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cu football

CU using its "summer school" to polish passing game

By Terry Frei
The Denver Post

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BOULDER — It was 7:30 in the morning, and if the Colorado football players had gotten too rowdy on the practice field, they might have awakened fellow students living in the adjacent Family Housing apartments.

A month before the start of official preseason practices, no CU coaches were in sight, in line with NCAA regulations tied to these "voluntary," player-run workouts in shorts and shirts (or skins).

Quarterbacks Tyler Hansen and Cody Hawkins passed the "script" back and forth and took turns directing the offense. At this stage, Han-sen, a junior from Murrieta, Calif., who started the final seven games of last season, still appears to be doing the majority of the work with the potential first unit and operates as what amounts to a

primary coach on the field, along with the other upperclassmen leaders.

"People seem to respect me, and I take on more leadership every day I'm out here," Hansen said. "I've organized all of this so far, and most people respect me for it. They listen to me."

The days of "going home" for the summer, maybe working a summer job and working out on the side, then reporting for college football in August, are long gone. At CU, most of the Buffaloes are enrolled in summer school, meaning they're around not only to practice (on their own, of course), but also weave through the ambitious reconstruction job in the University Memorial Center that mainly involves remodeling the infamous Alferd E. Packer Grill.

Hansen said the ongoing competition with Hawkins, coach Dan Hawkins' son, is friendly.

"It was maybe a little bit awkward sometimes last year, but not anymore," Hansen said. "We're comfortable with it now. There's still competition, but we just want to win games. Whatever's best for the team, we're going to be happy with."

The CU quarterbacks' tasks remains to become more familiar with a wide receiver corps that at least is suspect, especially after the talented Markques Simas

was suspended in June for the third time in four years because of off-field problems, lost his

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DaVaughn Thornton, right, celebrates with wide receiver Toney Clemons after Thornton, a tight end from Denver East, caught a touchdown pass during CU's spring football game at Folsom Field on April 10. The Buffs begin preseason practices Aug. 5. (Andy Cross, The Denver Post)

scholarship and left the program.

Scotty McKnight, a fifth-year senior, caught 76 passes last season. The only wide receivers likely to play this season who had catches in 2009 are Jason Espinoza (13), Will Jefferson (six) and Dustin Ebner (three).

Simas had 43 receptions, with 31 coming in the

final four games, when the hope in the Dal Ward Center was that he finally had straightened out.

He hadn't.

Simas' absence makes it even more important for junior Toney Clemons, who had to sit out last season after transferring to CU from Michigan, to live up to the hopes he raised in his year in waiting.

"He's a stud," Hansen said with a laugh. "Last year, early in camp, he still got reps with us and you could see it. We were going, 'Wow, we wish this guy can play with us.' Now he finally can play with us, and I'm excited.

"He's big, he's fast, he's got great hands and he's got an attitude to him. He's got a swagger."

Hansen ran down a list of other wide receivers he is convinced can make significant contributions, but it's clear that if Clemons is a bust, it will greatly lessen the chances of the Buffaloes being productive in the air this fall and significantly improving on last season's 3-9 record.

Even at the informal workouts, Clemons, from New Kensington, Pa., tends to stand out.

"We just try to work on our chemistry

out here," Clemons said. "We just want to get the kinks out of our plays, help the defense and have the defense help us. We're trying to make it as

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Senior quarterback Cody Hawkins will compete with junior Tyler Hansen to be CU's starter this season. Hawkins' father is CU coach Dan Hawkins. "It was maybe a little bit awkward sometimes last year, but not anymore," Hansen says. "We're comfortable with it now. ... We just want to win games." (Leah Millis, The Denver Post)

practicelike as possible and run things that will become second nature for us.

"This is all crucial for me. I need it. I have to work off the rust and learn everything, so it's like the back of your hand and you can play faster. So for me, it's about route running, reading defenses and learning how to play fast. Last year was my first year away from playing football on Fridays or Saturdays in . . . well, I don't even know how long. I wanted so bad to help them out, but I knew I couldn't. It was tough to go through watching, and it was tough to struggle with those guys, but it was a learning

experience, and I think I'm better because of it."

CU opens the season Sept. 4 against Colorado State at Invesco Field at Mile High.

"We already know a lot of people are counting us out of the Big 12," Hansen said. "We aren't expected to do a lot this year, and we definitely know that and will use that to our advantage this year."

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Bufs' schedule

Sept 4 CSU at Den. Noon

Sept 11 at Cal 1:30 p.m.

Sept 18 Hawaii 1:30 p.m.

Oct 2 Georgia 2:30 p.m.

Oct 9 At Missouri TBA

Oct 16 Baylor TBA

Oct 23 Texas Tech TBA

Oct 30 At Oklahoma TBA

Nov 6 At Kansas TBA

Nov 13 Iowa State TBA

Nov 20 Kansas State TBA

Nov 26 At Nebraska 1:30 p.m.

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