

CU Buffs quarterback Shane Dillon powered by perspective

By John Henderson The Denver Post The Denver Post

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BOULDER — They stood in the Christian High stands and cheered and yelled as Shane Dillon led the El Cajon, Calif., school back to football prominence. They were seven adults, all wearing the Patriots' red, white and blue colors and feeling like they belonged.

People with Down syndrome, even adults, don't know all the intricacies of football. But these seven knew enough to know that their housemate, the son of their caretakers, was becoming one of the best prep quarterbacks in the country.

Colorado's quarterback battle began Thursday with the start of spring practice. Six are in the running, and it will be seven in August when freshman Sefo Liufau arrives. By the end of spring camp, new Buffs coach Mike MacIntyre wants to cut the candidates to three.

It could be a wild ride, but the smart money since last fall has been on the redshirt freshman who brings a different résumé from the others.

Dillon was a prep All-American, ranked seventh nationally by PrepStar, and attracted scholarship offers from the likes of Ohio State and Miami.

George Whitfield, the quarterback guru featured in Sports Illustrated last month, has tutored him since the seventh grade. As a senior, Dillon led once-struggling Christian to a 10-3 record and the CIF San Diego championship.

But what has made the biggest difference in Dillon's life are his special housemates. His parents house and care for Down syndrome adults in their suburban San Diego home.

"I'd say that is where I get all my leadership skills," Dillon said. "Just having to grow up in that situation has taught me how lucky we are as people. You can have things taken away from you in a heartbeat."

His mother, Shani, took the role from her parents, who had as many as 12 in their home only five minutes away. The Dillons ate with them, took them to the zoo and, in the fall, took them to Christian High games.

"It's just taught our whole entire family to value what you've been given, and I just want to take that and show our guys that we all come from different backgrounds and we all love the game," Dillon said. "We should be a family, which is what I think we lacked last year."

In the Buffs' 1-11 debacle last season, among the many holes was quarterback. Rebuilding is nothing new to Dillon. Two years after winning the San Diego CIF title, Christian slumped to four wins and put Dillon at receiver and some quarterback his sophomore year.

The Patriots went 7-5. He moved to quarterback his junior year, when they went 6-6 before the 10-3 campaign in 2011. He finished by throwing for 6,681 yards and 45 touchdowns (and 29 interceptions) in essentially two seasons.

"He played big in big games," Christian offensive coordinator Dave Beezer said. "The bigger the game, the better he played."

One big game nearly short-circuited Dillon's career. In the CIF San Diego Section championship, he threw for 316 yards and two touchdowns in a 32-29 win. However, on the last play of the first half, he threw an interception and made the tackle. He felt his shoulder pop.

What he didn't know at the time was he played the entire second half with a torn labrum. That February, 15 screws were put in his arm, which wound up in a sling for two months.

He couldn't really throw until the end of last October.

"It feels even better than before I had surgery," he said.

Dillon enters the QB race at CU with less experience, but he has other advantages. Beezer played receiver in college at Liberty from 1989-91 for former Cleveland Browns coach Sam Rutigliano. Beezer put in the same pro system at Christian, which had similar principles as MacIntyre's new pistol offense.

"He's a natural fit for what we like to do," CU offensive coordinator Brian Lindgren said.

One other huge advantage: Whitfield. The former NCAA Division II quarterback who has trained the likes of Andrew Luck and Ben Roethlisberger had Dillon as one of his first pupils. So before dropbacks in the sand and surf of San Diego became hip, Dillon had the drills down pat.

It was Whitfield who told him to stick it out his sophomore year at Christian while he was wallowing at receiver.

"He sat me down and said: 'You have a real bright future if you stick with it. Just keep working. Keep grinding, and you can do some great things,' " Dillon said. "I took his advice. If it wasn't for him, I wouldn't be standing here right now."

He has a long way to go before he's declared the starter for CU's Aug. 31 season opener against Colorado State. Senior Jordan Webb is a returning starter. Junior Nick Hirschman showed promise near the end of last season. Junior Connor Wood's athleticism fits the pistol offense. Liufau is the new staff's chosen one.

But Dillon has the street cred. He has saved a program before.

"There's never any question that when Shane Dillon walked out on game night, he played and believed that he was better than anyone else out there," Beezer said. "If you're a program that's struggling and you need a confident leader, there won't be a better, more confident leader than Shane Dillon."

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