



Nate Solder: "I don't want to look back and say, 'I was looking ahead and I missed out on the best time.'"
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Brooks: Solder Takes Aim At Memorable Senior Season

BOULDER - I recently turned a corner in a local supermarket and narrowly avoided a head-on with a shopping cart being nudged along by Nate Solder.

Memorable experience . . . could have been harrowing.

If he'd been pushing his cart recklessly or with malice, he would have parked me among the organic bananas a couple of aisles over.

"Shop a couple of times a week . . . food doesn't go far at my place," Solder said, eyeing a basket that held 10 pounds of potatoes and other stuff essential for a guy who stands 6-foot-9 and is intent on opening the 2010 college football season weighing 315 pounds.

If he eats that 10-pound sack of potatoes and keeps the weight on through August camp, he'll hit his goal. He's currently at 305, but as his cohorts in Colorado's offensive line constantly tell him, "Dude, you're a skinny 300-pounder."

Not true. Solder, a senior preseason All-America candidate at left tackle, is nowhere near skin-and-bones. He's cut like a cartoon character. His body fat comes in consistently in single digits. He's light afoot, swift with his mitts and can hang clean (*Google* it if you must) 473 pounds - an all-time, all-school record for one of CU strength and conditioning coach Jeff Pitman's disciples. Oh, and Solder's 40-yard dash time is 4.8 seconds - an impressive burst for an impressive load.

Solder "has just immense God-given ability," said CU O-line coach Denver Johnson. "He's just an enormous talent."

Playboy Magazine, a publication Solder knows but doesn't frequent, concurs. It included him on its 2010 preseason All-America team, as have several other preseason college football publications. Although the recognition is appreciated, Solder's attitude is, "Thank you very much . . . now let's get on with the season."

"It's an honor . . . I know someday I'll look back and say, 'That's really cool,'" Solder said. "But right now, it's not important. It's something you've got to look past because there's so many more important things for us as a team."

Pomp and self-promotion aren't his things. Taught his work ethic on a relatively small (35-acre) horse ranch near Buena Vista and hoping to someday become a veterinarian (probably whenever the NFL allows it), Solder packs as much bling as a bale of hay.

Sometimes he's quiet and unassuming to a fault. In mid-April, I asked Johnson his spring goals for Solder and he responded: "Directing traffic and setting blocking and protection schemes (before the snap). Nate's been a little reluctant to do that - but he's coming out of it . . . I want him more assertive as a leader and more vocal on the field."

Solder will give that a shot this September, hoping to improve on his and his team's productivity from 2009. In retrospect, he believes he had "a pretty good season last year." Pretty good? In the classroom, he maintained a 3.45 GPA in biology. In Johnson's weekly grading scheme, he hit 90 percent or better in seven of 12 games, allowing three quarterback sacks in 850 snaps and had a team-best 97 finishes (or knockdown blocks), including 14 against then-No. 17 Kansas.

Fine numbers all except the most critical ones: 3-9. The Buffs struggled badly as a team, and Solder enters his final CU season burdened by an overall lack of victories. He hopes to bring his sacks allowed total to zero and improve his run blocking.

"But really, I just want to bring the group (O-line) together so we can be more effective as a team. That's my biggest goal right now," he said.

Among his secondary goals, showing well personally to improve his NFL stock doesn't even make the list. The NFL, he said, "is out of my head . . . all that stuff will come in its due time. I love college football and I want to take the most out of this experience. I don't want to look back and say, 'I was looking ahead and I missed out on the best time.'"

"I was never really trying to look forward to the NFL. When you're a senior, it's different. It's all come together - your last year and you've made so many relationships and put so much work into it. It's really become part of you and is so important to you."

That's one of the reasons he acknowledges the importance of improvement in CU's O-line in 2010. When I asked him if he and his group underachieved last season, he answered, "At times, yeah, I do think that. At times we really learned a lot about ourselves and did pretty well. But overall, yeah . . . but there were some bright moments, too."

He agreed that for the Buffs' offense to vacate its position at the bottom of the Big 12 Conference, the O-line must lead the ascent: "Absolutely," he said. "If there's a huge improvement - like we all think there will be - it's going to start with the O-line. Definitely."

"And I've seen so much of that already. I think it's partly that I'm getting to know the guys better, but it's also partly that they're all just giving it a little bit more. I'm seeing everybody give it a little more."

"For a couple of those guys - it was Keenan's (Stevens, center) first year starting. It was Ethan's (Adkins, guard) first year starting (in 2009). That's tough. They're learning. I remember my first year starting . . . it was a lot different the next year and I was a lot better."

The Buffs' voluntary summer conditioning work has about two weeks remaining. Players will have four days off before preseason camp begins on Aug. 4. In addition to the conditioning and keeping attuned to the playbook, Solder said time getting acquainted with the newcomers will be beneficial once camp starts.

"You meet the freshmen for the first time and they become part of the team," he said. "We train all spring, but this is the time to get sharpened up physically for the season."

Several incoming players have impressed him, but in viewing the bigger picture, Solder sees CU's roster "getting pretty deep . . . it's to the point where you don't have to rely on the freshmen that are coming in. We're getting guys developed and getting better."

"We've got a lot of players. This year, more than any other year since I've been here, there hasn't been an emphasis on the freshmen (having to play). That can only help."

Something, anything must help. The Buffs need a big year, and Nate Solder wants to close out his career with a memorable season - certainly not three-win memorable.

TALK IT UP: Solder and fellow seniors Scotty McKnight (receiver) and Jalil Brown (cornerback) will travel to Dallas later this month with head coach Dan Hawkins to represent the Buffs at the Big 12 Conference preseason football media briefing.

It could be CU's final appearance at the annual event if the Buffs are cleared to begin competition in the Pacific-10 Conference for the 2011 football season.

Solder said he's already gotten gobs of questions about the prospects of playing in the Pac-10 - never mind that he and his upperclass buds won't take part in the conference switch.

Meanwhile, the Buffs' time before the Big 12 media is scheduled for Wednesday, July 28 at 10:30 CDT. Also appearing that day are Kansas, Oklahoma and Texas.

CU's annual media day in Boulder is set for Saturday, Aug. 7.

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