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Support comes from surprising places for ex-CU player

By Terry Frei
The Denver Post

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Former Buff Bernard Jackson is thankful for his second chance to play football, at Division II CSU-Pueblo. (Karl Gehring, The Denver Post)

PUEBLO — Former University of Colorado starting quarterback Bernard Jackson understands that a

two-word summary hangs over him, follows him around, perhaps is unshakable.

As he prepares to play NCAA Division II football for the Colorado State-Pueblo ThunderWolves this season, Jackson is a "convicted felon," out of jail for less than a year and on probation until late 2014.

Jackson and former CU teammate Lionel Harris were convicted on felony charges of second-degree burglary and menacing in January 2009 in connection with a Boulder apartment robbery of victims whom authorities characterized as small-time drug dealers.

"I know what happens," Jackson, 25, said. "People think someone is a good guy at first, then

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they hear details and they pull back. They hear something and it's, 'Oh, he is?' and they pull away. I understand why they would feel the way they do about me.

"I definitely want people to know that my heart and my intentions are where they should be. My thing now is to continue to prove people wrong. My goal is to get my degree and to change one

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person's life, no matter how that might be. That's something I take very seriously, and I know I made a mistake and I wouldn't want anybody to go down the road I took."

Jackson, a sociology major, said he is about 30 hours short of graduating. He is in Pueblo in part because of support he received from Broncos offensive tackle Tyler Polumbus and other former CU teammates, as well as from former CU coach Gary Barnett and CSU-Pueblo coach John Wristen and his staff.

Wristen was on Barnett's CU staff for the 1999-2005 seasons, so he knew Jackson well. As others spoke up for Jackson, lobbying Wristen to bring him on, the coach's major misgiving was that some people might interpret doing so as only a means to get a former Big 12 Conference starter into a program being built from the ground up. But Wristen decided that the important people involved, including the man he

saw in the mirror while shaving, knew his motives.



Quarterback Bernard Jackson during his playing days at Colorado in a Big 12 Conference game against Texas Tech in 2006. (Hyoung Chang, The Denver Post)

"I really felt like not everybody deserves a second chance, but Bernard Jackson deserves a second chance," Wristen said. "In his heart, I believe he's a good kid. He understands that he made a mistake, he's owned up to it, he's paid his dues to society."

Jackson moved to Pueblo in July. He's living in an apartment at the edge of campus. He has not played a down of football in nearly four years. So, ask Jackson and Wristen about whether the former CU quarterback can be a productive college football player this fall, even at Division II, and neither is certain.

"We're going to find out," Jackson said, smiling.

After nearly a week of practices in preparation for

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(Karl Gehring, The Denver Post)

their Aug. 28 season opener at Oklahoma Panhandle State, Wristen said the plan for Jackson hasn't changed. He will use Jackson at wide receiver, with situational "packages" for him at quarterback. At some point, he might get a look at running back and safety.

"Oh, football is so secondary in this," Wristen said. "If he never plays, I think we've helped him get back in the flow of society. I want him to have a successful career. He can be one heck of a counselor. He might save two or three lives. If you've done that, you've had a pretty good lifetime."

No bitterness toward CU

Jackson is from Corona, Calif., about 45 miles east of downtown Los Angeles. In Barnett's final two seasons, Jackson played tailback, receiver, and quarterback as a freshman and sophomore, but saw little action as a quarterback, throwing but two passes.

In 2005, he became a father, and his little boy, Jayden, had an early eye cancer scare that rattled Jackson. After Barnett was fired after the 2005 season, Jackson emerged as the starting quarterback for new coach Dan Hawkins the following year. Jackson ran for 677 yards and threw for 1,298 for a 2-10 team.

Looking back, Jackson wonders if he was a sacrificial lamb in a transitional year, setting the stage for Cody Hawkins to take over at quarterback the next season.

"It was my first year of playing quarterback and who knows what they thought as far as where my development was," Jackson said. "I think if as a coaching staff they thought I was lacking something, they should have made sure I wasn't used there. It definitely took its toll on me."

Jackson talks without a trace of bitterness, more like musing out loud.

"I wish it could have worked out a lot different and given me my second year at quarterback," he added.

In late 2006, his teammates voted him a captain for the 2007 season. After spring ball, though, he was listed as the No. 3 quarterback and was playing receiver. He seemed ticketed to play as a senior in roles that highlighted his versatility.

Before fall practice opened, however, he was declared academically ineligible, effectively ending his CU career.

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"Things snowballed," he said of his off-field problems. "It was a bunch of things that weren't going my way. I was caught up in a bunch of stuff I shouldn't have been involved in."

Jackson remained in Boulder that fall, which he now considers another misstep, rather than returning home to Southern California. In March 2008, he participated in CU's pro timing day but no NFL team showed an interest.

On June 5, 2008, two intruders wearing masks burst into a Boulder apartment and accosted its occupants. The victims told police the intruders threatened them with guns. The robbers left with less than \$500. Prosecutors said they suspected the robbers had smoked marijuana on another occasion with the victims in the same apartment.

Harris and Jackson were arrested. In Harris' car, police found two handguns, a marijuana grinder, a "Scream" mask, \$420, and a wallet and debit card belonging to one of the robbery victims. Harris and Jackson were charged with first-degree burglary, aggravated robbery and felony menacing. They remained in jail until they pleaded guilty to reduced charges in January 2009. They were sentenced to 5 1/2 years in prison, with a provision for "reconsideration" after a year.

"It was the dumbest mistake of my life," Jackson said. "I'm deeply sorry for it. I did my time for it. I did everything I was asked to do. I'm still doing it."

Following his sentence, he served time in prisons at Trinidad, Delta and Rifle for the better part of a year. He read, with many of the books coming from another former CU quarterback from Carson, Marc Walters, who lettered in 1986. His reading list included Rick Warren's "The Purpose Driven Life," the Bible, Paulo Coelho's "The Alchemist," Khaled Hosseini's "The Kite Runner," and several books by George Myers Jr.

"You do a lot of thinking," he said. "You have a lot of alone time. That's basically all you can do. You can work out, but that can only go so far. . . . You have your lows, you go through spurts where you don't want to deal with anybody. You're constantly being told what to do and to have that freedom taken away from you makes you appreciate life so much more. Those were the things I learned as a human being — you have to do things the right way."

He also received letters from Polumbus and others.

"Tyler kept in contact for a long time," Jackson said. "He wrote me and said that when I got out, things were going to be all right for me."

Freedom at last

On Dec. 1, 2009, Boulder District Court Judge James Klein ruled at a hearing that Jackson could be released on probation. Liz Polumbus, Tyler's wife, was among those who spoke on Jackson's behalf. She said one possibility was that Jackson

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could live with her and her husband.

"Bernard made a big-time mistake," Tyler Polumbus said after a recent Broncos practice. "All I know is I serve a God of second chances, and I was just trying to be someone who could help him land on his feet. If he doesn't have someone out there helping him land on his feet, who knows? I believe in him, and I believe he's going to do well in life."

Jackson never lived with the Broncos tackle and his wife. Instead, Polumbus was part of a successful effort to find work for his former teammate.

Boulder homebuilder Conley Smith, who lettered as a CU linebacker from 1984-86 and also owns landscaping and snow-clearing services, got involved. Jackson calls him "an amazing individual." Polumbus' father, Tad, was acquainted with Smith's lumber dealer, CU supporter Bill Dowd. Smith got a call from Dowd, asking if he might be able to give Jackson a job. Conley contacted Barnett and former CU assistant Jon Embree to check on Jackson.

"They both spoke highly of him," Smith said.

Jackson moved in with Smith's brother, Brook.

"I did landscaping, cutting grass, lawns, weeding, things of that nature," Jackson said. "I worked my butt off to keep myself out of trouble, keep myself down the right path."

Said Smith: "He always had a great attitude. And I'm not just saying that. That was the pleasant surprise of having him around. The type of work we do is physical work, and a lot of times guys don't like it or complain about it. He just did it."

Football wasn't in the equation.

"I was ready to hang it up and work, work, work for Conley," Jackson said.

Fresh start

One day last winter, however, after his crew cleared snow all day, Smith took Jackson and the others out to eat. At the restaurant, Jackson saw CU athletic director Mike Bohn, and during the brief conversation, it came up that Jackson might have one year of eligibility remaining at something other than the Football Bowl Subdivision (former I-A) level. Bohn said he "encouraged (Jackson) to go for a fresh start."

Another Smith acquaintance, former CU player Tim James, also got involved, communicating with Barnett. Eventually, the chain led to Jackson talking with Wristen.

"There were a lot of people who stood up for him," Wristen said. "But I knew him. It wasn't like I didn't know what they were saying. I know what Bernard's about. I feel lucky to be part of his life and help him turn it around."

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rare any player receives a full ride. Wristen said Jackson is on a partial scholarship and that he also gets conventional financial aid from the school. He is reporting to a probation officer in Pueblo.

Junior running back Jamaal Johnson, from Fountain-Fort Carson High School, gained nearly 1,000 yards for the ThunderWolves last season. He said of Jackson's presence: "It's a good idea. Everybody deserves a second chance. I enjoyed watching him when he played at Colorado. I remember watching him in my senior year of high school. I can't wait to get to play with him."

Wristen has several staff members with CU connections.

"It definitely helps me feel at home, and I'm around guys I know care about me," Jackson said.

He is adamant he won't let his supporters down.

Said Wristen: "Can he win everyone over? I don't think you can. But you have to win the people you touch and visit with. I think that's easy for him to do because of who he is and what he stands for now."

Terry Frei: 303-954-1895 or tfrei@denverpost.com

Jackson at CU

Passing

Season	G	Att	Comp	Int	Pct.	Yds	TD	Long
2004	6	2	2	0	100.0	59	0	41
2005	6	0	0	0	0.0	0	0	0
2006	12	219	108	7	49.3	1,298	7	63
Totals	24	221	110	7	49.8	1,357	7	63

Rushing

Season	Att	Yds	Avg.	TD	Long
2004	1	3	3.0	0	3
2005	8	10	1.3	0	7
2006	155	677	4.4	7	62
Totals	164	690	4.2	7	62

Highlights

2007: Voted offensive captain by teammates before the season, but was ruled academically ineligible and never played.

2006: Started at QB in the final 11 games in Dan Hawkins' first season, throwing for 1,298 yards and seven TDs. . . . Rushed for 677 yards and seven TDs, the third-highest rushing total by a CU QB, behind only Darian Hagan and Bobby Anderson.

2005: Was third on the QB depth chart, but saw game time as quarterback, tailback, receiver and returner.

2003-04: Redshirted in 2003. And after beginning 2004 as a quarterback, receiver and punt returner, he dislocated an elbow on a punt return and missed three games.

Source: University of Colorado

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Buffaloes support Jackson's quest

By Terry Frei
The Denver Post

Posted: 08/15/2010 01:00:00 AM MDT

BOULDER — The only players remaining on the University of Colorado football roster who were in the program with Bernard Jackson are fifth-year seniors.

One is quarterback Cody Hawkins. As a redshirt freshman, Hawkins watched Jackson start 11 games in 2006.

"Everybody you talk to will tell you Bernard's the first guy to say hello to you when you walk in, and he always had a smile on his face," Hawkins said. "Bernard's probably a big reason guys like myself and Scotty McKnight made it through our freshman year, when that was a really tough season. He was always optimistic, and when we were freshmen getting homesick, he was always taking us aside and made sure we were doing well."

Jackson was ruled academically ineligible shortly before the 2007 season, and Hawkins — expected to be the starter, anyway — lost his main competitor. Then came Jackson's arrest and

conviction on felony menacing charges and nearly a year in jail.

"If anybody in the world deserves a second chance, it's that guy," Cody Hawkins said. "I truly believe he's a great guy who got stuck in a bad situation. Some people just don't always have the power to say no.

"Saying no to your friends is tough. Sometimes when your friends get into a mess, it's hard to abandon them. I think now he obviously sees that."


CU senior cornerback Jimmy Smith echoed what Hawkins said. "Bernard was one of my best friends when he was up here. He's a good guy who got into a little bit of trouble and made some wrong decisions. I'm wishing and hoping that things go differently now that he's getting a second chance."

CU head coach Dan Hawkins said he was "totally" happy Jackson is getting another chance in school and in football at CSU-Pueblo. "I want to see the guy graduate, get heading in a good, positive direction for a good long time. I love that kid. I do.

"Hey, you have to pay your dues. There's no denying that. But I'm telling you, Bernard Jackson is not an evil kid. He is not."

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AUGUST 14, 2010, 9:43 PM

More on Bernard Jackson, including the CU/Broncos connections at CSU-Pueblo

By **TERRY FREI** |  Comments Disabled

A point of emphasis to follow up on my [Sunday story on Bernard Jackson](#) ^[1], the former University of Colorado quarterback:

What I was impressed with when talking with Jackson was that he kept coming back to accepting responsibility.

Many of his acquaintances wonder (or more than wonder) if the robbery victims in this case might have exaggerated the circumstances to increase the chances of a sympathetic reaction from authorities, but Jackson — understandably — won't talk about the specifics of what took place. But he kept coming back to accountability, and his acceptance of the concept.

So I want to make clear that when Jackson mused that he sometimes felt like the fall guy for CU's struggles in 2006 and said he wished things could have worked out differently for 2007, the next words out of his mouth were these: "Unfortunately, I wasn't able to live up to the expectations, academically and on and off the field. I paid the price for it."

The CU connections: Jackson mentions in the story that he has others with Buffalo connections around him in his return to college football in the Division II program at Colorado State University-Pueblo.



^[2]

The most obvious is CSU-Pueblo coach [John Wristen](#) ^[3] (left), the long-time assistant under [Gary Barnett](#) ^[4] who is the head coach at the school that was called the University of Southern Colorado when Wristen played quarterback there in the 1980s. Wristen was a hometown boy who played his high school ball for Pueblo South.

This isn't in the story, but here's a list of the others with CU connections on the CSU-Pueblo staff:

– Defensive coordinator Hunter Hughes was a defensive graduate assistant at CU in the 2003-05 seasons.

– Offensive line coach Chris Symington was a Buffs' lineman from 1984-88 and then a graduate assistant.

^[5]

Steve Sewell



– Defensive backs coach Donnell Leomiti was a receiver and then a safety for CU in the early 1990s and also was a Buffs defensive technical intern.

– Quarterbacks and passing game coordinator Mike Babcock, a former UCLA linebacker, was a CU offensive quality control intern.

– Wide receivers coach Dusty Sprague played with Jackson at CU as a receiver.

Those are enough CU connections, maybe those guys should try to get a franchise of The Sink or the Dark Horse.

Also, the ThunderWolves' running backs coach is former Broncos running back/wide receiver Steve Sewell.

The Pueblo program: While researching the Jackson story, I went to the Rocky Mountain Athletic Conference media day in Colorado Springs — an amazingly compact but productive session larger leagues can learn from — and then to CSU-Pueblo. Earlier, I wrote [this story](#) ^[6] about the state of the Thunderwolves' Division II program, about to enter its third season under Wristen.

I'm not sure, but I might be one of the few around who who has attended Division II national championship games multiple times for two different newspapers. I went to Florence, Alabama, to cover both University of Northern Colorado and Portland State University appearances in the title game, when Joe Glenn was coaching UNC and Pokey Allen was at PSU. (Allen was a great coach who died way too young of cancer after moving to Boise State and getting the Broncos on track to better things in Division I-AA.) When I told Wristen how impressed I was with the Thunderwolves' facilities, especially for the Division II level, he said: "When you're trying to start a brand-new program, if you don't have facilities, what else do you have to sell? They don't know anything about the program or me — well, they do, but they don't. Facilities are an eye-catching thing. It's really helped us say, 'Hey, we're serious about this game. We're really doing it right.'"

It also should be noted that both Division II national powers — Portland State and UNC — have moved up to the old I-AA level and the Big Sky Conference, and both have struggled mightily in football. Lesson: Either be prepared to fully fund a I-AA (Football Championship Subdivision) program to compete with the Montanas of the world or stay where you are. Yes, it's not just about football, but that has to be the primary consideration.

Click [here](#) ^[7] for additional information about the ThunderWolves' program.

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[Terry Frei's Web Site](#) ^[8]

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Posted: Aug. 15, 2010 | Updated: 2:57 a.m. today

Lions LB Jordon Dizon might be lost for season

BY DAVE BIRKETT
FREE PRESS SPORTS WRITER

Jordon Dizon is scheduled to undergo an MRI exam on his injured left knee today, and regardless of the results the Lions could be looking for linebacker help in free agency.

Dizon was injured in the second quarter of Saturday's 23-7 exhibition loss to the Steelers. He left Heinz Field on crutches and with a heavy brace protecting his knee.

Coach Jim Schwartz said after the game Dizon's injury "looked pretty significant."

"If the knee injury's what we think it is, we'll probably be making a move there," Schwartz said.

With DeAndre Levy nursing a back injury, Dizon started at middle linebacker against the Steelers. He was expected to be a key backup and special-teams contributor for the Lions this year.

Levy hasn't practiced in almost two weeks, and if he doesn't return today the Lions will be down to seven healthy linebackers for their afternoon workout.

If Dizon misses the season as expected, Vinny Ciurciu would be Levy's primary backup at middle linebacker. Ciurciu made a team-high five tackles Saturday.

Two free-agent linebackers who might interest the Lions are Rocky Boiman and Ryan Stamper. Boiman, who played under Schwartz in Tennessee in 2002-05, worked out for the team earlier this summer.

Stamper agreed to a contract with the Lions as an undrafted free agent, but failed his physical because of a back injury.

Garriet Blair, Stamper's agent, said Sunday he still expects his client to sign with the Lions, possibly as early as this week. Blair said Stamper and the Lions were close to reuniting before Dizon's injury.

"I don't have any idea what's transpiring with (Dizon). I just know where things stood with Ryan," Blair said. "I'll be surprised if he wasn't back up there this week."

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