

Wide receivers have struggled coming up with big plays

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The Colorado offense hasn't had many big plays so far this season particularly in the passing game where tight end Nick Kasa's 70-yard catch-and-run against Washington State stands as the shining moment.

A year ago, starting wide receivers Toney Clemons and Paul Richardson were threats to make plays down the field and gain big chunks or yardage at once. That helped stretch defenses and allowed former running back Rodney Stewart to execute a slew of effective screen passes out of the backfield. Stewart actually led the Buffs in receiving.

Both elements are either missing or not working as well this season with those three players graduated or are injured. Last season the Buffs had eight passes of 35 yards or more to wide receivers. So far this season, they have just one.

"We haven't made too many this year, but I definitely think we can," said redshirt freshman wide receiver Nelson Spruce, who leads the Buffs with 24 catches for 260 yards. "It's a matter of going out there and executing really. People kind of underestimate our speed because we lost Paul and we lost Tony. We might not have the same speed, but I definitely think we can make those down-field plays."

While sophomore Tyler McCulloch and Spruce haven't been able to replace the deep threat that Clemons and Richardson brought to the offense, they are on pace to produce similar overall receiving numbers this season compared with Clemons and Richardson's totals in 2011.

Clemons and Richardson combined for 82 catches for 1,235 yards and 13 touchdowns in a 13-game season in 2011. Richardson played in only nine of those contests because of a knee injury.

Spruce is on pace for 58 catches for 624 yards and five touchdowns. While McCulloch is on pace for 46 catches for 571 yards and five scores. If both receivers stay on pace, it will mean more total combined catches for slightly fewer yards and three fewer scores.

Spruce and McCulloch have the same philosophy about their ability to keep pace with last season's starters, despite the lack of big plays.

"It's nice to see we're putting up good numbers so far, but I'm just a competitor and I want to win," McCulloch said. "I've had some decent numbers so far, but I'd like to see myself like maybe getting over 100 yards (in a game) or something. Just keep making goals and getting better each game."

There is an area of the game where McCulloch and Spruce might have already surpassed Clemons and Richardson -- run blocking. Both players have focused on doing their part to help get the running game going, knowing it will ultimately help open things up for them and quarterback Jordan Webb in the passing game.

Spruce had the key block in the fourth quarter rally at Washington State two weeks ago that allowed running back Tony Jones to race around right end for an 84-yard touchdown run.

"That's kind of a thing we've worked on this year ever since the spring, just getting that mindset," McCulloch said. "We needed to be better in the run game."

Coaches have found places to work true freshman wide receiver Gerald Thomas into the game and his speed has allowed him to make plays that have fans excited about his future. Coaches also have commitments from a stable of speedy receivers and two grayshirts who could have the kind of impact on the CU offense next year that freshmen defensive backs are having this season.

Four of those defensive backs have logged significant playing time already and three have made starts. Cornerback Kenneth Crawley leads the team in tackles.

The additions at wide receiver along with Richardson returning from a torn anterior cruciate ligament bode well for 2013. Until then, McCulloch and Spruce are finding ways to make plays in any way they can.

"I think me and Nelson don't get as much credit for our speed as we should from some of you guys," McCulloch said. "We still run by some guys in the game. It's not always about speed. It's about getting route-depth discipline and running good routes and stuff, too."

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