

# Learning curve steep for CU receivers

## Bufs' offense a lot to digest for even most-talented players

**By Kyle Ringo** Camera Sports Writer  
Boulder Daily Camera

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There is plenty of head scratching going on and even a little angst among some fans of the Colorado football program over how little they have seen some of the wide receivers they are most excited about on game days.

Through three games this season, scholarship players such as Andre Simmons, Will Jefferson and Anthony Wright are taking a backseat to veteran walk-ons such as Jason Espinoza and Dustin Ebner.

The army of armchair quarterbacks seems to believe not utilizing the most physically talented athletes is robbing the offense of explosion plays and making it an easier unit to defend. Espinoza and Ebner aren't much of a threat to run by most defensive backs, but their experience in the system, ability to read coverages and make adjustments on the fly and sure hands is what keep them on the field. It's exactly the formula junior Scotty McKnight has used the past two years to be the team's leading receiver.

Simmons missed most of training camp because of a protracted enrollment process that included him having to pass a junior college class on the Internet while his teammates were practicing. He finally gained approval to enroll and play when the team was already into its preparation for the season opener. He has been making up ground ever since.

"Starting like a week before the CSU game and trying to catch on to the offense that fast is kind of hard," Simmons said. "I mean, as the weeks and days go by, I catch on to everything. It's been pretty rough, but I'm picking it up. This bye week right here will give me a better chance to take more in."

He has been involved in every game plan so far and made a 44-yard catch in the season opener to set up a touchdown, despite his limited knowledge of the offense. He is making progress every day but he's still miles behind the players who have been here for a year or more.

Toney Clemons transferred to Colorado from Michigan in the offseason. He is learning his third offense at the college level and says the CU system is tough to grasp after only a few weeks, especially when schoolwork is pulling a player's time and attention, too.

"It's tough. You've got a lot of reads," Clemons said. "You've got to learn a lot of coverages and base your routes and what you're going to run off of what their coverages are. So you have to be an avid film studier. You've got to know what to do when you've got guys lined up in certain positions."

Clemons said it has been a relatively smooth transition for him because he played in a very similar system at Michigan as a true freshman before that school made a coaching change, which led to a spread offense that Clemons said was much more basic but didn't suit him.

Clemons said he wishes he could play this season instead of having to sit out because of NCAA transfer rules. He recognizes the opportunity for a playmaker who understands the system. But he said he understands why the players who have been on the field this season are out there. He also has empathy for Simmons who is drinking from a fire hose as former CU coach Gary Barnett used to say.

"I definitely understand that," Clemons said. "He just got thrown into the fire, not to mention you have vets like Scotty and Jason. So they play a lot faster and they know the system so they should play a lot faster. They can run all the routes. They can read all the coverages and they just know the playbook like the back of their hands. (Markques Simas) was slowed up with his own issues and his own difficulties he's fighting, but whenever he gets over that, he's going to be playing just as fast and you will see him out there a lot more. There are a number of factors that play into the whole situation."

True freshman Will Jefferson is also dealing with the learning curve. Jefferson, who played mostly as a running back in

high school has been working on a lot of technique issues such as not bringing his eyes around too early, cutting hard in breaks and not wasting steps in route running. He has progressed the fastest of the three true freshman receivers on the roster and has been rewarded with early playing time in his career. He caught his first pass against Wyoming.

Jefferson has already altered his approach in trying to learn the system and progress. During his first week of practice in fall camp, he was hard on himself for every little mistake he made. Now he has learned that mistakes will happen and he doesn't get too down on himself.

He said his philosophy now is to "mess up at 110 percent."

"I think the hardest thing for me is just to have confidence to know what I'm doing," Jefferson said. "You get these huge play books every Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday for the whole week and you line up and it's like, 'Wait a minute. I know this, but is it the right thing?' You just doubt yourself. You know that you know the play, but you just have to have confidence, which is really hard to gain as a true freshman."

Anthony Wright spent his first two seasons in Boulder as a defensive back before moving to wide receiver in mid-August. He is one of the most athletic players on the roster, but he also has a lot to learn.

Coach Dan Hawkins is coaching wide receivers this year but plans to turn the position over to Ashley Ambrose in January. Hawkins said every player is different in how much time they need to pick up the system and learn to play fast and make the right decisions within it. Hawkins gets plenty of help this season from graduate assistant Skyler Fulton, who played wide receiver in college at Arizona State and in the NFL with three different teams.

"I relate it to like math or something," Fulton said of wide receivers learning the CU offense. "If you're trying to learn like trigonometry, it takes you a minute to get your feet underneath you, regardless of how talented or how smart you are."

Fulton said he expects Simmons, Jefferson and Wright to be more involved on game days as the season goes on and coaches are able to work more with them. But he said players have a responsibility in the process and won't be handed anything.

"All those receivers have to go out there and earn playing time," Fulton said. "I don't care how tall you are, how fast you are, what your ceiling is or how talented you're supposed to be. You got to go out and prove it every day. I think our coaches do a good job of trying to put guys in a position to make plays and play to their strengths."

#### **Notable**

Bryce Givens returned to practice Tuesday after missing a few days, including the win over Wyoming, to tend to personal problems. Hawkins said Givens will play against West Virginia. ... Offensive lineman Max Tuioti-Mariner returned to practice Tuesday, but was not cleared to participate fully. Tuioti-Mariner is recovering from two torn ACLs in the past year and said he hopes to play later in the season, possibly as soon as the start of conference play. ... The Buffs practiced in cold and rainy conditions Tuesday causing some to wonder when the practice bubble is scheduled to be up. Sports information director Dave Plati said the bubble will be ready Oct. 15.

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## Woelk: CU needs to consider risk-reward of scheduling

**Neill Woelk** Camera Sports Writer  
Boulder Daily Camera

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Welcome to Week 4 of what is almost surely the Colorado Buffaloes' most-convoluted schedule ever.

By the end of September, the Buffs will have played exactly one game on Saturday, and only three total in the entire month. Throw in the first week of October, and the number of Saturday games is the same -- in fact, by the end of that week, the Buffs will have played one game each on Thursday, Friday, Saturday and Sunday.

It's been a made-for-television schedule -- but not one made for success.

Only a couple of years ago, the 2009 schedule was "normal." Four games in September, all on Saturdays, followed by a bye week before the Big 12 opener at Texas.

But in order to pick up some much-needed income for the athletic department, CU compromised its schedule to the tune of a Sunday night opener against Colorado State, followed by a game at Toledo just five days later. Both were on national television, meaning an extra infusion of cash for the department.

No one -- including me -- will suggest that the final outcome of the Colorado-Toledo game would have been different had the Buffs been given a "normal" week to prepare. But certainly, a little more time to prepare couldn't have hurt, and the Buffs might have given at least a slightly better performance.

The Buffs also could have had more time to prepare for the Toledo game -- and still played it on Friday -- had there been a little more cooperation from the campus administration. There was a tentative agreement at one point for Colorado and Colorado State to open the season on the Thursday before Labor Day (Sept. 3). That date would have allowed the game to still be televised by FSN (the Rockies had an afternoon game that day), and it would have given the Buffs more than a week of preparation instead of just four days.

But the Thursday game was quashed because of faculty concerns, and thus the Sunday-Friday set-up.

(One also has to wonder if athletic department officials haven't had second thoughts about allowing the MAC to switch Toledo in for Miami of Ohio. The Buffs were originally scheduled to play the Redhawks, but Miami bowed out of the game in order to play Kentucky, and the Buffs drew Toledo on a Friday. The Redhawks, meanwhile, were beaten 48-0 and 42-0 in their first two games).

But now, finally, the Buffs can reap a little benefit from the crazy-quilt schedule. Dan Hawkins' crew will have extra time to prepare for both West Virginia and Texas. Buff fans can only hope Hawk and his staff will put that extra time to good use.

Still, the convoluted early schedule and the results it helped produce brings about questions CU officials must sooner or later ask themselves:

Is such a juggling effort worth it? In the long run, is a little -- or even a lot -- of extra money worth the strain such a schedule can put on the football program?

Hawkins, to his credit, refuses to bite on such questions. His response since Day One has been a stoic, "It is what it is."

But the feeling here is that sooner or later, Colorado has to get past the point where the program juggles its schedule for money. While the immediate payoff may be fat, the long-term effect may produce more problems than the money solves.

While we're on the topic, the same can also be said of the Buffs' non-conference schedule in general.

For years, we've been a proponent of the degree of difficulty CU has assumed with its non-league games. It meant the opportunity to see quality programs (Florida State, Georgia, etc.) that fans here don't usually get to see.

But there's no reason for Colorado to continue scheduling itself into a hole when most other programs around the country play one quality opponent and three humpties in the non-conference. In a conference such as the Big 12, it makes no sense to beat yourself up early.

Colorado's schedules are virtually set for the next half-dozen years. Those are difficult to change.

But if and when the opportunity next arises to pick up a little extra television money at the risk of taking a bigger step backward in terms of the program's overall health, CU officials should think twice.

Lately, that risk-reward equation hasn't been producing a favorable outcome for the Buffs.

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cu football

## Injured Colorado running back Scott makes progress

By Chris Dempsey  
The Denver Post

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**BOULDER** — Back on the practice field, Colorado running back Darrell Scott is looking forward to the possibilities ahead — like taking a hit on his bruised knee.

That hit, whenever it comes, will allow him to ease his mind. It will let him know things are fine and he can move on playing football without thinking about the injury, which caused him to miss CU's 24-0 victory against Wyoming on Saturday.

"I'm good," Scott said Tuesday. "It felt good today."

Scott won't go through full contact in practice until next week. But he says he'll be ready to go when the Buffs face West Virginia on Oct. 1. Scott has played in two of the Buffs' three games, but has carried the ball just 13 times. However, he has made the most of those carries, rushing

for 86 yards, a team-high 6.6 yards per tote.

Scott is also looking forward to getting back to returning kicks.

"Oh, yeah," Scott said. "I love it."

Meanwhile, freshman tackle Bryce Givens also practiced. Givens missed the Wyoming game with an undisclosed injury and declined to speak to the media, but CU coach Dan Hawkins said the young player looked good in his return to the field.

Hawkins expects Givens to be available for the West Virginia contest.

"He'll go," Hawkins said.

### Encouraging signs.

The learning curve for wide receivers Andre Simmons and Anthony Wright remains steep, but Hawkins is encouraged by what he's seeing from the pair on a daily basis.

"They're getting there," Hawkins said. "There's a lot that goes into it. Even if you said, 'You're going to line up on the left side in the same formation every time,' there's still adjustments based off coverage or we might audible. There could be a lot of things. And then it's a matter of making it not mechanical."

Asked how long it usually takes a wideout to take to the playbook and transition into playing effective football, Hawkins said, "It's different for

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every guy."

Both Simmons and Wright have played in all three games. Simmons has caught one pass for 44 yards. Wright has one catch for 42 yards.

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## CU receivers catching on

Wright, Simmons getting comfortable with Buffs' offense

*By Justin Williams*  
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BOULDER — The big play has played a big role in Colorado's season so far. Unfortunately, they've all been on the wrong side of the ball.

Through the first three games of 2009, the Buffs have had just two pass plays go for more than 30 yards. It suffices to say that Andre Simmons and Anthony Wright, a pair of speedy CU receivers brought in to boost the Buffs' receiving, will add to that total this season — but for now, CU fans will have to remain patient while the duo catches up to the offense.

"There's a learning curve, but I'm starting to pick up on things — like where to line up, little things like that," Wright said. "I really think this bye week will help me and Andre get caught up.

"There's a just a lot to learn."

The Buffs have been starving for a deep threat, especially since Josh Smith defected to UCLA this summer, and that's a large reason Simmons and Wright were thrown into the fire so early. But in the grand scheme, neither have had a lot of time to learn the CU offense.

Wright was moved to receiver from cornerback just two weeks before the season began, and Simmons' eligibility was delayed by the NCAA after he transferred from a community college, forcing him to miss much of fall camp. Still, Simmons made his debut against Colorado State, and he came down with a 44-yard reception — the longest play from scrimmage this season for the Buffs.

And Wright made the first catches of his college career against Toledo, and also had a 42-yard reception called back on a penalty.

"I think I bring speed, that big play to the offense," Wright said. "I mean, that's why they moved me to receiver. They feel like I can make some plays."

But in a 24-0 win over Wyoming last week, both receivers were nearly non-existent. Neither made a catch, nor did Markques Simas, CU's other deep-threat receiver who made his Buffs debut against the Cowboys.

Simas' excuse could be his nagging knee injury, but for the other two, it's just a matter of getting repetitions.

"Obviously, we've tried to use them in situations," said Colorado head coach Dan Hawkins, who doubles as the receivers coach. "Even if you tell them to line up in the same formation every time, there's still adjustments based off of coverage, or we may audible. So there could be a lot of things. Then it's a matter of making it not be mechanical, where he's going, 'Oh yeah,' and he's a second behind.

"I think they're both doing a good job."



Colorado wide receiver Andre Simmons celebrates a catch against Colorado State on Sept. 6 at Folsom Field in Boulder. **Lewis Geyer/Times-Call**

Wright, who played receiver in high school, said his biggest hurdle has been figuring out where to line up and learning the CU playbook, which offensive coordinator Eric Kiesau has said is complicated.

Right now, Scotty McKnight and Jason Espinoza — a former and a current walk-on, respectively — are receiving most of the reps at receiver. Even true freshman Will Jefferson — who played predominantly at running back in high school — has found himself in the mix.

But both Wright and Simmons said they expect to see the field more as the season progresses.

“I’m starting to get more comfortable with the playbook,” Wright said. “You get get more comfortable, you get more confident.

“This is my like my third week, so it’s finally starting to click.”

EXTRA POINTS: CU’s only other pass play of more than 30 yards came on a 34-yard catch by Ryan Deehan late in the Toledo game. ... Colorado offensive lineman Bryce Givens, who missed the Wyoming game for personal reasons, returned to practice Tuesday. When asked if the redshirt freshman would play against West Virginia on Oct. 1, Hawkins replied: “He’ll go.” Givens was not made available to the media. ... Hawkins said quarterback Jerry Slota, who was temporarily suspended, has been re-instated to the team.

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