

CU Buffs set rotation for QBs

Despite injury, Hirschman No. 2; Walk-on Schrock locks up third-string job

By **Ryan Thorburn** Camera Sports Writer
Boulder Daily Camera

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Innocent bystander.

That's what Nick Hirschman was relegated to for most of Colorado's fall camp after suffering a foot injury.

Meanwhile, starter Tyler Hansen practiced like a senior captain should, and freshman walk-on John Schrock made the most of his opportunity.

However, Hirschman was impressive enough during spring drills and through the first six practices of camp to earn the No. 2 spot. Starting with Monday's practice, the backup plans to be back on the CU practice fields.

"Nothing is given to anybody on this team. It's a whole new mindset and it's good for us," Hirschman said when asked if he felt comfortable with his position in the pecking order. "The way I looked at it is that I must have played well during that time frame. I was glad they had enough confidence in me to allow me to keep my spot. But as athletes, we're always looking behind our shoulders and looking ahead of us to make sure."

The Buffs closed camp with a scrimmage on Friday that was dominated by the defense. One of the few bright spots for the offense was Schrock, who threw a pair of touchdown passes to lock up his spot on the travel roster for the Sept. 3 opener at Hawaii.

"I was incredibly impressed with John. That's a hard situation to be thrown into your first semester here," Hirschman said. "To come in with no prior knowledge of the offense, I thought he stepped up and played real well. I'm proud of him."

While his teammates were grinding in the heat, Hirschman was studying his X's and O's in the Dal Ward Center. The coaching staff didn't want the 6-3, 230-pound redshirt freshman standing on his injured foot watching three-hour practices.

"It allowed me to get into my playbook even more so than I would have been able to having practices every day," Hirschman said. "I was able to master the offense even better than I think I would have been able to."

CU head coach Jon Embree was unhappy with the offense after the final scrimmage, but wide receiver Paul Richardson and running back Rodney Stewart didn't play, and Hansen, Ryan Miller and other regulars didn't play much.

"I feel good when we have the 11 that I need to have. I like it," Embree said of the starters. "The problem is we're going to need more than 11."

Hansen started the first seven games of the 2010 season but suffered a ruptured spleen against Texas Tech, allowing Cody Hawkins to finish his polarizing career under center.

When Hirschman is healthy, the 2011 Buffs feel good about their backup plan. During three spring scrimmages, he completed 22 of 43 passes for 274 yards, three touchdowns and no interceptions.

"Of course we don't want to get anybody hurt or anything like that," Hirschman said. "But the coaches have been preaching that we all have to be ready because if someone gets hurt it's better to have a smooth transition than a bumpy road."

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cu football

CU's Tyler Hansen can finally stop looking over his shoulder

By Tom Kensler
The Denver Post

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Tyler Hansen rolls out and looks for a receiver during spring practice, when he was named the starting QB for this season. (Cliff Grassmick, Daily Camera)

BOULDER — Having been yanked around the depth chart like a yo-yo for three years under the previous coaching staff, Colorado quarterback Tyler Hansen is finally in a good place.

For the first time in his college career, the senior won't be looking over his shoulder to see if Cody Hawkins is about to take his job. And, Hansen

said, he now knows that the present staff has complete confidence in him.

Hansen did not sulk or squawk, but he never understood why then-coach Dan Hawkins only allowed his son to run the two-minute drill — even during games in which Hansen had been the starter. Hansen didn't want to believe it was nepotism or anything personal. It still hurt.

"It was difficult, it was rough," Hansen recalled after a recent practice. "I tried to put on a good face. There were times when I put on a little mask, I guess. I was trying to show that nothing was going on, nothing was bothering me."

Hansen paused for a moment. This was not easy to talk about.

"You have to be politically correct and nice in a situation like that. You have to remain positive for the team," he continued. "I got along with Cody. But, yeah, it was a little awkward."

"Anytime you're in competition with someone, there's going to be a little tension. But when you're in competition with the coach's son, there's going to be more tension."

Now cleared of the mental clutter, Hansen looks free and relaxed. And his performance in August

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camp reflects an uninhibited flow to his game. New quarterbacks coach Rip Scherer said the progress Hansen has made from the beginning of spring practice to now is "better than I could have imagined."

Scherer's 37 years of coaching include the past two NFL seasons as QB coach with the Carolina Panthers under current Broncos coach John Fox and four seasons with the Cleveland Browns. Scherer paid the 6-foot-1, 215-pound Hansen the ultimate compliment.

"I think he has a chance to

Fan Mail

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play at the next level, I really do," Scherer said. "He's certainly not close to being there yet, but Tyler reminds me of Drew Brees with some of the things he can do."

Hansen said he doesn't have time to dream about the NFL. There is so much to do, so much to learn.

Under first-year head coach Jon Embree, Colorado has switched from Dan Hawkins' multiple offense, which often employed the spread formation, to a pro-style system with West Coast offense principles.

Hansen now takes most snaps from under center. In his estimation, under Hawkins the Buffs set up in the shotgun about 80 percent of the time.

Hansen prefers to be under center. He played that way in high school.

"When you're under center you don't have to take your eyes off the defense (to catch a shotgun snap), so you have more awareness," he said. "You can see the defense move around. I wish we would have done this before."

Waiting for a chance at CU

Hansen and his family want to make it clear they are grateful for the opportunities during the Hawkins regime. How many quarterbacks of teams in top conferences get tabbed to start games as true freshmen? Taking the reins in 2008 when Cody Hawkins struggled, Hansen became a starter as an 18-year-old against Missouri and Iowa State.

He started the final seven games of 2009 and was named the starter prior to the 2010 season. Former CU offensive coordinators Mark Helfrich (now at Oregon) and Eric Kiesau (California) remain friends of the Han-sens. There were some good times.

And with Cody Hawkins already established at Colorado, the Hansens knew to some extent what they were getting into on Feb. 5, 2008, when Tyler sat down at Chaparral High School in Temecula, Calif., and signed a national letter of intent with CU.

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Hansen basically chose the Buffaloes on the spot during the summer prior to his senior season. He made no other official visits. Cody Hawkins had served as one of Hansen's official hosts during his recruiting trip to Boulder.

Rick Hansen, Tyler's father and a starting quarterback at San Diego State during the early 1980s and now a high school coach, said he doesn't have "any regrets and Tyler doesn't have any" about signing and staying at Colorado.

"You make it what it is for you. I think in the long run, the more battles in life, you grow for it," Rick Hansen said. "But when does the long run become the long run? Is it two years from now, 10 years from now?"

"Tyler tried not to be sensitive. He tried to roll with it. He took the high road."

That's not to say the journey hasn't been rocky.

Untenable QB rotation

In 2008 against Missouri, Hansen became just the fifth true freshman in Colorado history to start a game at quarterback. But Hansen had given up his redshirt in the eighth game, a decision that he and his father fretted over for days before deciding to go for it. The following week, however, Cody Hawkins trotted out as the starter against Texas A&M.

Hansen took the opening snaps in the next game, against Iowa State. But with CU trailing 10-0, he was pulled after halftime. Cody Hawkins, to his credit, led the Buffs to a 28-24 comeback victory. But Hansen was surprised and disappointed that he failed to get an opportunity in the final two games, against Oklahoma State and Nebraska.

Hansen is more nimble and athletic and has a stronger arm than Hawkins.

"It was a little strange to rotate quarterbacks

like we did," Hansen said. "But being a freshman, I was just happy to get out there and get some playing time."

In 2009, Hansen was told privately during August camp that Cody Hawkins would be the starter and Hansen could redshirt. But off came Hansen's redshirt again, this time before the first drive of the fourth quarter in a 38-14 loss at No. 2 Texas, the fifth game of the season.

Hansen started the final seven games of 2009, but Hawkins trotted out on the field to run the two-minute offense late in the first half of the 20-6 loss at Kansas State. Hawkins was intercepted with eight seconds left before halftime.

"Tyler never said anything about it, but mentally that could have taken a toll," senior tailback Brian Lockridge said last week. "Being told you are the leader and then you're not the leader . . . he kept his cool through that."

In 2010, Hansen again topped the depth chart. And he started all seven games before suffering a lacerated spleen that required surgery and ended his season. The Buffs opened 3-1 after beating Georgia 29-27 at home. But the next game, Hawkins replaced Hansen against Missouri and finished that game with more pass

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attempts than Hansen.

"Last year I got hurt, so you can't control that," said Hansen, who had part of his spleen removed. "But one week I'm the quarterback when we beat Georgia, and the next week I get pulled (against Missouri). So I guess you could say there were some mixed signals."

Comfortable as a senior

Each August, Dan Hawkins told his team that every starting job, including quarterback, would be up for grabs until the opening game was just a week or two away. His philosophy was generally to keep players in the dark and promote intrasquad competition for as long as possible because that's how players improve.

Embree takes a different approach. He believes it best to let players know where they stand at all times. Hansen was named CU's starting quarterback during spring practice.

"Tyler doesn't like to lose," Embree said. "With him, you can tell that hurts."

The coaching staff couldn't be more pleased with Hansen. Offensive coordinator Eric Bieniemy talks about Hansen looking comfortable.

"Just knowing everything that the kid has gone through, this year is important to him," Bieniemy said. "He knows this is his team."

Scherer praises Hansen's command, his presence in the pocket, his playmaking ability.

"Tyler knows the offense in and out," Scherer said. "He works at it. He studies tape. He's got great vision. He handles pressure. He's got 'it' for what you're looking for in a quarterback."

"I'll tell you what, Tyler is going to be a good quarterback. It's a shame we don't have him for two years. We should have. It's a shame he was played that way (and did not redshirt as a

freshman or sophomore). But that's water over the dam."

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Friendships on CU staff could help Buffs

By Brian Howell Longmont Times-Call
Longmont Times-Call

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Ask Jon Embree a question about Eric Bieniemy and the University of Colorado head football coach is sure to come up with a quick joke about his offensive coordinator.

Bieniemy will fire right back when given the opportunity.

Ask defensive coordinator Greg Brown about Embree, Bieniemy or others on the staff, and he's sure to smile and glow about the talents of that coach.

Of all the changes going on with Colorado football this year, one of the most important -- yet somewhat hidden -- changes could be the friendships that exist on the coaching staff.

A year ago, former head coach Dan Hawkins and his assistants were a staff divided. Perhaps they weren't so divided publicly, but they certainly were privately. And, publicly there were no unsolicited compliments and good-natured jokes being thrown around.

Of course, there are differences in the staffs. Last year, Hawkins was on the hottest of hot seats and he and the assistants knew they had to win or possibly lose their jobs. This year's staff is brand new, has yet to lose a game in Boulder, and has a good measure of security.

Yet, hang around this team for even a little while and it's clear that these coaches genuinely like each other. It helps that many of them have the common bond of being Buffs. Embree, Bieniemy, Brian Cabral and Kanavis McGhee all played at CU. J.D. Brookhart and Bobby Kennedy grew up in Colorado. So did Brown, whose father Irv is a sports legend in this state and a former CU coach.

"I can remember when my dad used to take me here to watch spring ball when I was a little kid," Brown said. "To be fortunate enough to be invited to come back and be a part of this, that's a great honor."

Many others on the staff share Brown's enthusiasm, and many of them have already expressed the enjoyment they get from working with each other.

Will a staff that gets along and respects each other produce better results on the field? We'll find out. But it can't hurt.

THIS AND THAT ...

- Speaking of the Buffs, Sports Illustrated recently picked them to finish last in the Pac-12, at 0-9 in the conference. SI picks Washington State to finish 1-8 in the conference, which means the magazine is picking the Cougars to come to Boulder and take a win at Folsom Field on Oct. 1. That says a lot about SI's feelings about the Buffs, considering Washington State is 5-32 overall and 2-25 in conference play the last three years.
- Forget Orton vs. Tebow. The key to the Denver Broncos' offense will be the Knowshon Moreno/Willis McGahee duo at running back. If they keep the chains moving on those short-yardage situations -- a problem area last year -- the Broncos will be better.
- One quick look around the AFC West ought to give the Broncos some hope. The Chiefs and Raiders don't scare anybody, and the Chargers -- despite having Pro Bowl quarterback Philip Rivers -- aren't the same team they were a couple years ago. Denver has work to do, but competing for the AFC West title may not be out of the question.
- How winnable is the AFC West? In the past five seasons, the AFC West has had fewer 10-win teams (four) than any other division in the AFC. The AFC East, North and South divisions have all had eight 10-win teams in that time.
- Not that winning 10 games will be easy for Denver. From 2006-10, 22 of the NFL's 30 teams had at least one 10-win season. The eight that did not: Buffalo, Houston, Oakland, Washington, Detroit, St. Louis, San Francisco and the mighty Broncos.
- Four months ago, who would have thought the Colorado Rockies would be playing meaningless baseball the final two months? The Rockies, fighting to stay out of last place in the NL West rather than fighting for first place, have got to be one of baseball's most disappointing teams this season.
- Rockies shortstop Troy Tulowitzki is quietly having a phenomenal season, despite the team's failure. At the end of May, his batting average was a dismal .250. Going into Saturday, he was sitting at .307 with 25 home runs, 85 RBIs and nine stolen bases. He's got a great shot to pass his career highs in home runs (32 in 2009) and RBIs (99 in 2007).

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