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Former Buff Solder soldiers on toward uncertain NFL future

By Jeff Legwold
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INDIANAPOLIS — Colorado tackle Nate Solder doesn't yet know where he'll start his NFL career, or who his coach will be or even what kind of offense will be on the pages of his first professional playbook.

Oh, and he doesn't know if there will be a season or even how much he will get paid.

"It is a lot of the unknown right now," Solder said Thursday. "It really is going into a lot of the unknown. And that's OK."

And this is at least part of why NFL teams like what they've heard and seen from Solder thus far as he moves through the scouting combine this week. Sure, the league's football decision-makers love that Solder is 6-8, 319 pounds and has a pass-rush defying 81-inch arm span.

All physical attributes that will certainly make Solder a candidate to be the first offensive tackle selected in April's draft.

But the teams that have already talked to Solder here in Indianapolis — the Lions are one — and who talked to him at the Senior Bowl in Mobile, Ala., last month also like his mentality. His ability to adjust, to recover, to think on his feet.

"Offensive linemen have to deal with adversity," said Tennessee Titans head coach Mike Munchak, a Hall of Fame guard in his playing career. "One of the first things I look at with those guys is how they do when they get bad news on a play, or when things don't go exactly right."

And Solder has impressed those who have talked to him with his ability to bounce back and deal with what's in front of him.

Because Solder, like every player who will be in this rookie class, is facing an uncertain future beyond the seven-round draft at April's end because of the league's current labor troubles.

There is no collective bargaining agreement in place for the 2011 season, and if there isn't one negotiated in the next week or so, everyone expect the league's team owners to lock the players out March 4.

That means no free agency, no offseason workouts and, for the impending rookies, no contact after draft day with the team that selected them.

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Solder and the rest don't even know how much they'll be paid once there is football, if there will be the kind of rookie wage scale the rookies that came before them didn't face.

"I think there's a lot of good people working on that and I think it will be the best," Solder said. "It will work out the way it's supposed to. ... There's a lot to learn and I'm trying to learn as much as I can.

"All I can is concentrate on the things I need to do to take advantage of every opportunity. None of it will matter if I'm not ready to do my absolute best to be everything I can be. That's what I can control."

So while some of the top prospects in the draft may pass on going through the workouts and drills here at the combine, when asked what he was going to do, Solder said:

"Everything. That's what I've been working for, that's what I'm going to do. The rest will take care itself."

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