

RINGO: Leadership will be key to picking new CU Buffs' QB

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Football training camp will be under way a month from today at Colorado along with the most anticipated quarterback battle since the late 1990s.

It will be a three-man race between junior Jordan Webb, a transfer from Kansas, and third-year sophomores Nick Hirschman and Connor Wood, a transfer from Texas. It remains to be seen how much of the battle fans and media members will actually be able to see. If coach Jon Embree's approach in spring ball holds up, fans won't see a thing until the season opener against Colorado State and media members will catch only glimpses at the end of practices.

But despite all that, I can tell you today who will win the job and receive the first opportunity against the Rams.

Embree, offensive coordinator Eric Bieniemy and assistant head coach and quarterbacks coach Rip Scherer will be the primary forces in choosing a starter and all three put a premium on three elements of the game from a quarterback's perspective.

You can bet the young man who becomes the most effective leader, throws the fewest interceptions and allows himself to be sacked the fewest number of times will be the starter.

Now, you might be thinking, what if Hirschman is the best leader, Webb throws the fewest interceptions and Wood never gives up a sack, then what?

Based on what I've heard from these coaches over the past 18 months since they were hired, I would expect them to default to the best leader if everything else is equal. If the difference between two or more of the competitors is "razor thin" as former coach Dan Hawkins once famously said in breaking down a quarterback battle involving his son, Cody, they will pick the player who seems to inspire the most confidence in the players around him.

If I had one piece of advice for Wood, Webb and Hirschman it would be to forget the lead-by-example stuff. Show up with all your ducks in a row and be ready to get in your teammates' faces, call them out for mistakes and be the first guy to give a chest bump or slap on the head when they make plays. These coaches want a take charge kind of guy leading their football team.

When Bieniemy was a player, he ruled the Colorado locker room. He didn't accept mediocrity from his teammates. He inspired them to do better. He even willed them to it. He got in fights with his offensive linemen just trying to light a fire under them and the rest of his teammates. Bieniemy could do that because he backed up everything he said with excellence on the field.

Bieniemy has grown and matured a lot in the intervening years, but he's still the same guy at heart. Who do you think he's going to pick to lead his offense? A guy with voice and the guts to back it up or a guy who does everything the right way but waits for others to rev up the troops?

There is another big reason why you can count on these coaches choosing the best leader if everything else is equal. There are going to be a lot of inexperienced players on the field around the quarterback this fall.

The guy calling the shots in the huddle has to have that "it" factor this year more than others because of all the inexperience around him.

Look at the depth chart. With Paul Richardson out with a torn ACL, the most experienced wide receivers returning are Tyler McCulloch and Keenan Canty, both sophomores who played in spots here and there last season. A handful of freshmen and other less experienced players will have an opportunity to earn playing time there.

At tight end, you can expect to see two true freshmen earn playing time along with senior Nick Kasa, who only began playing the position at the tail end of last season and always had been a defensive lineman previously.

Junior Tony Jones will be the starter at tailback, but there will be a new fullback and almost everyone behind Jones is either a freshman or sophomore.

At least the offensive line features some experience. Whoever wins the quarterback job is going to fall in love with those five guys quickly while waiting for the talent to mature at the skill positions.

Some might say all of this lines up in Webb's favor because he is the only candidate in the field with any real experience, having played 21 games at Kansas the past two years. That experience will certainly help Webb, but I don't think that alone wins him the job.

You could say the most important part of the schedule is the first half of the season this year because it features the most winnable games. That is yet another reason why coaches will defer to a guy who leads the team rather than trying to develop a player.

If this team is going to improve its record and give itself any chance at reaching the postseason, it will need to get off to a strong start. And it will need great play and leadership from its quarterback to do so.