

Football: Former CU Buffs standout David Bakhtiari balances rage, focus to excel

By Tyler Dunne Milwaukee Journal Sentinel Boulder Daily Camera

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GREEN BAY, Wis. -- The heavyweight showdown is must-see TV. In one corner is Clay Matthews, the richest linebacker in football. In the other corner is David Bakhtiari, the rookie.

For three weeks -- rep by rep through these one-on-one drills -- Bakhtiari has meticulously irritated the All-Pro Matthews.

On one rush this week, Matthews finally ripped past the rookie, slipped, fell and screamed an obscenity. Other offensive linemen mocked him, shouting that Bakhtiari was getting inside his head. Steam practically shot out of Matthews' ears.

Their next duel, the linebacker finished, sort of, and flexed into his "Predator" pose toward the linemen.

They chuckled, fully knowing this celebration was masking frustration. If Matthews is The Predator, Bakhtiari is more Incredible Hulk. The "gray" Hulk, to be specific.

"Because that's when he's an intelligent, raging guy," Bakhtiari said. "Being calm, yet crazy at the same time. Understanding how to channel your energy."

This summer, Bakhtiari is doing exactly that. One injury to Bryan Bulaga and this 6-foot-4, 300-pounder from Colorado was elevated from third-party candidate at right tackle to starting left tackle. The Packers didn't blink -- and neither did Bakhtiari. There hasn't been a hint of panic in his voice, a tint of a lookout block in practice.

The reason can be traced to last fall. A miserable, miserable fall.

A junior at Colorado, Bakhtiari was a team captain for a 1-11 team that lost by an average of 30.8 points per game. The program was an embarrassment publicly, brittle privately. Bakhtiari blocked for three very different, very inadequate quarterbacks. Meanwhile, the shame of weekly blowouts, of seeing that half the team really didn't care, thickened his skin.

He was forced to mature. Fast. Now in the pros -- when the Packers absolutely need him -- it's paying off.

"At times, you forget you're talking to a 21-year-old kid," offensive line coach James Campen said. "He's very mature, very mature in his professionalism ... He asks questions and he has the right question to ask. It has some meaning, some substance scheme-wise. He's a very bright kid. He's very much like Bryan was when Bryan was young."

Bakhtiari half-jokes that he may appear so unflappable now because he hasn't been the goat yet. For now, he can do no wrong. He realizes these questions at his locker could turn in an instant. After all, he's been there. Three games into last season, the Buffaloes were flogged, 69-14, by

Fresno State. From there, it only got worse.

The season was total "dysfunction," Bakhtiari said, and it was rooted in a "lack of performance, lack of preparation, lack of caring." He puts it on the players. When Bakhtiari watched film two, three games at a time, he remembers teammates flocking to "Ladies Night" at a local bar each Thursday.

College is, well, college. Bakhtiari gets that. He admits he is no choirboy. But at some point -- maybe after the 55-point loss here, the 56-point loss there -- he wishes more teammates actually cared.

"On a team where you don't have the Eddie Lacys and Alabama reputation with that, you have to take every advantage you can," Bakhtiari said. "I understand guys want to have fun. But for me, I guess I had a different agenda."

One former Colorado teammate said "half the team" quit. As the losses mounted, the senior said players gave up and "partied all the time."

Which is why Bakhtiari is already relishing the Darwinian nature of training camp. Quit here and you're escorted to the Austin Straubel International Airport.

"This is a kill-or-be-killed type of business," he added. "It's either you're doing your stuff and we'll pay you for it or if you're not doing what you're paid for, we will cut you. I kind of wish it was like that (in college). I like that."

Yet all of the dysfunction helped Bakhtiari. Colorado cycled through three quarterbacks who combined to throw 11 touchdown passes and 19 interceptions, and each one had different depths on their drop-back. Jordan Webb, Nick Hirschman and Connor Wood ranged anywhere from 5 yards to 13 yards dropping back.

For an offensive tackle, each pass play was wildly unpredictable. Bakhtiari never knew exactly how much ground he needed to cover and/or if he could veer an end "around the horn." Not to mention, the linemen were declaring blitzes. Not the quarterback.

With Aaron Rodgers -- who Bakhtiari says will "stay at 7 (yards), maybe touch 9" -- the rookie is like a baseball player removing a 10-pound weight from his bat. Technique-wise, everything's easier.

"The pocket awareness wasn't as known as it is now," Bakhtiari said.

Unlike many of his teammates, Bakhtiari never did find a vaccine for losing. Those close to him know each of those 11 losses stung.

Tight end Nick Kasa, now with the Oakland Raiders, said that when others stopped caring, Bakhtiari "worked his butt off" and "always stayed on track." Eric Bakhtiari, a free-agent linebacker, helped his younger brother to treat the game like a job.

Tonight's exhibition tilt with St. Louis' Robert Quinn offers a preview of the land mine ahead for

Bakhtiari.

The left tackle can't afford to flinch. So far, he hasn't. In addition to the Incredible Hulk, Bakhtiari also keeps one quote from X-Men in mind. At one point, Professor X says that "true focus lies somewhere between rage and serenity."

On a 1-11 team in college, that mentality kept Bakhtiari sane, hungry. Replacing the starting left tackle, he's finding that balance again.

Now, he has to keep it that way.