

Four former Buffs reunite with Broncos

Players from CU at varying stages of their NFL careers

By Ryan Thorburn Camera Sports Writer
Boulder Daily Camera

Posted: 08/22/2010 11:24:29 PM MDT

DENVER -- Justin Bannan has been engaging Dan Graham in some violent immovable object vs. unstoppable force confrontations again during an August preseason camp.

Feels like 2001.

Unfortunately for Buffs fans, Bannan and Graham don't have a time machine. Their football reunion is at Dove Valley where they are both important members of the 2010 Denver Broncos.

"Dan and I go way too far back, man," Bannan said during an interview with the Camera after the Broncos' 25-20 preseason loss to the Detroit Lions on Saturday night at Invesco Field. "We've known each other since we were 18. It's good to be back, not only with a guy who played at CU, but a classmate. We have a real tight-knit class.

"It's good to play football with my buddy again."

Due to a number of well-documented events and factors, Colorado football has not been the same since the program won the Big 12 championship nine seasons ago.

The talented 2001 team that beat the Texas Longhorns for the conference title at Texas Stadium included offensive lineman Andre Gurode (currently with the Dallas Cowboys), safety Michael Lewis (currently with the San Francisco 49ers), defensive lineman Tyler Brayton (currently with the Carolina Panthers) and running back Chris Brown (former Tennessee Titans standout, currently a free agent).

Jashon Sykes, Victor Rogers, Quinn Sypniewski, Sean Tufts, Matt McChesney, Wayne Lucier and Derek McCoy were also invited to the Fiesta Bowl that year as Gary Barnett briefly returned the program to dominance.

"We still have a few guys left fighting the good fight. I think it's just a testament to what kind of players we knew we had," Bannan said. "We didn't just have guys who could go do a couple years in the NFL, but guys who could go do 10 years in the league. That's the kind of team we had back then."

Current CU head coach Dan Hawkins, entering his fifth season in Boulder with a 16-33 record, finally has a roster NFL scouts are somewhat curious about. Now the pressure will be on the coaching staff to make sure Nate Solder, Jimmy Smith and the rest leave the program on a winning note.

"We're going through some tough times these days and over the past few years, but it will turn around," Bannan said. "Nothing can stay great all the time. It kind of ebbs and flows. I have faith in my program. We'll be all right."

Bannan, after successful four-year stints with the Buffalo Bills and Baltimore Ravens, was signed by Josh McDaniels as a free agent to help anchor the Broncos' defensive front. He is locked in as a starting defensive end and poised for a productive season, especially if Jamal Williams can stay healthy and clog up the middle.

"It's awesome, so nice to be back in Colorado and play in this stadium. I couldn't ask for anything more," Bannan said. "It's a good feeling. ... We obviously have a lot of work to do and that's what preseason is for. We have some new faces here and a new D-coordinator, so it's going to take us a little time to jell and create that chemistry. But they're definitely moving in the right direction."

Graham, a Mackey Award winner with the Buffs and a two-time Super Bowl winner with the New England Patriots, is considered to be one of the best blocking tight ends in the NFL. He was held out of Saturday's preseason game to heal some bumps and bruises; injured Broncos are not allowed to speak to the media per McDaniels' Belichickian rules.

"You know, it gets a little bit harder," Graham said of the NFL grind earlier in camp. "I just do a little more just to get loose - just to get out here and get ready. My body has had a number of years of pounding on it, you know. I have to do a little bit extra just to get ready for practice."

Graham's backup, Richard Quinn, was also out of action against the Lions. That gave another ex-Buff, undrafted free agent Riar Geer, a chance to play throughout the game.

"Last year I went to a couple games (at Invesco Field) and was thinking how cool it would be if I could play for the Broncos," Geer said. "Getting into the game was absolutely awesome. ... It's a lot more intense. The game is a lot faster, and I have a lot of work to do to be where I want to be. If I actually made the team it would be absolutely amazing."

Geer, an intriguing 6-foot-4, 250-pound rookie from Fruita, is a long shot to make Denver's 53-man roster. However, if he continues to emulate Graham in practice ... well, perhaps McDaniels will make room for him on the practice squad.

"It's unfortunate we had two tight ends go down, but I got to go out there and get some experience," Geer said. "It's a job interview for the whole NFL. If I don't make it with the Broncos, other teams can look at the film and if they see something they like about me."

Geer cheered on the Buffs at the 2001 Fiesta Bowl at the age of 16.

"I've been a big fan of (Graham) since the time he has been a Buff to the Patriots to the Broncos. It's almost unreal to be playing with him on the Broncos," Geer said. "Things worked out so nice for me to be able to stay home and play for my favorite team growing up. I'm definitely blessed."

Yet another CU alum, Tyler Polumbus, is also battling to remain with the Broncos after appearing in all 16 games on special teams as a rookie in 2008 and starting eight games at tackle for an injured Ryan Harris in 2009. The offseason injury to left tackle Ryan Clady has given Polumbus, a Cherry Creek High School graduate, ample opportunity to play throughout training camp and in the preseason games.

"I've seen a guy who's gained confidence, because obviously, in this league, when you're playing in the games, that experience is more valuable than the experience that you gain in the offseason and all the rest of it," McDaniels said of Polumbus last season. "He knows what we're doing."

Close Window

Send To Printer