

Football: CU Buffs looking for right fit at tight end

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The Pac-12 Conference has produced its share of stellar tight ends in recent years and appears to have a few more following behind the latest crop to head to the NFL last month.

The position is one of the biggest question marks on the depth chart at Colorado, which produced Nick Kasa who was drafted by the Oakland Raiders in the sixth round of the NFL draft.

The Buffs don't have a player at the position with the combination of size and speed that Kasa possessed. Instead the team has a blend of players with different strengths and abilities at the position, making it unlikely CU will have one player get most of the snaps at tight end this fall.

"I think we can do it both individually and collectively," said veteran Kyle Slavin. "At the end of the year, we may not have one guy that is All-Pac-12, but when you look at CU tight ends as a unit, they're going to be up there with everyone."

Slavin played in all 12 games last season as a backup to Kasa, catching just 14 passes for a total of 109 yards. He has struggled to find his comfort zone at the college level, in part because he is now learning his third offensive system and is being coached by his third head coach and position coach.

"I think I've come a long way," Slavin said. "When you first get here, everything is new no matter how complex your high school offense was. It's a whole new world. I finally feel comfortable with terminologies, understanding defenses and understanding how to make reads and what the guy beside me is trying to do, which helps a lot with what I'm trying to do."

There are questions about the other three players who, when combined with Slavin, comprise the top four at the position following spring ball.

Senior Scott Fernandez is a converted offensive lineman who, like Slavin, has had his moments but hasn't proven capable of playing the position in all situations. Alex Wood is another veteran who has spent the past two years playing football, but returned to tight end this spring and Vincent Hobbs is the most athletic of the four, but his future with the program is uncertain because of his father's medical problems back home in Texas.

Hobbs was second in receptions last fall among CU tight ends, finishing behind Kasa. Hobbs caught 16 passes for 153 yards.

In the spring under new coaches, CU tight ends didn't specialize in certain roles. For instance, Fernandez was generally used in run blocking situations in the past, but he was moved around and asked to do what more agile guys generally have done in the past.

"Maybe in the fall that might change depending on what coach sees our strengths are and what other players' strengths are," Fernandez said.

Slavin said the tight end position is used differently by Mike MacIntyre than it was used by Jon Embree and his staff but the changes are subtle.

"I think it's a big role," Slavin said of what tight ends will be asked to do in the new offense. "There is a lot of stuff that fans don't really realize, key blocks on a lot of run plays, big reads, we set up guys on a lot of pass plays and help the receivers get deep. So I think the stuff that may not be noticed by fans is what we kind of do."

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