the Georgia game. For more photos from the game go to [www.dailycamera.com](http://www.dailycamera.com). Cliff Grassmick / October 2, 2010 (Fort Morgan Times | Cliff Grassmick)

"That was on Mama Fern and me," he said of his mother's No. 1 goal for him. She now lives in Palm Springs, Calif., and he supports her financially.

Bieniemy could have stayed with the Minnesota Vikings last December, as a top assistant on their coaching staff, once he was passed over for the CU head coaching job that went to friend and former teammate Jon Embree. He could have waited and worked to get that dream head coaching gig. Why come back?

"This is where it all started," he said. "Maybe every alum feels this way, regardless of the school you go to. There's something special about this university. A lot of friendships were built here. The foundation of my manhood started here."

He laughs at the suggestion he wasn't always the most responsible young man back in the day.

Instead of avoiding past issues, he has consistently accepted responsibility.

"That's why I don't want these young men to have to encounter all that stuff that I went through. It's learning from mistakes," Bieniemy said. "I'm here to teach these guys how to do it the correct way."

His athletic gifts and charismatic personality made him one of the most electrifying players in CU history. Off the field, he had occasional minor scrapes with the law as a player. And there was a DUI when he returned as an assistant coach in 2001.

"That incident was 10 years ago," he said. "The best thing is that it happened when it did. When you fall down, you either got to get up and correct it or you are going to repeat the mistake. That's the beauty of life, having an opportunity to amend your mistakes."

He points with pride to his two sons and 17-year marriage. And he talks glowingly of the blessing of his eldest son, Eric III, 16, who has cerebral palsy.

"He's the rock of the family," Bieniemy said. "He runs the house. I always tell people, 'Do not feel sorry because my son has cerebral palsy.' We're

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on his schedule. He makes all of the decisions. He's doing great."

He's equally proud of Elijah, 13, his youngest son, who is becoming involved in his own youth sports activities. Bieniemy enjoys being a Pop Warner father and fan but wants no part in coaching Elijah, having politely turned down requests last fall to help.

"The thing about it is I'm just a dad," Bieniemy said. "I'm there to support my son as he supports me on game day."

## **Coach with credibility**

As a CU player, Bieniemy was listed in the media guide at a generous 5-foot-9, but he regularly complained to media relations director David Plati that guys his height at other schools were listed as being much taller. McCartney, meanwhile, taunted him about being 5-6. Which means he has the perfect classroom setting for the Buffs' vertically challenged tailbacks, 5-6 Rodney Stewart and 5-7 Tony Jones.

"We all joke around about our running back corps being kind of short," Jones said. "Since he was a short running back, he stayed low too."

Bieniemy's running backs may tease him now and then, but the fact that he's coached the likes of Vikings star Adrian Peterson and spent nine years in the NFL carries all the credibility he needs.

"He wants us to be the best we can be, every day on the practice field," Jones said. "I'm sure he did the same thing to Peterson (up-downs for fumbling). Coming from the NFL, he knows what it takes. You want to know the best way to get to the NFL, and he will guide you in the best way."

That way includes minimizing mental mistakes, be it fumbling or committing a penalty or running a drill the wrong way.

"Every time we make a lot of mental errors, he lines us up so tomorrow when we come out here we will work harder," Stewart said.

Which is just the way Embree wants it.

"We'll find some guys who can hold on to the ball or understand they will be held accountable when they don't," he said.

And, in case they don't know, CU's running backs might want to get used to being called something other than their first or last names. Bieniemy had a confrontational relationship with former CU five-star recruit Marcus Houston, a running back whom he at times called "Marqueesha."

"I'm sure Adrian and Maurice (Jones-Drew at UCLA) would share a few (nicknames with you)," Bieniemy said. "They had plenty of nicknames for me as well."

To avoid any issues now, he usually calls players by their jersey numbers. And he gives depth charts by numbers, just like an EA video game. After all these years, though, McCartney still gets in the last word with his former star. Speaking before the spring game, McCartney told the Buffs about one of the most inspiring players he had on his 1990 national title team.



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"We had this guy, Eric Bieniemy," McCartney said.  
"He was 5-6 and 195 pounds. He's still 5-6."

Bieniemy's weight, like his legend, has grown  
with the passage of time.

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## Did you know?

*Three things you might not have known about  
Colorado offensive coordinator Eric Bieniemy.*

1. Started his coaching career in 2000 at Thomas Jefferson High School in Denver with his former CU position coach, Oliver Lucas.
2. He fell asleep at a draft party being held in his honor at his mother's house in Aurora in 1991, before San Diego took him in the second round.
3. Was a special-teams captain during his three-team NFL career.



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## Family a force for CU's Jimmy Smith

By John Henderson  
The Denver Post

Posted: 04/24/2011 01:00:00 AM MDT

COLTON, Calif. — Straddling Interstate 10, Colton, Calif., is tucked between the seamy sprawl of San Bernardino and Riverside. Colton (pop. 50,000) is 60 miles east of Los Angeles but seemingly light years away in glamour, glitter and fame.

Old single-floor houses stand hard against trailer homes. Long boulevards are lined with cheap retail stores and Mexican restaurants. Colton, a former railroad town named after the vice president of Southern Pacific Railroad, is a long way from the beach.

"It's a rough neighborhood," Jimmy Smith said. "A lot of gangs. A lot of gang violence. A lot of people get shot and killed all the time."

Later this week, Colorado's former star cornerback will be even further from Colton High School. Physically he'll be near L.A., at his stepfather's house in Downey. But professionally — and he hopes financially — he'll be in another world.

The NFL draft starts Thursday. Smith, a cornerback, is rated by most scouting services as a borderline first-round pick.

Whatever happens, how he got there and how he'll do were shaped in this Inland Empire, where urban renewal spreads wings over a crime wave that can turn boys like Smith into a lifer on the street.

He could very well still be on those streets. He spent time, along with his brothers and mother, in shelters in San Bernardino. His father left the family when he was nine. Jimmy moved in with his brother, Ryan Smalls, when he was 13. His future hung on the thread of a tight family refusing to be torn apart.

"We've been down and out," said Smalls, Colton High's track coach and assistant football coach. "Our story is nothing special. We didn't do anything miraculous. We struggled at times, but we came together as a family."

### Mother is backbone of family

The epoxy in the family was a mother who saw her kids' future shaped by academics, sports and independence — in that order. Terry Webster is a former basketball guard at Bronx (N.Y.) Community College and the daughter of a Queens auto mechanic who made sure she made every after-school activity, from basketball practice to dance.

"Athletics," she said, "is just part of what my family is about."

That's why the celebration this week when Smith is drafted may be subdued. To Webster, a life vocational nurse before going on disability,



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sports have never been a means to an end. They're just that: sports.

"It's exciting," she admitted. "I'm very proud of him. It is the culmination of years of preparation. But with my children, it's always been, 'What college are you going to?' It was never his plan to go to the NFL."

Webster sees college as much a part of her family's life as eating. Five of her kids played college football. Terrence played receiver at Illinois, Ryan played running back and slot receiver at Division III Millikin in Decatur, Ill., Paul played receiver at New Mexico and Anthony played defensive tackle at Northwest Missouri State. Only Paul didn't graduate.

Jimmy's younger brother, Daniel, is a junior cornerback at Colton whom Oregon State is recruiting.

"I had them play football because it gave them structure," Webster said. "I believe with kids, you've got to give them something to do because if you don't give them something to do, the devil's going to give them something to do."

Not wanting that to happen, Smalls took Smith under his wing. Going into ninth grade at San Bernardino High, Smith envisioned himself as a future NBA star. One problem: He was a very short center, though he grew to be a tall cornerback, at 6-foot-2. So, how could he earn an athletic scholarship? Smalls made him a deal.

"I said, 'If you quit football, you have to get straight A's,' " Smalls said. " 'If you play football, I'll let you get B's and C's.' "

## Football is his game

Soon after, he took Smith out to a football field and ran pass patterns against him. Smalls was shocked. Smith traced his every step. One year out of college ball, Smalls couldn't shake him.

"I knew he'd be tall," Smalls said. "I said, 'You listen to me, I promise you'll have the potential to be a first-round draft pick when you're done.' He said, 'Whatever.' "

After Smith's freshman year, Smalls transferred him from San Bernardino High, where the coach just got fired and the football program was a mess, to Colton, where the gang problem was no better but the football program sure was. The predominantly Hispanic Colton was rife with gangs, and fights in the hallway at school were common. With his mom shoving books at him at home and Smalls watching him at school, Smith saw gangs as a spectator sport.

"It was never something I was interested in," he said. "I never wanted to be in a position where someone wanted to shoot me for something."

Smith made all-county and schools came calling. However, any in-state school could save the p hone bill. Goodbye, USC. Forget it, UCLA. Sorry, Cal.

Mom's rule.

"I want you to go far away," she said. "I want you to go someplace else. I want you to experience something, meet different people. Going here is like going back to high school. You'll want to

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come home every weekend, you'll want to hang out, party. No."

NFL teams surely know all this. They also know Smith received two tickets for being a minor in possession and also tested positive for marijuana while at CU. Most predraft projections have him as the third-best cornerback, and probably a second-round pick.

He'll learn soon how the NFL weighs his character. The NFL will learn how much he wants it in coming years.

"I'm proud of Jimmy because he graduated," his mother said. "Now, whatever else you choose to do, that's on you."

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## Solder's field of dreams

Former Buena Vista athlete proactive about becoming first-round NFL pick

0 tweet

Posted: Sunday, April 24, 2011 12:00 am

By TRACY RENCK | [tracyr@chieftain.com](mailto:tracyr@chieftain.com) |

Nate Solder doesn't sound like a person about to go through a life-changing event.

The offensive tackle was calm and composed in discussing the NFL draft that begins Thursday. The former Buena Vista High School and University of Colorado standout is projected by draft gurus to be a first-round pick.

"I'm real excited and a lot of big things happen on draft day, but it is not going to determine whether you are good or not in the NFL," Solder said during a recent phone interview. "It is just a steppingstone."

Solder will become the first person from the Buena Vista school to become an NFL draft pick.

Among the experts projecting Solder as a first-rounder are ESPN's Mel Kiper Jr., Scouts Inc.'s Todd McShay and NFL Network's Mike Mayock.

Solder, however, isn't losing sleep over where they project him.

"I do not pay attention to any of the mock drafts," Solder said. "It would drive me crazy. Everyone is different. I just go about my day-to-day business or I will get caught up in all that stuff. It is not going to help me or hurt me either way, so why pay attention to it."

Projected high draft picks often attend the event at Radio City Music Hall. But Solder does not plan to go, preferring to watch the action unfold at his family's home in Leadville, where they moved after he graduated from high school in 2006.

"I'm just happy for the opportunity to play, and I will play for whatever (team) wants me," Solder said. Solder definitely didn't fly under the radar to get to this point in his football career. Last season, he was named to the Associated Press All-America team, becoming the first CU offensive tackle to earn consensus honors.

Then he turned even more heads at the NFL scouting combine in February in Indianapolis.

Solder recorded the top 40-yard dash time among offensive tackles (5.05 seconds) and also had the best 10-yard split among offensive linemen (1.63 seconds).



His impressive combine results didn't stop there. Solder tied for the third-best vertical jump among offensive linemen (32 inches) and the third-best broad jump (9-foot-2). His one drawback was that he only benched 225 pounds 21 times.

"The last day at the combine was just kind of fun, all the working out," Solder said. "The stuff that is stressful is that they kind of get you running all day. You will be going from psychological evaluations to medical evaluations to interviews; that's what kind of gets stressful. The running on the field was fun. Some teams have told me they will draft me as a right tackle and some have told me they will draft me as a left tackle. It doesn't matter to me at all."

#### Impressing the experts

Solder's strong performance at the combine didn't go unnoticed by the draft experts.

"The biggest thing with him is his ability to move laterally and bend," McShay said to [espn.com](http://espn.com). "He plays high too much of the time and you see him get in trouble when he does. But he's close. If he gets with a good coach, he could be a good starting left tackle for a long time in this league."

Kiper agreed, saying in one of his online mock draft discussions, "Solder is another tackle defined by his athletic frame and ability to move for the position. (Solder is) a player with a massive 6-foot-8 frame who manages good leverage at the point of attack, he gets good surge as a run-blocker and works well to the second level. No injury history and very smart, he should become a solid NFL starter in short order."

On his mock draft, the NFL Network's Mayock compared Solder's ability to recent New York Jets first-round pick D'Brickashaw Ferguson. Ferguson, a left tackle, was the fourth overall selection in the 2006 draft.

"(Solder) reminds me of D'Brickashaw Ferguson in that he's a little bit underpowered, has great feet and an awful lot of upside," Mayock said. "That's value right there."

That's high praise for Solder, who was recruited to CU as a tight end and moved to left tackle in spring 2008.

"Back in 2008, I didn't even know what a pass set was," said Solder, who put on about 85 pounds during his 4 1/2 years at CU. "I always hoped I would be good, but I did not think I would be in the position I am now. I'm so blessed to be here and I'm so happy. . . . The improvements I had throughout the seasons were monumental. . . . So I expect actually more improvement the next few years than I have ever had. I put on weight at CU with consistency in nutrition and work in the weight room. . . . It took my entire time at CU to get to where I am today."

#### Making the grade

Last fall, Solder played every snap on offense for the Buffaloes, grading out at an amazing 94.3 percent. He led the team in knockdown/finishing blocks (142) and touchdown blocks (10). He allowed just one quarterback sack and three pressures and was called for only one penalty.

Academically, Solder is no slouch either. He graduated in May 2010 with a degree in evolutionary and ecological biology and a 3.52 grade point average.

Solder also admitted he has kept a close eye on some NFL players to help improve his game.

"A lot of my techniques and things come from the way I have been coached," Solder said. "But the guys I do watch in the NFL and the guys I have appreciated over time are Jonathan Ogden (Baltimore Ravens), Joe Thomas (Cleveland Browns), Jake Long (Miami Dolphins) and Ryan Clady (Denver Broncos). I watch those guys with a little different eye than a lot of people do because that is my position."

Through all of his success, Solder has not forgotten about his days in Buena Vista.

"I would like to think they are real proud of me and are excited," he said. "It is more for who I am, I think, than it is (for) what I am achieving, and I think that is important. I'm not trying to be a big star going back home or anything. I just want to be me and represent the community the best that I can."

Solder was in Salida on Thursday speaking at a Boys & Girls Clubs of Chaffee County breakfast and Friday he spoke to students at Avery Parsons Elementary School in Buena Vista.

Bob Marken, Solder's football coach at Buena Vista, couldn't be happier for his former player. Solder played tight end, defensive end and linebacker for the Demons.

"Nate was a really good football player for us, and just an outstanding person," said Marken, who has coached football 19 of the 25 years he has been at Buena Vista.

"He was always a real humble kid to the point that I think he did not ever realize how good he was. He was just very much a part of the team and to his credit when he was being recruited, that was never an issue with our team. . . . He was just a great team player. The people of Buena Vista are really proud of him and really excited for him. . . . He is such a humble, great kid it makes everybody want to get behind him."



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