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Longmont, Colorado
Wednesday, August 12,
2009

Publish Date: 8/10/2009

Settling in

Bufs QB Hansen prepared to fight for top spot

By Justin Williams
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BOULDER — Tyler Hansen's first season as a Colorado Buffalo was something of a blur.

Stripping his redshirt midway through meant getting thrown directly into the fire, as a freshman quarterback in the meat of a brutal Big 12 football schedule.

"I was so overwhelmed by the amount of offense we had," the sophomore said, "that I was constantly worried, 'What's this guy gonna do? What's that guy gonna do?'"

Now, 10 months later, Hansen finds himself in the heat of a quarterback battle — and he enters it with a much clearer head.

Cody Hawkins and Hansen are splitting reps with the first team so far at camp. Both players are towing the company line, expressing the healthy benefits of competition and praising each other's abilities.

Hawkins has the experience and football intelligence; Hansen (6-1, 205 pounds) has more size and running ability. But Hansen feels he's gaining ground in the area he lacks most.

"I understand the defense so much more," he said. "Now I know what our players are doing, and now I'm looking at the defense and focusing on that to make the right decision.

"I feel more comfortable this year, for sure."

Hansen hinted that he was uncomfortable on more than just the field last season. Taking over the quarterback job midway through the season forced some of his teammates to choose sides.

"Last year, you definitely could feel that. They'd want this guy because he has experience, or this guy because he can move around a little bit," Hansen said. "But we've both gone through the summer and made plays, and the whole team relies on us the same amount, and I think that's good."

Bufs receiver Scotty McKnight, who is good friends with both players, echoed those thoughts.

"It's not like last year," McKnight said. "There's no division."

McKnight, who was a roommate of Hawkins during their freshmen year, said that he was one of the players that welcomed Hansen with open arms last season.

"He's from California and I'm from California, and I know how it is to be away from home," McKnight said. "This is a



Colorado's Tyler Hansen participates in a spring scrimmage at Folsom Field in April. Hansen faced a trial-by-fire last season, but has entered this season with a clearer head — all the better to battle Cody Hawkins for the starting quarterback position. **Lewis Geyer/Times-Call file**

tough situation to walk into, especially when you walk in and we're not having a great season. That's a lot of pressure for a young guy to handle.

"He's on a different path than most. To be thrown in there as a true freshman at the quarterback position in the Big 12, that's a difficult task. But he's proven he can handle it."

Hansen saw both ups and downs during last season. He made his debut in a comeback win against Kansas State. But he struggled in his next three games, eventually losing the job back to Hawkins against Iowa State. He didn't throw a pass in CU's final two games of 2008, and finished with 280 passing yards, one touchdown and four interceptions. He also rushed for 261 yards.

Hansen spent this summer in Boulder, working with offensive coordinator Eric Kiesau to learn the team playbook. But he suffered a setback in the spring game when his throwing hand came down on a helmet, breaking his right thumb. Hansen is still rehabbing the thumb and said it's not quite 100 percent but that he's participating fully in practice.

"(Friday) didn't go so well. I threw a couple of picks," Hansen said. "But I think things are going better now."

Known mostly for his running ability, Hansen said he'd like to turn some eyes with his arm this season.

"Everybody knows I can move around a little bit, and I like that — making plays with my feet," Hansen said. "But that's the thing I want to improve most on right now, sitting in the pocket and throwing the ball around."

"I feel like Kiesau's reads are a lot more suited to me, and I feel it helps us be better pocket passers."

McKnight is already convinced of Hansen's throwing ability.

"His arm's very strong — I mean, he's got a hose," McKnight said. "I've caught some guys that have very strong arms, NFL-type guys, and he's up there with them. He can throw a ball."

With all political correctness aside, Hansen made it clear he wants the starting job. He said throwing for "a couple thousand yards and leading the Buffs to 10 wins and the Big 12 championship" is a realistic goal that he's set for himself.

"I've been dreaming since I was a little kid to play big-time college football and to be that guy, the one that everyone looks up to," Hansen said. "But I've got to work hard for that and compete and get out there and make plays."

"I've just got to prove it."

EXTRA POINTS: CU coach Dan Hawkins said Sunday that quarterback/athlete Josh Moten, who is awaiting certification from the NCAA to be allowed to play, is currently in California — not on the Colorado campus. Hawkins said it is basically a waiting game at this point. ... Transfer receiver Andre Simmons is still waiting for his academic records to get to CU and did not practice again Sunday. ... Today's two practices will run from 9:45-11:45 a.m. (veterans) and from 4:30-6:30 p.m. (newcomers). They are both open to the public.

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Son's future motivates Buff wide receiver

Simmons pursues dream as 4-year-old boy grows up in S.C.

By Kyle Ringo
Monday, August 10, 2009

BOULDER, Colo. — The sweetest cheers for the Colorado football team this fall will come from the tender heart of a 4-year-old boy in South Carolina sitting on grandma's lap rooting for daddy.

Omarion Simmons used to believe his father was playing in any football game that appeared on the television, even when dad was sitting right there beside him on the couch.

Over the past few months, he has learned his father's new team has a buffalo on the side of its helmets and the colors are black and gold. Now he wants a youth-sized No. 1 Colorado jersey of his own because he always has to look like dad, even down to the dreadlocks.

Andre Simmons should be cleared to participate in his first practice today on coach Dan Hawkins' team.

He is a talented and badly needed wide receiver from Southeastern Conference country whose road to Boulder and the Big 12 has been anything but easy.

His journey included an upbringing in which he was the man of the house from an early age, becoming a father to Omarion before his junior year of high school and already spending the better part of two years away from his little boy at junior college in order to eventually provide him a better life.

"Since Day One when he was born, he's always been motivating me," Simmons said. "I feel like every time I step on the field I do it for him."

Changing diapers

Simmons grew up in Blackville, S.C., a tiny town with one stoplight and a population of less than 3,000 about 45 miles northeast of Augusta, Ga. Its greatest claim to fame might be that it already produced one famous wide receiver in former New England Patriot Troy Brown.

Simmons made a name for himself as an athlete throughout childhood. His trophies and plaques and a most valuable player award are on display throughout various rooms of his childhood home. He wore No. 10 and is known as "Flo" back home.

"They also call him 'Go Getter,'" said his mother, Thomasann Elmore. "Because if you throw a ball straight, crooked or slanted, he's going to get it."

Simmons has four siblings, including two older sisters and one younger sister with whom he shared his mother's house as a boy. He also has a younger half-brother on his dad's side.

His mother sometimes struggled to provide for her kids but always found a way working hard as many hours as she could take on the concrete floors of a nearby vending machine assembly line. It became even more difficult when Omarion arrived.

He was born premature and weighed just two pounds. He remained in the hospital for the first month of his life and Andre had to learn CPR and other life-saving measures in order to bring him home. Omarion required a heart monitor and constant supervision the first nine months of his life. He also needed monthly shots to bolster his immune system.

Andre was just a kid himself at the time, but he developed a wisdom beyond his years.

"Andre has been a wonderful dad," Elmore said. "Whenever I had to go, he would stay home. He's a child who never hung out late. Him being a young guy, he took the opportunity out to spend a lot of time with his child.

"He changed pampers, did bottles. He did excellent."

Some young men who find themselves in the position of becoming fathers at an early age run away from the responsibility. Older men do, too. Simmons embraced it. He said he grew up knowing he wanted to have a son one day.

"I didn't want my son to grow up and say, 'My dad's a football player, but I never knew him,'" Simmons said.

Elmore agreed to help raise her grandson four years ago so that Andre and Omarion's mother could continue their education. Elmore manages with help from her daughters and Omarion's mother, who lives nearby in Blackville, when Andre is away at school despite being on disability after too many hours on the line led to problems with her legs.

Long journey

Elmore does it with a better future in mind.

"First of all, and most importantly, I want him to get an education. I want him to get his degree," Elmore says of her son. "I want him to go and play pro football, but I want him to have something to fall back on. It will be a big help to him in raising his son."

Simmons shares those goals. He is focused on making them happen. His determination is what allowed him to find his way to Boulder, so far from home.

Despite helping lead his high school team to a 56-4 record over four years, including an undefeated campaign in his junior season when they went 15-0 and won the state championship, he was not recruited. Simmons believes he was overlooked because he played for a Class 1A school.

He found his way to Independence Community College in Kansas with help from a friend and spent the past two years there where he attracted attention from numerous schools and offers from CU, Arkansas, South Florida, Kansas and Kansas State. He was named first team All-KJCCC as a freshman in 2007.

Landing at CU

Simmons developed a chemistry with CU offensive coordinator Eric Kiesau, who was then wide receivers coach, and when he visited Boulder and met the players in the program last fall, he knew he had found the place he wanted to be.

"I always dreamed of playing college football," Simmons said. "It didn't matter where I played. It was just a big dream for me and this is a dream come true."

Kiesau said he knew almost immediately he had found a gem of a receiver when he evaluated Simmons. He is 6-foot-3 and 210 pounds with consistent 4.5 second speed in the 40-yard dash, good hands and vision that allows him to also return punts and kickoffs.

What Kiesau didn't immediately know is whether Simmons' personal life would be too much of a distraction to allow him to succeed academically and athletically at the Big 12 level.

"We addressed that right from the beginning because that is a hard situation to do," Kiesau said. "He actually has a good situation with his mom taking care of his son. We felt good that the baby was in a good, safe environment and he would be able to concentrate on his school and football and not have to worry about what the baby is doing or try to take care of the baby here."

Trying times

The past eight months have been one of the most challenging experiences of Simmons' life as he took the final steps to making his dream a reality.

He had to pass nine classes between January and the end of July to earn his Associate's degree, be cleared by the NCAA clearinghouse and admitted to CU. The final step in that process should be completed today when official transcripts arrive and he is allowed to practice as a Buff for the first time.

To this point in camp, Simmons has been standing on the periphery trying to learn all he can from watching drills and listening to coaches. He is excited to get in the action and show everyone what he can do. CU needs him even more now with the recent news that sophomore receiver Markques Simas has been suspended for the first two games of the year.

At night after practice and meetings are complete, Simmons picks up the phone and spends a few minutes talking with his mom and Omarion. His son asks where he is and when he's coming home. It can be heart-wrenching at times.

"It's very difficult, but he is so smart," Simmons said. "If he sees college football come on the TV, he's like, 'Daddy, that's you.' It's hard, but, in a way it's OK because I know my mom is going to take care of him and my family is going to do everything they can to support him."



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GRIDIRON DOMINATION COMES IN 7 FLAVORS.

[Hawkins learns about priorities after recent hospitalization](#)

August 10, 2009 11:34 AM

Posted by ESPN.com's Tim Griffin

Colorado coach Dan Hawkins' summer vacation was interrupted by an unexpected trip to the hospital where he was treated for the removal of a kidney stone.

Upon reflection, Hawkins said the stay might have been an enlightening change for him.

"I really called it the gift -- I did," Hawkins said. "It was a humbling thing."

Hawkins' kidney stone first flared up when he was vacationing with his family in his old hometown of Boise, Idaho. He was treated there, only a few minutes before he had planned to leave for Boulder.

"If it had been 15 minutes later, I'd have been on a plane," Hawkins said. "The whole time going to the hospital while I'm crying and saying words I shouldn't have been saying, I'm thinking '15 minutes more I would have been on the airplane. What would that have been like?'"

Hawkins was hospitalized a few days longer than was expected after fluid accumulated in his lungs. But he's healthy now and ready for the Buffaloes' Sept. 6 start against Colorado State.

"Any time you get humbled like that, it's good," Hawkins said. "I thought about the people that go into the hospital and never get out. I thought about the people who have it a lot worse than I do, so it was a good experience for me."

[Colorado Buffaloes](#), [Dan Hawkins](#)

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Tim Griffin joined ESPN.com in Februar

2008. He has covered the Big 12 since its inception, among a variety of beats during a 24-year career at the San Antonio Express-News. Griffin, a Memphis State University graduate, lives in San Antonio with his wife and son.

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