

Former Buff Tolan one back at Colorado Open

By Gary Baines For the Camera Boulder Daily Camera

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Buffzone.com

DENVER -- A 2 1/2-hour lightning delay interrupted his round, and the wind was stiff when he did get out on the course, but Derek Tolan apparently was right in his element on Friday.

While most players were losing ground Friday afternoon at the HealthOne Colorado Open, the former University of Colorado golfer made considerable headway. Darkness didn't allow Tolan to finish his second round at Green Valley Ranch Golf Club, but he'll go into Saturday just a stroke out of the lead.

The 2009 Open champion, returning to the tournament after a one-year hiatus, was 4 under par through 16 holes Friday and stands 8 under overall. He trails leader Steven Kupcho, a 19-year-old amateur from Westminster who shot a 67 Friday and is 9 under for the tournament. Canadian Tour player Joel Dahmen shares second place with Tolan after a second-round 68.

"I'm excited," Tolan said. "It's fun being right there again. I'm pleased to be in the hunt."

Despite the difficult conditions Friday after the weather delay, Tolan went 4 under par following the interruption. Overall, he made six birdies and two bogeys through 16 holes, and he tallied three birdies in a row to end the day.

"I was even par for the day going into (the delay), so if anything it helped me," said the 26-year-old from Highlands Ranch. "I played great after it. There was nothing negative about that."

"It was definitely playing difficult (due to the wind) -- I had some clubs into greens I couldn't imagine normally -- but I played really well. I was hitting some really good shots."

Meanwhile, a couple of other former CU golfers are also in the top 20 going into Saturday. Pat Grady of Broomfield played his final 11 holes in 3 under par to shoot 71 and share 13th place at 3-under-par 139. And defending champion Ben Portie is 2 under through 30 holes -- and in 16th place -- despite a double bogey on Friday.

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Scotty McKnight ready for his chance

KRISTIAN DYER

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It has been nearly nine months since Jets wide receiver Scotty McKnight stepped on a football field and the second-year wide receiver is itching to make an impact.

Taken in the seventh round of last year's NFL Draft, McKnight failed to register a catch or play in a game and a midseason ACL tear in his left knee prematurely shelved his season. A long rehab followed and McKnight attended rookie minicamp along with the Jets' other young players and while he didn't put on a helmet, he did participate in individual drills. During OTAs and minicamp, McKnight gradually increased his workload and on Friday, for the first day of training camp, McKnight was a full go.

"It felt really good. I'm not surprised by it. I've been working with [head strength and conditioning coach] John Melody and the training staff and gradually started here at Day 1 with the injury, starting from scratch to be ready for training camp. And now I'm here in a position to compete and take reps," McKnight told Metro. "I was a full go."

The selection of McKnight was labeled by fans as a bit of favor by the Jets organization due to his childhood friendship with quarterback Mark Sanchez. But in limited snaps, McKnight has been shown an ability to run solid routes and he possesses good hands.

Right now, his focus is on getting healthy again and regaining his ability to make cuts and runs without fear of his knee giving out.

"Minicamp was all individuals. I was six and a half months [into his recovery] at that point. I'm still at that range where things didn't physically feel that comfortable," McKnight said. "But now at eight months, I feel much more comfortable with the knee."

McKnight shared the nearly four hour trip to Cortland from northern New Jersey with his old friend and wide receiver Patrick Turner, who played with Sanchez at USC.

The trip up was a contrast to that of Sanchez's backup, Tim Tebow, who made the road trip with rugby player turned tight end Hayden Smith. On Thursday, Smith told Metro that the two talked the whole trip and never once turned on the radio. Smith also confirmed that the evangelical good boy of the Jets doesn't speed on the highway.

Meanwhile, McKnight said that Sanchez speeds "at times," confirming former Jet Mark Brunell's comments on Sanchez's heavy foot from two years ago when the two shared a ride.

McKnight described a free-flowing gab fest between the three riding mates.

"Us three? We cover everything, we listen to music, whatever," McKnight said. "[We] kind of mix it up. Pat is more of a rap guy. Mark is more classic rock. Me? I'm a mix. We just had fun going up together."

Follow Jets beat writer Kristian Dyer on Twitter [@KristianRDyer](#) for live updates from Cortland.

NEW YORK



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Scotty McKnight.



Packers by Position: Specialists

Special teams set goal of excellence

By [Bob McGinn](#) of the Journal Sentinel
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Green Bay - Reaching respectability is one thing. Attaining excellence is quite another.

The sorry special teams of the Green Bay Packers awakened last season, vaulting from 31st and 29th rankings the previous two seasons into a tie for 13th in the annual Dallas Morning News statistical breakdown of overall performance.

Before last season, ace Jarrett Bush stated a goal of turning that 29th-place finish in the Super Bowl season into at least middle-of-the-pack status.

Having met that objective, Bush and his teammates want a whole lot more this season.

"I think getting in the top five is not out of the realm of possibility," long snapper Brett Goode said. "Even better than that. That's the mind-set."

If not for the perennially pathetic Indianapolis Colts, the Packers would have had the poorest special teams in the National Football League under the leadership of Ted Thompson and Mike McCarthy.

Then Thompson made the inspired second-round pick of Randall Cobb in 2011. He became the first player since Terrell Buckley in 1992 to be chosen by Green Bay in the first two rounds with the ability to return kicks playing a key part in the selection.

After watching Cobb give the Packers their best dual return threat since Allen Rossum in 2000, Thompson made sure to re-sign Bush one week into unrestricted free agency for \$5.25 million over three years.

Together with entrenched and capable specialists Mason Crosby, Tim Masthay and Goode, the Packers now realistically can think about winning games on special teams rather than not losing them.

"I thought it was a solid year," said Shawn Slocum, who begins his fourth year as coordinator after a three-year apprenticeship under Mike Stock. "We got headed in the direction we wanted to go."

"Now our play style should continue to improve. I like our roster top to bottom right now. For a coach, that's really exciting."

Some teams, such as San Francisco and Chicago, have been all in on special teams for years. Coincidentally, those two teams open the schedule against Green Bay.

In coach Dave Toub's eight seasons the Bears have finished in the top five four times and never worse than 11th. The 49ers were No. 1 last year under coach Brad Seely, who was coming off third- and first-place finishes in Cleveland.

On the first day of free agency, new Bears general manager Phil Emery signed Atlanta returner-cover man Eric Weems and all-around dynamo Blake Costanzo from San Francisco. The 49ers responded a day later by signing Rock Cartwright from Oakland.

The Packers have never signed a coverage ace in free agency.

"But," Slocum said, "let's look at this group of guys and create that guy. I think we've got some guys who are candidates to be very good players."

For a franchise that hasn't had a top-five finish since 1993, special teams suddenly are the place to be.

"With the young guys from last year, the young guys coming this year have to fight for a spot on special teams," said Crosby. "You can see it."

"The Bears, it's just their history. Since I've been here, it's special teams and defense, and try to manage the game with the offense. Whenever (Devin) Hester gets a big return, they're the most dangerous. Having a returner like that now helps us."

In 2011, just 13 players in the NFL had 20 or more punt and kickoff returns; the Packers had just one reliable dual returner, Will Blackmon (2008), in McCarthy's first six years.

Not only did Cobb return 88% of the attempts, his second-place ranking on kickoffs (27.7) was the Packers' best since Robert Brooks in 1993, and his seventh-place tie on punts (11.3) was the club's best since Desmond Howard in '96.

"We just want to continue rallying around him," Crosby said. "Just watching him early on, he looks even more explosive than last year."

Cobb, a Pro Bowl alternate, made "pretty good" decisions, according to Slocum, but also had three fumbles, which tied for fifth most among the 13 qualifying returners.

"He's learning the NFL game," Slocum said. "He made a few mistakes whether to return or not. He will improve as a result."

Cobb's fumbles, all of which were lost, led to a minus-2 turnover differential after the Packers took the ball away just once. Slocum's units are minus-3 in three seasons.

"We've got to create more turnovers," he said. "That needs to be flipped because it's so highly impactful."

Thompson's decision to pay Crosby \$14.75 million over five years right after the lockout ended 12 months ago turned out wonderfully when the powerful kicker enjoyed easily his finest season.

After ranking 26th, 28th, tied for 25th and 26th in field-goal percentage, Crosby finished 11th with a career-best 85.7% before going 2 for 2 in the playoffs.

His kickoffs were exceptional as well.

Buoyed by having Goode snapping for a fourth year and Masthay holding for a second year, Crosby is a believer in continuity for specialists.

"Brett doesn't have errant snaps," said Crosby. "Tim's just catching it and doesn't have to move laces. That's the majority of the time. We're starting to get really picky with it. That's the benefit of having us together this long."

Masthay has put together two solid seasons, enabling the organization to come out from under the post-Jon Ryan ineptness of Derrick Frost and Jeremy Kapinos.

Masthay ranked 15th in gross average (45.6) and tied for 19th in net with a mark of 38.6, the best by a Packer since Jerry Norton averaged 39.2 in 1963.

"That's good," Slocum said, "but it was 19th in the league. What do we want to be? We started back in the off-season really putting an emphasis on net punt and his role in that."

The unassuming Goode has been a worthy successor to Rob Davis, who retired in March 2008.

"He's so consistent, you expect every one of them to be picture perfect," said Slocum. "He's a solid guy, solid as he can be. He needs to continue to work on maintaining velocity throughout the course of the season."

Possibly the most impressive turnaround has been in the area of penalties. Two years after drawing 32 in 17 games, the special teams had 10 in 17 games last season. That was the Packers' lowest total since 1991.

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