

Coming into his own: CU's Solder blossoms on, off field

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Boulder Daily Camera

Posted: 07/24/2010 11:07:13 PM MDT

Nate Solder wasn't always the biggest kid in the room.

Lying in the nursery in St. Anthony's hospital in Denver on April 12, 1988, he was a modest 7 pounds, 3 ounces when he was born three weeks early. There were few clues back then that he would grow to become a 6-foot-9, 318-pound left tackle who runs like an elk escaping a hunter.

In fact, very little throughout Solder's childhood foretold a potential All-American career as an offensive lineman at the University of Colorado. He was a boy with posters of professional skiers on his walls, not pro ballplayers.

He raced giant slalom events and lived on the slopes. His father allowed him and his brother a set number of days each year to skip school to ski. Solder played baseball in the summer, but he was more of an outdoorsman, learning to camp, fish and hunt.

He didn't play video games or Pop Warner football. He said the sport didn't become important to him until he realized during his senior season in high school that it could lead to a free college education.

However, there was a point when it seemed he might not make it to college.

Solder grew up in two towns off Highway 285 deep in the Colorado Rocky Mountains. He lived in Leadville, where his parents operated a bed and breakfast, through the fifth grade. But he was struggling to get good grades and to get along with classmates and teachers. A boy who always had been singing, building things and creating art was withdrawing.

His parents, Ed and Peri, decided to move their boys, Nate and his older brother John, south to Buena Vista to live on a small 40-acre ranch with horses, sheep and a donkey. It was a life of adventure Solder loved. After a short time there, the old Nate returned.

"I went, 'Wow, my little boy is back to where he used to be,'" Peri Solder said.

Solder thrived in school and athletics from that point on. He became a model student who has already earned his degree in biology as he begins his senior season at CU this fall.

Solder was one of three Buffs named to the preseason All-Big 12 Conference team last week, and he will be one of three players escorting coach Dan Hawkins to Big 12 media days this week in Dallas.

Three days of coaches and players forecasting the season to come begins Monday and continues through Wednesday afternoon, the day the Buffs are scheduled to speak. Here is how Solder sees his team after a long offseason:

"It's going to come down to, in my mind, execution," Solder said. "That's what it's going to all be about. The execution is going to stem from our preparation. Hopefully, we are doing everything we can right now to be able to execute on the field.

"It's not even like we're going to be a couple games better if you were to buckle it up a little bit more. It's like we're going to win a lot more games. I really believe that."

There might not be a player on the Colorado football team who has made as much progress personally and athletically as Solder during the past five years. He joined the program in 2006 as a lanky freshman who was recruited to CU by former coach Gary Barnett's staff. He played tight end his first two years in the program before making the move to the offensive line.

Over the past two seasons he has become one of the best players at his position in the nation. Playboy Magazine named him to its prestigious preseason All-America team earlier this summer. He is a candidate for the Outland Trophy and

Lombardi Award.

Freakish athleticism for a man his size has been a key ingredient in his development. He runs a 4.9-second 40-yard dash and has 10 percent body fat. He also has a competitive side that made him unpopular in gym class growing up and when playing games with family and friends.

"He wanted the gold medal. He always wanted to go for the top," his father said. "He is inherently competitive. I don't think you could blame that on anybody but him. That's Nate."

He has a certain future in the NFL after this season and next April could be the Buffs' first first-round draft pick since former defensive lineman Tyler Brayton was selected in the first round in 2003. Solder, on the advice of coaches and his parents, has secured a modest insurance policy to guard against lost future income if he suffered a serious injury during his final season in Boulder.

"Just as if you would plan for the next year of your life, I've set up myself where I'm not going to be shocked by the things that are going to come," Solder said. "But I also know that this year is going to be more important in my life than anything. It's always kind of the thing that you're on that you have to focus on. That's what I'm all about. So if I am just always constantly focused on next year and what can happen and all these things, I'm going to miss out on so many things that I'm doing now and I'm just not going to be the player that I could be."

Hawkins said Solder could be as good as Denver Broncos left tackle Ryan Clady, whom Hawkins recruited to Boise State before he took over at CU.

Solder could have left for the NFL following last season when Big 12 coaches named him a first-team all-conference tackle. He probably wouldn't have been picked as high, but it was never an option for him.

"There were so many things left undone," he said. "I just feel like I can be so much better from a personal stance. And I feel it's just the natural way that things work here. You stay five years. I hate the fact, and I can't speak for everyone, but in college basketball right now it's real popular to stay one year and leave. I don't even see why you waste your time. I think if you commit to a college, I think that's your duty to commit to that college and be there for four years. I think it's the same thing for me. They've given me so much. Why is it that I can just dip out the second that I have a chance to. That's just my job. That's why I'm here."

His coaches and teammates say Solder is an achiever, driven to please those he loves and respects. His mother calls him "mission oriented."

"I think every season I've gotten better and I think it's the same kind of deal," he said. "Coach Hawk has never told me, 'Wow, you've really made it.' or 'Wow, you're really there.' That's not how it ever works. He's always challenging me and I'm always getting frustrated. He always wants me to do more and I'm always like, 'Wow, I guess I can.'"

Solder has blossomed off the field, too. He was shy and unsure of himself doing interviews as a freshman and sophomore, but he is a likely candidate to be a team captain this fall and is now comfortable in almost any conversation from the Gulf oil spill to the plight of children in the Third World to blocking the Nebraska Cornhuskers.

"He's just a first-class guy in every way," Hawkins said. "He's off the charts in every category when you talk about work ethic and honesty and integrity and humility and being a team guy. Just all of that. He is off the charts."

"He's a great example for everybody. He's great in football. He's great in school. He's got plans to be a veterinarian. He's got his life outside of football. He's got it figured out."

Solder is no longer sure he wants to become a veterinarian, though caring for animals is still something about which he is passionate. He is eyeing a career working to find common ground between corporations and environmentalists.

During his time at CU, Solder has traveled to Italy and Guatemala to do charity work and help children. He has talked to his parents about one day turning the family ranch into a camp for kids.

"If he puts his mind to it, he does it," Ed Solder said. "That's the guy he is."

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