

Keith Miller, former CU football player, makes Denver debut as opera singer

By Ray Mark Rinaldi *The Denver Post* *The Denver Post*

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They're the same drill really, football and opera. You make the team, put in the practice, and when the whistle blows you perform like your life depended on it.

Still, they don't overlap much among fans. Chances are that half the people who read this story — it is about a football star who became a world-class opera singer — wouldn't know which NFL team has won the most Super Bowls. The other half couldn't tell you who wrote "Madame Butterfly."

The answers, for the clueless and the clueless, are Pittsburgh and Puccini, and it's a safe bet that Keith Miller would get both. He's the former University of Colorado fullback who found a new life as a bass-baritone. These days, he performs at concert halls across the country, though he still has the swagger of an athlete, and the triceps. When he talks about his fledgling career, it's all about conditioning, getting ready for the big play.

And there's no downtime for an athlete in training, not even between gigs at The Metropolitan Opera House and Carnegie Hall, or here in Denver, where he makes his debut Saturday night with Opera Colorado.

"You can take the preseason off and play it safe, or you can put the work in," said Miller, who at 38 is just getting to the place where many baritones start to do their best singing.

A player stays focused.

"I know what's in front of me," he says. "I know what I need to do to be my best."

It's a story with the sort of wide turns Rossini might compose a score for (he wrote "The Barber of Seville," football fans). And it starts in the little town of Ovid, Colo., where Miller was raised. His dad worked for John Deere, his mother was a school teacher. Of course, there was a family farm, and Miller was up at 5 a.m. helping with sugar beets, tending to cattle.

He knew early on he wanted something different. He worked hard, stayed out of the kind of trouble rural kids can get into, earned a 3.8 GPA.

"I didn't even drink until I was 24," he says. "I knew if I didn't do it clean and the right way, I'd never get out of there."

Football got him out. He was tough and fast, and his school made it to the state championships. He won a scholarship to CU. He remembers going to the school early on and watching the Buffaloes practice. He dreamed of making "one play, just one play" with the team.

It turned out better. Miller was on the team from 1992 to 1996, lettering the last two years. He played on three bowl teams, including the 1994 team that finished in the top 10. It won the Cotton Bowl and

Holiday Bowl the next two years, points out Larry Zimmer, the longtime, and legendary, KOA radio announcer known as the "Voice of the Buffaloes."

"That era was probably the best that CU football has ever been," said Zimmer. "If you add up the numbers, in the years Keith played, they were 31 and 5."

Miller was there for the famous 64-yard "hail Mary" pass of '94, when the Buffs miraculously beat Michigan in the final seconds of a big game. (That, opera fans, is one of the greatest college football plays of all time.)

A semblance of a pro play followed, five years with the European and Arena football leagues. He may or may not have developed an NFL career — he was working out with teams, including the Broncos, but another interest lured him away.

Classic moves

Miller had become enchanted with opera in college. It started with a date to see "Phantom of the Opera." It grew into afternoons listening to recordings of truer works, such as Mozart's "Don Giovanni." He sang along, taught himself the lyrics. He threw caution to the wind, tried out at an open audition for the Pine Mountain Music Festival in Michigan. He got the gig, and an agent, and sang his way into Philadelphia's Academy of Vocal Arts.

Then a funny thing happened. He tried out for The Metropolitan Opera Company's Young Artist Development Program, and instead of getting in, he got offered a real job. Since then, he's been in scores of productions, performing such roles as the King in "Aida," Count Monterone in "Rigoletto" and Zuniga in "Carmen."

Over the past few years, in addition to concert gigs, he's performed at the Washington National Opera (as The Bonze in "Madame Butterfly"), the Seattle Opera (Sarastro in "The Magic Flute") and at the well-regarded Florida Grand Opera (Figaro in "The Marriage of Figaro").

Opera is a medium of stories, and it helps that Miller has a unique one. He didn't grow up learning languages, or playing an instrument, like other singers. He came late to the game. And he took a risk on music "when he clearly had potential" as a football player, said Opera Colorado general director Greg Carpenter.

Miller's deep and versatile voice has "great size and depth," Carpenter says, "a good, solid top and the kind of bottom you want to see in a bass-baritone."

"He has a sizable instrument at a time when we are seeing less of that," said Carpenter.

Opera Colorado was looking for a production that would allow it to showcase Miller's varied talents. They found it in Mexican composer Daniel Catán's 1996 "Florencia en el Amazonas," a rare Spanish-language opera with doses of magical realism. Miller plays Riolo, a character with mystical traits who disappears into the sea and returns as a sort of spiritual superhero.

It's a physical part that even has Miller flying above the stage on ropes — a good fit for a singer who happens to be in very good shape. He brings a confident athleticism to the gravity-defying moments that you wouldn't think imaginable from a guy like Pavarotti.

Opera Colorado insists Miller was hired for his voice, not his potential to bring a new set of fans to Ellie Caulkins Opera House. And conductor Ramon Tebar, who hails from Spain, didn't even know Miller was a former football player ("He played soccer? Hmm.")

But a few additional ticket buyers wouldn't hurt, and Miller's background gets its mentions in promo materials. "Floencia" has a lush and easy-to-like score, but the title isn't familiar to most opera-goers. "We want as many people as possible to see what we do, and that means having every seat filled," said Carpenter.

Working overtime

Miller isn't oblivious, or resistant, to the marketing efforts that play up his past over his singing ability, or that bring him more attention than the star of the show, in this case Pamela Armstrong, who sings the colorful role of Floencia (opera fans need to know she's a skilled soprano, football fans that she's hot in that voluptuous diva way).

But he knows a good back story isn't everything in a competitive field. Opera singers need to keep egos in check and do the hard work. A lot of singers, he said, are "so good, so impenetrable. Like athletes, they get a sense of self-worth that's not really there."

A few things are keeping him humble. He has to fight to stay in the kind of shape that keeps the good roles coming. That means running 4 miles a day, working out. It's hard in a career that takes you from place to place. Last year, he took on roles in 10 cities over nine months.

He's also helping other artists. In conjunction with work at the Crested Butte Music Festival, he has created something called "Puissance Training," which gets singers into the kind of physical shape that will help sustain long careers.

"I'm 38 now. I'm on a career path that will take me to 70. But the question for me is, 'What do I need to do to allow that,' " Miller said.

Most humbling of all: He and his wife, Sage, have a new baby, Josephine, who helps "keep it real." With a daughter in the mix, "I know I can be nothing but an example of the best for the rest of my life."

If his voice holds up, the possibilities are vast. From Denver, he goes on to "Billy Budd" at The Met. After that, he'll sing a staged piece with the New York Philharmonic at the Park Avenue Armory.

"To survive is the most important thing because not everybody does," he said.

In football, it would have been over by now.

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"FLORENCIA EN EL AMAZONAS." Opera. Daniel Catan, composer. Brad Trexell, director. Starring Pamela Armstrong, Inna Dukach, Beth Clayton, Hector Vasquez, Kevin Langan, Greg Fedderly and Keith Miller. In Spanish with English subtitles. Four performances at the Ellie Caulkins Opera House. 7:30 p.m. Saturday, March 27, March 30, and April 1. \$20-\$150. operacolorado.org or 303-468-2030

This story has been corrected in this online archive. Due to a source error, Keith Miller's wife's name was incorrect. Her name is Sage.



Clippers welcome Chauncey Billups back to Staples Center

By Associated Press | Saturday, March 17, 2012 | <http://www.bostonherald.com> | **NBA Coverage**

LOS ANGELES — All Chauncey Billups had to do was show up and the mood in the locker room improved.

"It's definitely bittersweet," Billups said. "I would just like to be walking in and putting my jersey on, of course, going out there and fighting with the guys. Obviously, I can't do that. But on the flip side, it's just really good to see the guys and see them just as happy to see me."

The five-time All-Star is done for the season because of a torn left Achilles tendon. He was at Staples Center on Saturday morning before the Los Angeles Clippers played the Houston Rockets.

Billups was injured Feb. 6 during a 107-102 overtime victory at Orlando and had surgery eight days later. The Clippers were 15-7 when they learned Billups' season was over. They have been playing close to .500 ball since, with losses in five of their last seven. During the 15-year veteran's absence, Randy Foye has been starting at shooting guard.

"It's been tough, and kind of a helpless feeling," Billups said. "It's been a struggle, watching the inconsistency night in and night out. We were really in a rhythm when I went down. Roles had been defined, and guys had embraced their roles. Then when I went down, things kind of changed a little bit."

The Clippers claimed Billups in December after he was waived by the New York Knicks under the league's new amnesty clause. He averaged 15.0 points in 20 games, and is still the team's third-leading scorer.

"I've looked at some games, and we've been playing selfishly — both defensively and offensively," Billups said. "We got away from what we were doing early in the season, and guys are trying to figure it out again. When we play against really good teams, we come out and play hard. But against teams we should really beat, sometimes we let our guard down and get away from our principles. And that lack of discipline hurts us."

That could change once newly acquired Nick Young joins the Clippers. The shooting guard was acquired from Washington on Thursday in a three-team trade with Denver. He will replace Foye, his former Wizards teammate, in the starting backcourt alongside Chris Paul.

"It's a great feeling, coming back to family and playing for a great team. You can't wish for nothing better than that," Young said. "It's a dream come true. The organization wanted me and they traded for me, so I feel like I'm a part of this team already."

Young was born in Los Angeles and was a two-time all-conference player at USC before the Wizards made him the 16th overall pick in the 2007 draft. At the time of the three-team trade, the fifth-year player was averaging 11.6 points.

"He just gives us more size in the backcourt," coach Vinny Del Negro said. "He's a proven scorer in this league, he's explosive and he can take you inside and outside. How it's all going to come together with the chemistry of the team and everything, time will tell."

The last time Young played against the Clippers was Feb. 15. He missed his first nine shots and finished 5 for 18 with 14 points. Still, general manager Neil Olshey is confident Young will fill the team's needs at both end of the court.

"We've been looking for a traditional 6-6 or 6-7 two-guard that can defend those guys on the opposition because we've had a lot of trouble with the bigger guards," Olshey said. "Nick is a multidimensional scorer. He can score in pick-and-rolls, isolations, off screens, and he can catch and shoot. He's one of the best catch-and-shoot players in the league."

Just as important, Olshey said, is the depth Young brings to the roster.

"We can go deeper into our bench, which we're going to need," he said. "I mean, we're playing six games in eight days and 10 in 14. So it's just not going to end between now and the end of the season."

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Chauncey Billups returns to Clippers

By Arash Markazi

LOS ANGELES -- When **Chauncey Billups** walked into the Clippers' locker room Saturday morning, wearing a dark blue suit and a walking boot on his left foot, he barely had time to look at his locker before **Chris Paul** went to him immediately started critiquing his wardrobe.

"Already," Billups said with a smile as he put his crutches down. "I haven't been back more than three minutes."

As soon as word spread Billups had arrived, players walked in from the training room and film room to give him a hug and welcome him back.

It was the first time Billups had been back at Staples Center since Feb. 2 after he ruptured his left Achilles tendon Feb. 7 in Orlando. Since Billups left the team, the Clippers were 9-11 and had lost nine of their last 14 games. They had also faded down the stretch in close games with an 8-8 record in games decided by five points or fewer.

Just seeing Billups back brought a smile to every player and coach in a Clippers locker room devoid of smiles in recent weeks. Less than 48 hours earlier, the Clippers met for over an hour after an embarrassing 91-87 loss to the Phoenix Suns, who were playing without **Steve Nash** and **Grant Hill**.

"It was great having Chauncey back," Paul said. "I wish he would take that boot off and stop playing and get out on the court. We could use him but he's being selfish."

Paul joked with Billups about taking his boot off and putting his uniform on as the two sat in front of their lockers, which are next to each other. The Clippers have hung Billups' uniform up in his locker for every game, home and away, since he was injured and Billups smiled when he saw his No. 1 hanging when he walked into the locker room on Saturday.

"It's definitely bittersweet," Billups said. "I would like to be walking in and putting on my jersey of course and going out there and fighting with the guys. On the flip side, it's just really good to see the guys."

Watching the Clippers on television from his home in Denver had been almost as hard on Billups as his current rehabilitation. He could see the team was lost without him and there was nothing he could do from his couch as his left foot was propped up on a pillow in his living room.

"It's been tough," Billups said. "It's a helpless feeling. Even though I've been in contact with the guys the whole way, they've been more worried if I was getting better and I've been more worried about what's going on with the team. At the same time it's been a struggle to watch us be inconsistent night in



Chauncey Billups had not been to Staples Center since Feb. 2 before rejoining the team on the bench in street clothes on Saturday.

and night out. ”

Billups had a better view of the game Saturday as he sat alongside the Clippers’ coaches on the bench. He plans to be there for all home games the rest of the season but said his daily rehabilitation schedule will prevent him from traveling with the team.

Not even Billups’ presence on the bench could totally revive the slumping Clippers. Despite pulling out a 95-91 win against the Rockets, they made many of the same mistakes on offense and defense that have led to losses over the past month. Houston, playing without **Kyle Lowry** and **Kevin Martin**, their top two scorers, and without **Marcus Camby** and **Derek Fisher**, whom they traded for Thursday, were in control for much of the game and jumped out to a 14-point lead in the first half before losing late.

“It’s just one win that helps us in the standings,” Paul said. “We have another one tomorrow and we got to get consistent. It’s one of those games where if we play all these close games, if they hit one more shot, maybe your story changes that quick. We have to get consistent and string together six or seven in a row and then we can talk.”

Even though Billups wasn’t able to contribute on the court, his advice to Paul in the fourth quarter when the Clippers were behind by six points with less than three minutes left, proved to be critical.

“He told me, ‘C, we need you to score, we need you to be more offensive-minded’ and I needed that,” Paul said. “I usually call him after every game and we talk about what he saw. It’s one thing to talk to him after the game when you can’t change what happens but now he’s here at the game and can help us.”
