

Pressure's on Nick Kasa to catch on with CU Buffs

D-lineman making switch to TE, a position with little depth at CU

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Spring generally isn't a pressure-packed time of year for most college football players, but this year Colorado tight end Nick Kasa is absolutely under the gun.

Kasa is heading toward his senior season trying to learn a new position in time to be a factor on game days for the Buffs' offense next fall. It is an offense that desperately needs him.

"He better," tight ends coach J.D. Brookhart said when asked if Kasa can be a major contributor for the Buffs in 2012. "He's got to. It's not really a hope right now. We've got to make it happen."

How did the program get itself into this position?

A year ago at the end of spring ball, coach Jon Embree parted ways with two tight ends, Harold Mobley and Henley Griffon. That left little depth on the roster behind senior Ryan Deehan, who ate the majority of the playing time at the position in 2011.

CU coaches also moved several other former tight ends last season because they didn't have all the capabilities for the position that coaches desire.

DaVaughn Thornton was never able to put on enough weight to be a real factor in run blocking and he was moved to wide receiver. Alex Wood looked more like a fullback, which is where he is practicing this spring.

The only other tight ends on the roster this spring along with Kasa have their limitations, too.

Scott Fernandez knows the position inside and out, but is a converted offensive lineman who isn't a big threat in the passing game.

Kyle Slavin can be a weapon in the passing game, but hasn't shown he is capable of being a consistent blocker in the running game.

In November after nearly three full seasons of struggling to earn playing time on the defensive line, Kasa decided to move to tight end, knowing there was opportunity there.

Kasa is 6-foot-6 and 260 pounds. He is perfectly suited to play the position in the Buffs' offense. Now he just needs to learn how.

He caught one pass for eight yards in the season finale at Utah and went into the offseason determined to deliver.

He said he spent time catching passes every day throughout the winter, often asking his dad or his roommate, Wood, to serve as quarterback when an actual CU quarterback wasn't available.

"Yeah, of course," Kasa said when asked if he feels pressure this spring. "I really do want to help out and I know they need me. I'm just doing everything I can every day to get there."

Brookhart said he didn't want to bog down Kasa with too much mentally during the winter. So he told him to focus on running routes and catching passes in December, January and February and promised that learning the nuances of playing tight end would come during practices this spring and summer.

Brookhart said Kasa has been an eager pupil.

"He shows a lot of 'want to' and he's making a commitment like he's never done before. But to cram an old lineman into a skill guy, it's going to be a lot of work," Brookhart said.

"There are going to be some things that he does well, but it's very foreign territory to him. Every day are big jumps. He's got a long way to go, but he's got the ability to be a good player. Now catching the ball is not something he's done his whole life. He's had his hand on the ground. That just doesn't happen. The pass game, it's a foreign language right now, but that being said, he's showing exactly what it takes to get it. So he's working at it."

Outside of the first spring practice when he dropped several catchable passes, Kasa said he has done well this spring when he has been healthy enough to practice.

He missed several recent sessions with a concussion. He was able to participate in parts of Sunday's practice and says he expects to be fully cleared this week.

"I was (angry) when I got the concussion," Kasa said. "I need every practice I can get so that I can make those mistakes and correct them. My coaches know I'm going to make them just because I'm not used to offense at all."

He said it has been a big adjustment playing in full-team periods as opposed to just 7-on-7, which he got used to during the winter.

Kasa said he feels comfortable with his understanding of the offense and the playbook and each day the position shift gets a little easier and he gains a little more confidence.

Kasa said he is happy he made the decision. He said he wanted to play tight end as a senior at Legacy High School in Broomfield, but his coaches there needed him to play offensive line. He was a five-star recruit in 2009 as a defensive end and he originally committed to Florida.

But when former Florida coach Urban Meyer began talking about shifting him to either offensive line or tight end, Kasa chose to be a Buff, preferring the defensive line.

A few years of watching game days pass by with little or no playing time there helped change his mind about playing

offense.

CU coach Jon Embree, a former tight end who has coached some of the very best to ever play the position, and Brookhart said they expect two of the three tight ends they recruited in the 2012 class to play as true freshmen next fall. They aren't sure which two they will be. So Kasa will have some help at the position.

"He's shown he can learn it," Embree said. "There are some things he's got to keep improving at and some of it is just instincts or being used to playing that position. But he is showing up in the run game and we've just got to get him better in the passing game."

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