



Four years into his tenure at Colorado, Buffaloes head coach **Mike MacIntyre** firmly believes his Buffs are poised for a breakout year.

MacIntyre, no stranger to rebuilding programs, has plenty of ammunition to support his belief.

For starters, all but a handful of players on this year's roster will be his recruits, players he brought to Colorado to help turn the program back into a consistent winner.

But even more importantly, this year's Buffs will be a team laden with upperclassmen, seniors and juniors who not only have plenty of experience under their belts, but players who have also proven they can play at a Pac-12 level.

"I see 21 seniors on scholarship, 22 juniors on scholarship," MacIntyre said during the spring. "I see guys that are hungry and they've been in the heat of the battle more often. Even the backups have been in the heat of the battle in some really close games. We came out on top of a few of them, now we need to come out of a lot more."

By virtually all measurables, 2015 was a step forward for the Buffs. Colorado doubled its win total from 2014, collected a win over in-state rival Colorado State, ended a Pac-12 win drought by collecting a conference road win, and played straight up with some of the league's top squads.

But it was by no means satisfactory progress for anyone associated with the program, beginning with MacIntyre and his staff. The Buffs came up just short in too many close games last season. Four of their Pac-12 losses were by a combined 20 points, and in three of those games, CU had the lead in the third or fourth quarter — a trend the Buffs are determined to correct this season.

MacIntyre didn't stand pat in the offseason. After former wide receivers coach Troy Walters left to take the job as offensive coordinator at Central Florida, MacIntyre dipped into the well of former Buffs, hiring a pair of former CU standouts to bolster his coaching staff.

First, MacIntyre convinced former Buffs wide receiver **Darrin Chiaverini** to return to his roots. Chiaverini, a central cog in Texas Tech's high-powered offensive scheme, assumed the position of co-offensive coordinator and wide receivers coach with the Buffs, as well as taking on recruiting coordinator duties.

MacIntyre then turned in house, bringing former CU star quarterback (and one-time assistant coach) **Darian Hagan** back to the field. Hagan had been serving as CU's director of player development; MacIntyre put him in charge of the Buffs' running backs. CU also shuffled some duties within the current staff, moving running backs coach **Klayton Adams** to the offensive line and former O-line coach **Gary Bernardi** to tight ends/H-backs.

The new offensive staff didn't take long to have an impact. The Buffs began the process of tweaking their playbook in spring drills, putting a heavy emphasis on increasing the tempo of play. While they didn't have the services of starting quarterback **Sefo Liufau** in the spring — the record-setting QB was still rehabilitating a Lisfranc foot injury suffered late in the 2015 season — they still made solid progress.



QB Sefo Liufau

MacIntyre also made a change in the Buffs' weight room in the offseason, adding **Drew Wilson** to the staff as director of strength and conditioning.

One area MacIntyre didn't have to address in the offseason was the defense — and for good reason. In his first year on the job, defensive coordinator **Jim Leavitt** helped the Buffs take significant strides on that side of the ball, with the Buffs improving in a host of areas:

- ▶ **Points Allowed.** CU's defense shaved nearly two touchdowns per game off its 2014 average, going from yielding 39.0 points per game in 2014 to 27.5 per game in 2015. It was the third-best improvement by any FBS team, and enough to move the Buffs into the top half of the Pac-12 in scoring defense;
- ▶ **Takeaways.** The Buffs moved from 125th in the nation in 2014 to 34th in the nation in 2015 in defensive takeaways. After producing just 11 takeaways the year prior to Leavitt's arrival, the Buffs forced 22 last season (14 interceptions, eight fumble recoveries). The Buffs were also one of just six schools in the nation — and the only Power Five squad — to force at least one turnover in every game;
- ▶ **Pass Defense.** The Buffs moved from 100th in the nation to 59th in passing yards allowed, giving up just 218.2 yards per game in the air, third-best in the Pac-12;
- ▶ **Sacks/Tackles For Loss.** CU recorded six more quarterback sacks and 12 more tackles for loss in 2015, taking important steps forward in those areas;



- ▶ **Total Defense.** The Buffs moved from 11th to sixth in the Pac-12 in total yards allowed, improving by more than 44 yards per game;
- ▶ **Scoring Defense.** In 2014, Colorado allowed 39.0 points per game; that figure dropped to 27.5 last year, with the 11.5-point improvement the fifth-best in Division I (and the third best by a Power 5 school);
- ▶ **Yards Per Pass Attempt.** Opponents averaged just 6.52 yards per pass attempt against the Buffs, the best by a CU team since 2002;
- ▶ **Passes Broken Up.** CU was once again among the nation's leaders in PBUs, as 17 different players combined for 63 breakups.

When you include the 14 interceptions, the 77 represented 18 percent of opponents' throws, the highest percentage since the 2001 Buffs broke up 19.4 percent of their opponents' passes.

That's the good news. The better news is that the vast majority of the players who helped the Buffs improve so dramatically on defense will be back in the fall, as CU lost just three senior starters off the defense: cornerback Ken Crawley, safety Jered Bell and defensive lineman Justin Solis.

After a year of transition playing what Leavitt called a "hybrid," the Buffs will this year work out of a 3-4 base defense, Leavitt's preferred scheme — and he will have experienced players at virtually every position.

In the pass-happy Pac-12, the Buffs should be well-prepared in the secondary. Senior cornerback **Chidobe Awuzie**, a second-team all-conference pick in 2015, figures to vie for conference honors again this year. Awuzie enjoyed an outstanding junior season, finishing with 90 tackles, four quarterback sacks, two interceptions, 10 third-down stops and a forced fumble. Awuzie now has five career sacks, putting him third on CU's all-time list for sacks by a defensive back.

But Awuzie won't be alone in the secondary, as he'll be joined by a host of talented teammates. The list includes a pair of returning starters at safety in **Tedric Thompson** (honorable mention all-Pac-12 last year with three interceptions) and **Ryan Moeller** (47 tackles, one forced fumble and an interception in seven games); plus returning starter **Ahkello Witherspoon** and ultra-talented sophomore **Isaiah Oliver** at corner. Also figuring to see plenty of playing time are junior **Afolabi Laguda** and sophomore **Nick Fisher**.

There's also plenty of talent returning at linebacker. On the outside, junior **Derek McCartney** (70 tackles, five sacks) and senior **Jimmie Gilbert** (47 tackles, six sacks, 10 third-down stops) give the Buffs a good one-two punch. Inside, junior **Addison Gillam** (a Freshman All-American in 2013) looks to return from a knee injury that sidelined him for most of 2015, and he'll be joined by senior **Kenneth Olugbode** (11 starts, 80 tackles and an interception return for a touchdown), **Rick Gamboa** (team-leading 96 tackles) and junior

college transfer **Drew Lewis**.

Up front, the Buffs should also be improved. Along with returning starters **Jordan Carrell** (52 tackles, including eight for loss, and a team-high three forced fumbles) and **Leo Jackson III** (33 tackles, two sacks), the Buffs will have the services of nose tackle **Josh Tupou**, who returns after a year away from the program.

It all adds up to a defense that should not only be improved, but one that could be a difference maker in close games — particularly if they continue to improve in the takeaway department.

"I expect that unit to improve again," MacIntyre said. "We have a lot of talent on defense. We have depth in the secondary, depth at the linebacker position and depth on the defensive line. They guys have played a lot, they are stronger, they understand the game and have been in a lot of battles. Maybe not as big of a jump as we made last year, since we were so far away from where we needed to be, but I would say relative to where we ended up I think we should get better at defense this year."

Two years ago, it was CU's offense that made the huge jump. Last year, however, injury woes across the offensive line made improvement difficult. CU started an astounding nine different offensive line combinations in 2015, with only one player — center **Alex Kelley** — starting the same position in all 13 games.

Still, despite the lack of continuity up front, the Buffs did hit the 300-point mark for the third straight season, the first time the Buffs have managed to do so since 2001-03. They also continued their trend of solid ball security, a MacIntyre trademark. In his three seasons in Boulder, CU has lost just 24 fumbles, the best such stretch in Buffs history.



SS Tedric Thompson



The good news on the offensive line is that almost all of those players who gained experience a year ago will be back, as CU's only loss up front was starting tackle Stephane Nembot. His departure, though, should be negated a great deal by the return of starting left tackle Jeromy Irwin, who missed most of last year with a knee injury. Irwin is being touted as a player with NFL potential, and if the Buffs can stay healthy up front this year, they should be much improved there.

In terms of graduating players, there's no doubt where the Buffs' biggest loss — on either side of the ball — occurred. Gone is wide receiver Nelson Spruce, the all-time Pac-12 leader in receptions who set 42 school records. But the Buffs do have some capable receivers to pick up the slack, beginning with junior **Shay Fields** (42 catches, 598 yards, four TDs). Also figuring to bump up their numbers will be junior **Devin Ross** (25-324, two TDs), junior **Bryce Bobo** (24-207) and tight end Sean Irwin, an honorable mention all-conference pick a year ago (15-248 and team-leading 16.5 yards per catch). Also figuring to make an immediate impact are junior college transfers **Juwann Winfree** and **Kabion Ento**.

While the Buffs haven't had a dominant go-to running back in recent years, it doesn't mean they haven't been able to run the ball. CU had six players last year with 200-plus rushing yards, led by junior **Phillip Lindsay** (140 carries for 680 yards, six touchdowns). Expected to push Lindsay for the starting spot will be juniors **Donovan Lee** and **Michael Adkins II**. Lee moved to running back from wide receiver midway through last season and showed breakaway potential while Adkins started the season with 209 yards and three TDs in his first two games before a hamstring injury sidelined him for the rest of the season.



TB Phillip Lindsay

The biggest question for the Buffs may have been at quarterback. Liufau appears to have fully recovered from his injury, which means the Buffs will have a record-setting quarterback at the helm (75 and counting). The CU senior already owns CU's career record for completions (688), completion percentage (62.9) and total offense (7,842); and is just 14 yards away from owning the career yardage mark, as well as 122 attempts and 12 touchdown passes away from being the all-time CU leader in those categories. Behind Liufau is senior **Jordan Gehrke** and redshirt freshman **Steven Montez**, both of whom had solid springs working in the revamped offense.

The Buffs should be solid on special teams this year. Back for his sophomore season is punter **Alex Kinney**, who set CU freshman records last season for kicks inside the 20 (23), inside the 15 (17) and inside the 10 (nine). Senior kicker **Diego Gonzalez** also returns after a season in which he connected on 18 of 29 attempts, including two of three tries from 50-plus yards out.

After a year in which the Buffs played 13 straight weeks — the season began with a road trip to Hawai'i — they return to a more "normal" schedule this season. Colorado opens under the lights Sept. 2 (Friday night) against Colorado State in Denver, followed by the Sept. 10 home opener versus Idaho State.

Then, never a stranger to squaring off against tough non-conference foes, the Buffs continue that tradition on Sept. 17 with a game at Michigan.

This year, the Buffs get the "plus side" of the Pac-12's unbalanced nine-game schedule, meaning they get five conference games at home. Scheduled to visit Folsom Field are Oregon State, Arizona State, UCLA, Washington State and Utah. Their four road games will be at Oregon, Southern California, Stanford and Arizona.

CU will also enjoy a bye week this year, taking the weekend of Oct. 29 off before returning to action the following Thursday (Nov. 3) for a nationally televised home game against UCLA.

One major difference in the Buffs lineup this year? Try the radio booth. Legendary play-by-play man and color commentator **Larry Zimmer** called it a career in 2015, stepping away from the microphone after calling 42 seasons of Colorado football (486 games in all, including CU's season finale at Utah).

His replacement, however, is no stranger to Buffs fans. Former CU coach **Gary Barnett**, who led the Buffs to the 2001 Big 12 championship, will step in alongside **Mark Johnson** in the radio booth.

Colorado fans would like nothing better than to hear Johnson and Barnett call a year that would see the Buffs return to the postseason. The Buffs will need at least six wins to become bowl eligible, but MacIntyre has repeatedly said his players have more than that on their minds.

"We want to win a Pac-12 Championship — that's what we want to do," MacIntyre said in the spring. "If you win, that that takes care of the other stuff. Our kids, that's what we shoot for and we shouldn't shoot for anything less. That's what our kids believe, that's what we're shooting for, what we're trying to do. If you're not trying to do that and work at it then you're not doing what you should be."