A Mountain, or a Moment: The Season of 26’

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The stars of the 26’ CU football season; Deion Sanders, Issac Wilson, Julian Lewis, Boo Carter, Micha Welch, & Charlie Williams.

Including icons of the past; Shedur Sanders, Travis Hunter, & Bill McCartney.

Football at Folsom has always been, and will always be, a cultural cornerstone to The University of Colorado Boulder. From 1982-1994, Bill McCartney was at the helm of the program and guided the Buffaloes through great adversity to eventually summit the college football world. In 1990 the Buffs won the National Championship. From that moment on, CU football was forever cemented as a legendary college football program that once climbed the mountain of greatness. Between the years of 1995-2022, CU’s football program fell off the cliff of glory, and into a valley of mediocracy. They retained 7 different head coaches including 4 interim head coaches, who produced a lackluster overall record of 142 wins, and 175 losses during this 27 season stretch (static.cubuffs.com).

To find out more about this troubling time period, I interviewed Coach Mike Sanford who was the interim head coach for CU prior to Coach Prime’s entry in 2023. Sanford told me; “Some of the best years that I feel like I ever had coaching, one of them being at CU in 2022, were the years that on paper were terrible.” In ‘22 CU posted a 1-11 record marking a program all time low. Coach Sanford spoke about how despite success not being a primary theme for the Buffs during this time, the positive energy and impact that playing at Folsom Field brought to those involved, is something that can show an individual what really matters most to them.

The landscape of college sports began to shift in 2021 due to the implantation of *NIL* (the legal right for college athletes to make money off personal branding [espn.com]), and the *one-time transfer rule* (allowing athletes to transfer once without having to forfeit eligibility [ncaa.org]).

While powerhouse universities such as Georgia and Alabama took off running due to these new NCAA rules, this shifting landscape did not immediately benefit programs like CU. Coach Sanford explained that CU struggled to adapt to this new environment; “We did not have it right in 2022 like at all, – It was one of those things like ‘oh well see, well figure it out when it becomes a reality’ like no, it's a reality. We're playing a bunch of teams that are paying their guys six figures and sub seven [salaries]. – We had no NIL money, literally 0 dollars in the CU bank account for NIL.” CU football was in dire need of significant change while being forced to adapt to the NIL and transfer portal era. Athletic Director Rick George, hired Deion Sanders from Jackson State in 2023 with hopes that CU football could become legendary once again.

Coach Prime brought both Hall of Fame experience, and impactful players to the program in ‘23 such as Shedur & Shilo Sanders, Cam'Ron Silmon-Craig, and Travis Hunter who went on to win the Heisman trophy in 2024 as a Buff himself. Despite these impactful changes, Coach Prime held an overall record of 16 wins, and 21 loses from 2023-2025. Prime’s winning percentage of 43.2% had not rivaled McCartney’s 62.8%, or even impressed upon the 27 season coaching turnover stretch of 44.8%.

While *The Prime Effect* (colorado.edu) might have brought about excitement, it hasn't brought about significant change on the football field itself. With 2026 marking coach Prime’s 4th year, which is typically when the grace period of criticism ends for a college football coach, Deion had decided to start from scratch yet again, specifically from the coaching standpoint. Most notably, Prime replaced Defensive Coordinator Robert Livingston, for Chris Marve from Virginia Tech, and Offensive Coordinator Pat Shurmur, for Brennan Marion from Sacramento State. These changes were the reasons why publications such as the *Daily Camera* called the ‘26 season a “hard reset” and a “turnaround time” (dailycamera.com) for this season. In terms of the players, media influencers and online commentators created the narrative that this CU team was “too small” and “undersized” ahead of this year (si.com).

After a ‘no-phone’ boot camp in Colorado Springs (cubuffs.com), and a strenuous pre-season training camp taking place throughout the month of August, Julian Lewis and Brennan Marion's ‘Go-Go offense’ (footballgameplan.com) along with coach Prime and his revamped roster, were set to take on the immense challenges that the 2026 schedule presented (fbschedules.com).

The first stop for the ‘26 Buffaloes was Atlanta Georgia as they faced off against Georgia Tech in Bobby Dodd Stadium at Hyundai Field. The general expert consensus (cbssports.com) was a 31-24 or 30-23 victory for Georgia Tech. Analysts heavily favored the Yellow Jackets' rushing attack, led by Michigan transfer Justice Haynes, anticipating they would exploit Colorado’s historically weak run defense. Most experts predicted Georgia Tech to lean heavily on their ground game to ease an unproven transfer quarterback in Alberto Mendoza.

Chris Marve's defense immediately proved the experts wrong as new stars emerged for the Buffs. Transfer edge rusher Lamont Lester Jr. wreaked havoc on the defensive line, racking up three sacks in his impressive Power Four debut. Additionally, Colorado's rushing attack was effective, tallying 183 yards on the ground, led by Damian Henderson II (65 yards) and Micah Welch (58 yards, 1 TD). Georgia Tech certainly struggled in this week-one matchup as their lone touchdown came via a 100-yard kickoff return by Rahkeem Smith.

Although the highlight moment in this game was when Colorado was trailing late in the fourth quarter. Julian Lewis engineered a clutch 75-yard drive, culminating in a 20-yard touchdown pass to Charlie Williams with just 41 seconds remaining to take a 14–13 lead.

Mendoza quickly moved the Yellow Jackets down the field into field-goal range, and with 3 seconds left, Georgia Tech attempted a potential walk-off 35-yard field goal, but Boo Carter (Tennessee transfer) blocked the kick to secure a dramatic victory for the Buffaloes. This game kicked off the college football season entirely, and a buzz began to brew in Boulder. After the game coach Prime read out the stat line to the media and chastised the pre-season narrative; "I thought we were small?" (youtube.com)

Buff faithful welcomed their 1-0 team with enthusiasm as their home opener took place on September 12th, at Folsom Field. With Weber State being an FCS (Football Championship Subdivision) school, the Buffs were heavily favored in this one.

JuJu orchestrated an explosive first half, throwing four touchdowns and rushing for another. Micha Welch added 106 rushing yards, becoming the first 100-yard rusher of the Deion Sanders era and the Buffs won in week 2, 52-21. Despite the 31-point victory and 578 total yards of offense, Coach Prime expressed dissatisfaction with his team's execution and 13 penalties. Coach Prime knew these small mistakes were going to catch up with them eventually.

In the locker room after the game, Prime told his team; "Some of y'all are satisfied with that? You definitely aint no dawg, you aint no killa, and you definitely ain't no pro, if you could be satisfied with that." (youtube.com)

The Buffs then traveled to Evanston Illinois, to face off against 1-0 Northwestern on September 19th. Experts and analysts were largely divided in the pre-game. Sportsbooks favored Northwestern as a 3.5-point favorite going into the matchup (fanduel.com) They predicted the Wildcats to have an 80.3% win probability, but thought that Colorado could keep the game close and maybe pull off an upset like they did in week one.

Northwestern absolutely dominated Colorado 41-7, handing the Buffaloes their first loss of the season. CU was plagued by self-inflicted miscues, turning the ball over multiple times (up to

seven total possessions ending in turnovers or on downs) which Northwestern heavily capitalized on. Wildcat QB Aidan Chiles accounted for five total touchdowns (three passing, two rushing) and their offense racked up a total of 423 yards.

This game was truly a turning point in the '26 season as Coach Prime witnessed multiple players not taking the loss to heart and decided to cut three players from the roster right then and there. CU officially confirmed the dismissal of three cornerbacks.

Jah Jah Boyd, Justin Eaglin, and Paul Omodia were cut from the roster in the wake of these conduct issues (foxnews.com).

This loss made the first two wins look like somewhat of a mirage because it exposed severe self-inflicted mistakes, ended their undefeated start, and triggered internal fallout. Buff Faithfull began to feel uneasy prior to their week 4 matchup against Baylor and the emotions in Boulder were palpable. Even though they were 2-1 entering into Big 12 play, 'buff faithful' was quickly turning into 'buff doubtful' as the CU fan base had been used to watching their team crumble the second one thing went wrong.

Regardless, on September 26th, the Buffs traveled to Waco Texas and looked to turn the tide against Baylor. Colorado entered Waco as a heavy 9.5-point underdog (sports.yahoo.com). Additionally, Baylor was bringing back their star quarterback in DJ Lagway after he suffered an ankle injury in week one.

Julian Lewis struggled in the first half of this game, completing 11 of 16 passes for 75 yards and taking three sacks leading to a halftime score of 10-3 in favor of the Bears. A key word to describe this performance would be 'indecisive'. For this reason coach Prime decided to bench JuJu at halftime and replaced him with Issac Wilson. With a 95-yard, 12-play drive capped by Wilson connecting with wide receiver Joseph Williams for a 17-yard touchdown, the game was tied at 13 with 11:04 remaining in the fourth quarter.

Sadly, the Bears bounced back with a 5-play, 65-yard drive. DJ Lagway threw a 33-yard touchdown pass to Jadon Porter to reclaim the lead at 20-13 with 9:02 left. Baylor then forced a stop and extended their lead to 23-13 on a 54-yard field goal, later running out the clock deep in Colorado territory. CU was now 2-2.

Fans and experts alike began to connect some unfortunate dots. The wheels of the '26 season were starting to fall off the wagon. I was seeking answers myself so I interviewed lead sports anchor and reporter for CBS News Colorado, Romi Bean, and asked her what was going on behind the scenes. She told me; "It's one of those things that Sean Payton says 'confidence is born out of demonstrated ability.' As cliche as it sounds, – that inability to transfer it over on

gameday has been something that I think is really hurting this team." As someone who does a weekly show with Coach Prime titled "*Coach Prime's Playbook*," (youtube.com) Romi's insight was very telling. When talking about the key problems that led a 2-0 team to a 2-2 season, Bean explained; "The hardest part has been seeing a team that is struggling to capitalize in the biggest moments. When they need that touchdown, when they need points before the half, when you need a turnover, ya know its little things."

In a time of controversy, Colorado was finally coming home, but the Buffs were set to face-off against 12th ranked Texas Tech who maintained an undefeated 4-0 record. The Raiders looked to spoil CU's Homecoming week as experts widely expected Texas Tech to win comfortably. With the Buffs offensive struggles and unsettled quarterback situation, Colorado's only path to victory seemed to be through forcing turnovers (sports.yahoo.com). Although the home field advantage had historically favored the Buffs in this matchup, with Tech being 1-4 while playing at Folsom Field.

Issac Wilson was named the starting quarterback late into the week and with the *Ralphie Run* firing up the Buffs fanbase right out of the gate, things started off well. Colorado held a 7-3 lead at the break, marking their first halftime lead against an FBS opponent in over a year, but were quickly put out to pasture as the Buffaloes experienced a second-half collapse. Wilson threw three interceptions, one being an immediate pick-six and Texas pulled away late in the game, handing Coach Prime and Colorado their third consecutive loss of the season. The Buffs are now 2-3.

CU have 7 regular-season games left on their schedule. Based on power ratings and matchup predictors, toss-up or favorable opportunities remaining include games against Kansas State, Houston, and UCF. Regardless, Brian Howell of @On3sports predicts Colorado to finish out the '26 season with a record of 5-7, or at best 6-6.

I spoke with Howell about the future for the Buffs and he told me; "You have to play the game financially, especially with the revenue share, you have to figure out how to divide what CU has." While the NIL and transfer portal landscape appears to infest the game that so many know and love, navigating this field seems to be the key to finding success. Howell explains; "I remember one of the first times that I met coach prime he told me there's not a lot of guys actually making NIL, they're just getting paid under the table by boosters. Shedur, Shilo, and Travis were making real NIL from commercials for Gatorade and things like that, it was different with those guys and today is a totally different ballgame than when those guys were here."

As this year plays out, the mountain that Coach Prime and the Buffaloes seek to climb, seems to continuously encounter moments that fail to fulfil Colorado's desire to reclaim greatness.