



CU'S 1990 NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP



The 1990 edition of the University of Colorado football team accomplished two of the biggest “firsts” in its storied history. The Buffaloes played the nation’s toughest schedule and posted an 11-1-1 record overall, with the win over Notre Dame in the Orange Bowl cementing the school’s first national championship. For the second straight year, CU logged a 7-0 record in league play, marking the first time that the Buffs had claimed the Big Eight Conference title in back-to-back years.

Colorado had flirted with the national championship just one season earlier, owning an 11-0 regular season record and entering the Orange Bowl ranked as the nation’s No. 1 team. A 21-6 loss to Notre Dame, however, ended CU’s dream season and the Buffs finished No. 4 in the national polls. Little did anyone know at the time that the Buffaloes would have the chance to redeem themselves.

Questions prior to the start of the 1990 season included, “What do you do for an encore?” and “Is Colorado for real or was last season a fluke?” Coach Bill McCartney didn’t set winning the national championship as the team goal; winning back-to-back Big Eight titles was what he wanted his men to aim for. Shooting for all the marbles includes too many variables that are out of a team’s control, while one holds its own destiny in pursuit of a league title. McCartney was not the kind to set a national title as a goal, anyway.



Joe Garten

In the Associated Press preseason poll, the Buffs were ranked No. 5; it’s first opponent, Tennessee in the Disneyland Pigskin Classic, was ranked No. 8.

Colorado overcame three first-quarter turnovers against the Volunteers (that was almost one-fourth of the entire turnover total of the season before) to lead 24-10 early in the fourth quarter. The Buffs couldn’t sustain the lead, and Tennessee caught CU with the game ending in a 31-31 tie.

In game two, Eric Bieniemy scored on fourth-and-goal from the one with 12 seconds remaining to give CU a 21-17 win over Stanford. This was alarming in that Stanford had the worst record in 1989 of the five non-league teams on CU’s schedule, along with the fact that the Cardinal led 14-0 at halftime and had stifled the high-powered CU offense.

Illinois dealt CU what proved to be its only loss of the season on Sept. 15, as the 23-22 defeat to the Illini sent the Buffs reeling to No. 20 in the polls. A game that Colorado should have won (CU led, 17-3, in the second quarter) turned into a loss and gave CU a 1-1-1 start. Talk of 1989 being a fluke started to surface, that CU had won only because of emotion in response to the death of quarterback Sal Aunese.

The next two games put the Buffaloes back on track, and ended talk that Colorado was not for real. A 29-22 win at No. 22 Texas, with CU rallying from a 22-14 deficit early in the fourth quarter, was the game that McCartney and the team pointed to as the turning point of the season. Then a 20-14 win over No. 12 Washington a week later reinforced the national opinion of the Buffaloes, as CU took over the No. 12 spot in the polls after its defeat of the Huskies.

Colorado came through the fierce non-league portion of its schedule with a 3-1-1 record and prepared to defend its Big Eight crown earned the season before. The Buffs topped Missouri, 33-31, in their league opener amid controversy of the now famous “fifth down.” CU’s Charles Johnson scored the game-winning touchdown as time expired on what turned out to be fifth down. The play, created through an incredible mistake by the officiating crew, and unnoticed by Missouri game administration and virtually everyone in the



Kanavis McGhee



Eric Bieniemy

stadium, tainted the CU win and hurt the Buffs' image. Even though the Buffs defeated Iowa State, 28-12, the following week, Colorado had dropped back to No. 14 in the rankings though it sported a 5-1-1 record.

Still, the Buffaloes were off to a 2-0 start in league play, and improved to 3-0 with a 41-10 drubbing of Kansas at Lawrence in week three of the Big Eight season. The win pushed CU back into the top 10 (No. 10), with the "Big Reds" next up on the schedule.

Colorado knocked off Oklahoma, ranked No. 22 nationally, 32-23 to deal the one-time fourth-ranked Sooners their third straight defeat. The Buffs trailed, 14-6, late in the first half, with OU in position to kick a field goal. Greg Thomas skied to block the attempt, and quarterback Darian Hagan took over to lead the Buffs to a touchdown right before the halftime gun. Bieniemy broke free for a 69-yard TD run in the third quarter, and the Buffs pulled away in the final 15 minutes to dispose of the first of the Big Reds.

A week later, Colorado, now No. 9, traveled to Lincoln and defeated No. 3 Nebraska, 27-12, in rainy, cold and windy conditions. Bieniemy overcame five fumbles to score four touchdowns in the fourth quarter to rally the Buffaloes to the win. The end result was that Colorado had defeated both Oklahoma and Nebraska for the second straight year, and in back-to-back weeks, no less. The Buffs, with an 8-1-1 record, zoomed to No. 4 in the nation in the polls, and needed just one win in their last two games to get back to the Orange Bowl.

The Buffs steamrolled both Oklahoma State (41-22) and Kansas State (64-3) to finish the regular season at 10-1-1. The wins also marked the second straight year that CU took the Big Eight title with an undefeated 7-0 record in league play.



CU's National Title Display at the College Hall of Fame

When Penn State knocked off Notre Dame hours after CU's win over K-State, the Buffs became the nation's new No. 1 team. Thus, as was the case in 1989, the Buffaloes entered the Orange Bowl to defend the nation's top ranking against Notre Dame, the team that lost to hand CU the No. 1 claim.

Colorado had the rare chance to play for the national championship a second straight year, and this time around, the Buffs made the most of their opportunity. Colorado overcame the loss of Hagan and Kanavis McGhee to injuries in the first half, taking the lead for good in the third quarter in defeating the Irish, 10-9. The win kicked off a wild celebration by some 20,000-plus CU fans in Miami and hundreds of thousands back home in Colorado.

McCartney's ninth Colorado team attained its goals of claiming the Big Eight title in back-to-back years, and surpassed it by winning the national championship. In the process, CU established itself among the elite in college football.



Alfred Williams

FINAL ASSOCIATED PRESS POLL

	Record	Points
1. Colorado (39)	11-1-1	1,475
2. Georgia Tech (20)	11-0-1	1,441
3. Miami, Fla. (1)	10-2-0	1,388
4. Florida State	10-2-0	1,303
5. Washington	10-2-0	1,246
6. Notre Dame	9-3-0	1,179
7. Michigan	9-3-0	1,025
8. Tennessee	9-2-2	993
9. Clemson	10-2-0	950
10. Houston	10-1-0	940
11. Penn State	9-3-0	907
12. Texas	10-2-0	887
13. Florida	9-2-0	863
14. Louisville	10-1-1	775
15. Texas A&M	9-3-1	627
16. Michigan State	8-3-1	610
17. Oklahoma	8-3-0	452
18. Iowa	8-4-0	370
19. Auburn	8-3-1	288
20. Southern Cal	8-4-1	266
21. Mississippi	9-3-0	253
22. Brigham Young	10-3-0	246
23. Virginia	8-4-0	188
24. Nebraska	9-3-0	185
25. Illinois	8-4-0	146