



# MASCOT/NICKNAME



The University of Colorado has one of the more unique mascots in all of intercollegiate athletics, a real buffalo named Ralphie. The tradition celebrated its 50th anniversary during the 2017 season.

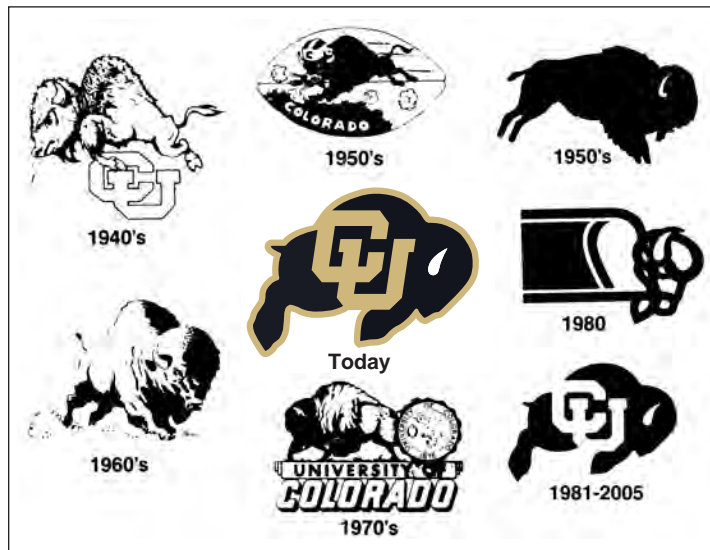
The live buffalo leads the football team out on the field both at the start of the game and second half. It is truly one of the special sights that exist anywhere in college or professional sports, especially for opposing teams, who often stop in their tracks watching the massive buffalo round the end zone and head directly at their sideline.

The buffalo first appeared in 1934, three weeks after a contest to select an official school nickname by the *Silver & Gold* newspaper had come to an end and "Buffaloes" was the winning entry. For the final game of the '34 season, a group of students paid \$25 to rent a buffalo calf along with a real cowboy as his keeper. The calf was the son of Killer, a famed bison at Trails End Ranch in Fort Collins. It took the cowboy and four students to keep the calf under control on the sidelines, a 7-0 win at the University of Denver on Thanksgiving Day.

Prior to 1934, CU athletic teams usually were referred to as the "Silver and Gold," but other nicknames teams were sometimes called included Silver Helmets, Yellow Jackets, Hornets, Arapahoes, Big Horns, Grizzlies and Frontiersmen. The student newspaper decided to sponsor a national contest in the summer of 1934, with a \$5 prize to go to the author of the winning selection. Entries, over 1,000 in all, arrived from almost every state in the union. Athletic Director Harry Carlson, graduate manager Walter Franklin and Kenneth Bundy of the *Silver and Gold* were the judges.

Local articles first reported that Claude Bates of New Madrid, Mo., and James Proffitt of Cincinnati, Ohio, were co-winners for the prize as both submitted "Buffaloes" as their entry. But 10 days later, the newspaper declared Boulder resident Andrew Dickson the winner, after a follow-up revealed his submission of "Buffaloes" had actually arrived several days before those of the original winners. Through the years, synonyms which quickly came into use included "Bisons," "Bufs," "Thundering Herd," "Stampeding Herd," "Golden Avalanche," and "Golden Buffaloes."

Live buffaloes made appearances at CU games on and off through the years, usually in a pen on the field or sometimes driven around in a cage; in the 1940s, the school kept a baby buffalo in a special pen at the University Riding Academy. The first named buffalo was "Mr. Chips," who appeared for the first time at the 1957 CU Days kickoff rally, as



supporter Mahlon White donated him to the school, and it was cared for by a men's honorary.

A few years passed between a live mascot on the sideline and the tradition Colorado fans have come to know so well. In 1966, John Lowery, the father of a CU freshman from Lubbock, Texas, donated to the school a six-month old buffalo calf from Sedgewick, Colo., and first appeared on Oct. 1, 1966 when the Buffs defeated Kansas State, 10-0.

For a while, she was billed as "Rralph," but the origin of the name is in some doubt. Some say it was given by the student body after sounds she allegedly made while running and snorting; others say it was named for Ralph Jay Wallace, the junior class president at the time; and the original handlers will tell a third version. Regardless, an astute fan soon discovered that the buffalo was in fact a female, thus the name alteration to **Ralphie**.

The initial tradition was for CU's five sophomore class officers to run the buffalo around the stadium in a full loop. They would pick her up from caretaker C.D. "Buddy" Hays, who kept her at the Green Mountain Riding Stables during the season at Hidden Valley Ranch in the off season. The officers would run her for two hours in the morning to tire her a bit to keep her under control by the time the game started. At the conclusion of the run, the fans would break into the "Buffalo Stomp," which would literally shake the stadium in deafening fashion as the team took the field. But CU officials soon had the tradition stopped because of the actual physical damage it was causing.

Around that same time, head coach Eddie Crowder was approached with the idea the charging buffalo running out on the field before the game with the team behind right her. Crowder thought it was a great idea, and the debut of this great tradition took place on Sept. 16, 1967, and was celebrated with a 27-7 win over Baylor and the tradition was here to stay. The five sophomores appointed themselves as the board of directors of a fundraising effort to bring Ralphie to the '67 Bluebonnet Bowl in Houston, raising the necessary money through selling stock. (Eventually, those who had training in working with a wild animal eventually replaced the sophomores.)

Ralphie attended every CU home football game for 13 years (including all bowls), and retired at the end of the 1978 season. CU's first Ralphie achieved nationally celebrity status, and was even kidnapped in 1970 by some Air Force Academy students as well as being named the school's 1971 Homecoming Queen at the height of the anti-establishment era.

In 1976, The Bank of Boulder and its president Steve Bosley, proposed to Crowder they would do a fundraiser to send Ralphie I to the Orange Bowl Game with Ohio State.





When a reporter asked Bosley how Ralphie would travel to Miami, he explained that the information was top secret since CU was concerned that Ohio State students would try to kidnap (or “buffalo-nap”) Ralphie. The story of the potential “buffalo-napping” made newspapers nationwide, featuring a picture of Ralphie in full charge with her handlers. The story stimulated over \$25,000 in donations. Ralphie’s trip to the Orange Bowl cost \$2,500, and the balance was put into a fund for Ralphie’s future care.

In 1978, when the original Ralphie became ill, Bosley organized a search for a new buffalo headed by Buddy Hays. Hays discovered a calf named Moon, short for Moonshine, which was owned by Gregg Mackenzie. Bosley, The Bank of Boulder, and bank director Robert Confer bought Moonshine from Mackenzie for \$1,000 and donated her to the university. Since “Ralphie” had become the well-known and popular name of the buffalo, then-athletic director Eddie Crowder made it permanent.

**Ralphie II** made her first appearance at CU’s final home game of the 1978 season. At age 12, after serving the Buffs for 10 years, she passed away on Sept. 19, 1987, following a 31-17 CU win over Stanford.

**Ralphie III**, donated by the C-Club, was pressed into action earlier than anticipated, as she had been in training for the 1988 season. Originally named “Tequila,” she made her debut on Nov. 7, 1987, when the Buffs beat Missouri, 27-10. After over 10 years of service, she passed away in January 1998, at the age of 13.

**Ralphie IV** was donated to the university by media and sports entrepreneur Ted Turner in 1998. Born in April 1997 on the Flying D Ranch in Gallatin Gateway, Montana, which is a part of Turner Ranches, she was named “Rowdy” by ranch hands. She was separated from her mother when she was about a month old and was literally found in the jaws of a coyote with bite marks around her neck. She survived the attack and was bottle-fed by the hands for four months. She was released back to the herd but wouldn’t bond with them, so the ranch hands took her back in and fed her grasses and grain. It was then that she was donated to CU as a yearling early in the spring of 1998.

John Parker, who trained and housed both Ralphie II and III and supervised the early training of Ralphie IV, retired after 12 years of



**Ralphies IV and V together in November 2007**

service as caretaker in May 2000. His assistant, Ted Davis, assumed the program duties for the next year, while long-time CU supporters Dale and Lynn Johnson housed Ralphie for the following season.

In 2001, two former Ralphie Handlers and CU graduates, Ben Frei and Kevin Priola, took over as volunteer directors of the program. Together they coordinated the selection and managing of up to 15 student handlers along with all aspects of training. The overall program was managed from 1994-2013 by Gail Pederson, the CU Athletic Department’s Chief of Staff.

Ralphie IV made her debut against Colorado State at Mile High Stadium in Denver on September 5, 1998. She appeared at six bowl games and four Big 12 Championship games. In November 2007, “Ralphie’s Salute To A New Era” was held, where Ralphie IV was semi-retired and a 14-month old **Ralphie V** was officially introduced to the public. Ralphie IV’s last game was the 2008 season opener, as she led CU on to the field one last time, again versus CSU in Denver. She died on March 19, 2017, due to liver failure just one month shy of turning 20.

Ralphie V, known as “Blackout,” (she was the darkest calf in the herd), also from a Ted Turner Ranch, the Vermejo Park Ranch in New Mexico, was donated to the university in January 2007 as a 325-pound, four-month old calf. She made her debut on April 19, 2008 at CU’s annual spring game (which drew a record 17,800 spectators) and her regular season debut five months later on Sept. 6 at Folsom Field. She will be 12 years old this September and has reached full maturity, weighs in at approximately 1,200 pounds and as with all buffalo, can reach speeds up to 25 miles per hour (which she reached during her run around Folsom Field).

The Ralphie Live Mascot Program as it is formally known is currently under the direction of program manager John Graves, longtime coach Ben Frei and assistant coach Taylor Stratton, all of whom were handlers when they were CU students.

**RALPHIE STATS:** The five Ralphies have led the Buffaloes on to the field for 348 games (not including spring games): 293 home games, 24 bowl games, 18 Rocky Mountain Showdowns in Denver, nine regular season road games and four Big 12 Championship games.

**NOTE:** In 2016, President Barack Obama signed into law a bill that declared the bison as the official “National Mammal of the United States.”

