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Brooks: Tau Lightens His Load, Eyes Final Chance

BOULDER - Sione Tau is out of time. He's a fifth-year senior whose hope for playing in his first college football game has dwindled to a final season. It's his last chance to make a good first impression on a new coaching staff, and so far he's done it.

"This is pretty much my last shot to put it out there," Tau said. "Yeah, I'm pretty excited."

So is new Colorado offensive line coach Steve Marshall, who has shrugged off the darker portions of Tau's resume - academic ineligibility that cost Tau his redshirt freshman season, a suspension for violating team rules that shelved Tau as a sophomore.

Said Marshall: "I don't know what's happened to him the last three or four years, and to be honest with you, as I told Sione, I don't really care."

But here's what gives them both hope: For maybe the first time since he came to Boulder, Tau cares. The proof comes in looking at him, watching him move at right tackle, talking with him.

Right now, Tau, a Hawaiian, is the Big Island. In early January he was a couple of luaus shy of 400 pounds. He stands 6-foot-5, but 380 pounds were still too many for him to carry comfortably and effectively - and Tau knew it.

"He came in my office on Day 1, expressed his concerns, his strengths, weaknesses," said Malcolm Blacken, CU's new director of speed, strength and conditioning. "He's done nothing since Jan. 8 but work at it. I take my hat off to him, because I've asked him to do some uncomfortable stuff and he's done it every step of the way, some of it with a grimace on his face. But he's done it. I can't do nothing but respect that."

Since that first visit with Blacken, Tau has increased his water intake while cutting back on salt and fried foods. Vegetables and salads have become prominent in his diet, overall portions have decreased.

"I'm just watching what I consume," said Tau, who obviously was consuming too much. He has dropped 20 pounds and wants to shed another 28 by mid-August, leveling off at 330. Blacken's plan is for Tau to "interval" his weight loss, dropping two pounds one week, one pound the next, then back to two pounds, back to one pound, etc.

"Can he play heavier than (330)?" asked Blacken. "Sure he can. But the lighter he gets at this point in time, losing body fat is going to speed him up. That's what we want. We've got him with a nutritionist and he's really cleaned up his diet. That's huge. A guy that size, when he was 380, he was eating a lot of calories. We're going to make sure whatever he's putting in, there's a nutrient value . . . there wasn't before. He understands that. We've made it clear to him and he's done a good job."

He's done it on the field as well, noting that through the first half of spring drills, he feels "stronger, better conditioned (and) quicker." Blacken sees all of the above: "I can see it already, he can see it. He's starting to feel light on his feet. And that's with 22 (pounds lost) - imagine the next 20. He's feeling good and it's giving him a chance. That's all he wanted, a chance to compete. Now we have to ward off injury and keep lifting. He's doing a good job; I'm real proud of him."

The burden to improve is on Tau, but he says a huge boost has come from Blacken and the overall energy and positive vibe created in the weight room. "It's motivating everybody to get better," Tau said.

After his first glimpses of the "new" Tau, Marshall said his late-blooming project "has some skills. He's a smart guy and I think he really likes football. He's in that mix for one of those tackle jobs. He's got a unique set of abilities: he's a big man and can move people off the football. He's just got to get used to playing a lot of football again. Right now he's competing for a job. For the first week and a half, he's been learning just like the rest of them."

Tau, who hasn't played in a game since his senior season at Honolulu's Damien Memorial High School, is competing with sophomores Jack Harris and David Bakhtiari and junior Ryan Dannewitz, among others. Marshall has nine or 10 players in the O-line who are getting tackle-to-tackle spring auditions. So far, Tau has exclusively lined up on the right side, but he expects to be shifted as the experimentation continues.

"I played tackle in high school, then came here and was a scout team guard/center," he said. "Tackle

is pretty much my dominant position. I haven't worked on the left side, but hopefully that happens soon."

Even with the loss of All-America left tackle Nate Solder, Tau believes the O-line will be among CU's stronger positions this fall. That, he said, will be out of necessity: "Last year, some of the (losses) were kind of on the line. This year, we're trying to set the tempo - it starts with us. Coach Marshall has been pushing us to set tempo, he wants us full speed all the time. The O-line is going to be a big factor in this season; we're all training hard."

With CU's coaching change, all players entered spring drills on equal footing. It was a fresh start for all, but perhaps particularly for Tau, who said he and his teammates "have been coming out every day since (March 11) and trying to show these coaches what we've got and how we can help the team win.

"This is a whole different ball game, but it's pretty exciting to learn from coaches that played here when (the Buffs) were at the top of their game. And coaches who have been to the next level - they pretty much know what it takes to win. I'm excited being under their wing. They're expecting us to grasp their whole concept of winning. There's an energy around here now."

Marshall isn't as much into individual pages being turned as how the book reads when the Buffs open the 2011 season at Hawaii on Sept. 3. "You'd have to ask him (about a fresh start)," Marshall said. "I know one thing: the guy works hard and has gotten himself better, from a physical standpoint. There's no question he's still too big, but he's worked extremely hard this last month or two and I expect him to continue. We'll see at the end of the day where it goes.

"There's an athlete in there . . . he's got a chance."

At this point, that's all Sione Tau is hoping to create for himself. Lost time doesn't have to mean a lost cause.

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