

Football: Boulder, CU Buffs offer escape, opportunities for D.C. Three

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The overwhelming majority of players on the Colorado football team came to Boulder from places west of the Mississippi River, but there are a few East Coasters on the roster and within that group are three young men from the same Washington D.C. high school.

They were dubbed the 'D.C. Three' when they chose to sign with Colorado in the 2012 recruiting cycle. Cornerbacks Kenneth Crawley and John Walker and defensive end De'Jon Wilson came to Boulder a year ago. Only Crawley played as a true freshman last season while his old high school teammates redshirted. Walker's 2012 season ended early when he injured his hand in training camp.

They love Boulder, the school and the football program that gave them the opportunity to escape the hardscrabble atmosphere in which they grew up. They used to walk through metal detectors just to start each day of high school, and experienced more than their share of loss, crime and treachery growing up.

All three have lost friends, family members or both to gun violence.

"We safe out here," Crawley said matter-of-factly.

Given those realities, one would think they would be thrilled to be 2,000 miles away in a much more laid back, safe environment where strangers say hello on the streets and the biggest concern on their minds about being out past 10 p.m. is making coach Mike MacIntyre unhappy.

That is true most of the time. The thing is, it has been a culture shock adjusting to this new life beneath the Flatirons. Yes, it's possible to get homesick for a place where danger lurks around even the most familiar corners.

"In D.C., you see a person die every day and hear about it," Walker said. "I know a lot of the dudes around here, they ain't really used to that. We had to come out here and get used to being around guys here. In D.C. you have to act a certain way. Out here, you can just relax and you don't have to worry about watching your back or if somebody is going to try to take the shoes you have on or anything like that. You can just relax out here."

Crawley is in position to be a starting cornerback for the second straight season.

Walker had a productive spring after redshirting, but has been dealing with a groin injury in fall camp. When he gets healthy, he should be a regular contributor in the secondary and on special teams.

Wilson is battling to earn a spot in the defensive line rotation at defensive end and he's fighting the grief of having three friends killed since January back home.

"It's a very tough city to grow up in and we're blessed to make it out of there," Wilson said. "There is a lot of friends and family that get lost in the streets and we lose a lot of people to a lot of gun violence. It feels good to get on track and do the right thing. When we go home, it's just motivation for our friends and family to do the right thing and follow in our footsteps. We're trying to get everybody on the right track."

There is actually a fourth member of their unique fraternity. Former Buff Sherrard Harrington, another defensive back, was the first to choose to leave D.C. for Boulder back in 2011. He was a year older than his former teammates.

Harrington was on the roster until this spring when he reinjured his hip and doctors advised him to give up the sport. Injuries prevented him from playing a down in a CU uniform, but helping to bring his three former teammates to Boulder just might be a legacy of which he can be proud.

Harrington also has made the most of his opportunity in the classroom at CU. He started a real estate business that is off to an exciting start.

All three members of the D.C. Three believe they will be able to make significant contributions to the CU defense or special teams this fall. They each possess the kind of athleticism that CU needs more of on the field.

When they weren't on the field practicing or in football meetings or classes last season, they were often in dorms where they felt trapped. Now they are allowed to live off campus and they have started to explore the world around them.

"It just makes you appreciate life more," Walker said. "Out here you're exposed to things I never would have done back at home. Like I have been Buena Vista a couple times and been hiking up there. I would have never been hiking. I would have been just sitting outside in the neighborhood. And there ain't nothing good back in that neighborhood. So it's something negative I would have been doing. It is good that I chose to come all the way out west and stayed away from home."

CU football players generally get to spend a total of a month at home during each year they are in the program. One week generally comes around Christmas and three weeks in May after the spring semester and before summer workouts.

Crawley, Walker and Wilson enjoy being able to go home and spend time with their families but they are greeted by an old familiar feeling when they reenter that world they left behind.

It is the anxiety of living life on guard, questioning everyone's motives and trying to identify the threats a block away.

"Coming out here to Colorado really opened my eyes that there is life beyond D.C.," Wilson said. "The world is bigger than D.C. It's really tough going home and all your friends you went to high school with or elementary school with are in jail or dead from someone that they knew. It's just very tough."

They all try and stay away from the areas they know are trouble spots and get together with each

other or other friends that escaped to college life in other spots around the country. Crawley says he usually stays with an aunt who doesn't live in the city.

"When I go home, like the second day I'm there I always wish I'm back here," Crawley said. "I second guess making the purchase for the plane ticket going home and I just want to be back here. It's more drama-free."

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Football: CU Buffs' Uzo-Diribe looking ahead to future he never thought possible

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Growing up in Corona, Calif., Chidera Uzo-Diribe caused a few problems for his mother.

"My mom used to tell me I would test her a lot," said Uzo-Diribe, a defensive end on the Colorado football team. "My mom says I was an angry, tyrant child. She thought I was going to be a problem child growing up. I was always running around, pushing and knocking down TVs, breaking things.

"She always jokes that she's surprised that I grew up to be a little cooler and as mature as I am."

Now a senior with the Buffs, Uzo-Diribe has learned to channel his childhood aggression in the right way and now he causes a few problems for opposing ball carriers.

At 6-foot-3, 250 pounds, Uzo-Diribe is one of the top defensive linemen in the Pac-12 Conference and one of the most valuable players on the CU roster. His seven quarterback sacks led the team a year ago, and he's got 16 sacks in his career.

As a team captain and one of just two seniors (along with Nate Bonsu) on a young defensive line, a lot is expected of Uzo-Diribe this year.

"It just pushes me to work harder just so I can meet those expectations," he said of outsiders' expectations of him. "I hold myself to a higher standard, too, so it's going to be a good year.

"I expect to be a guy that teams have to account for each and every game and make sure they know my presence is felt out there."

His presence has been felt since he first stepped onto the football field just five years ago.

Uzo-Diribe grew up playing baseball and basketball.

"I really loved basketball," he said. "Football was never something that crossed my mind. Growing up, kids played Pop Warner, pee wee (football). I never did that."

It wasn't until his junior season, in 2008, that Uzo-Diribe decided to play football.

"I was real tall coming into high school, but I didn't really grow much (after that)," he said. "My coach, he pulled me aside and said, 'You can get your school paid for (with football).' Hearing that, I was just like, 'Well, I might as well give it a shot.' Since then, football is something that I've been learning and picking up and now I see it's actually something that can benefit me."

Uzo-Diribe had 12 tackles in his first start at Corona High School. He was an all-league performer as a senior, racking up 69 tackles and 7.5 sacks as a linebacker.

Since arriving at CU in 2010, Uzo-Diribe has appeared in all 37 games the Buffs have played.

He started 10 games a year ago.

Despite his late start in the sport, Uzo-Diribe hopes this isn't his last season on the gridiron. A descendant of the Igbo tribe in Nigeria, Uzo-Diribe hopes to follow in the footsteps of his cousin, Osi Umenyiora, and play in the National Football League. Umenyiora plays for the Atlanta Falcons.

"It's a big dream," Uzo-Diribe said of the NFL. "It's something that originally wasn't in my mind when I first came to school here. Now just to see that the opportunity is there, it's a good dream to help jump start my career. Even if the NFL is not something that lasts long for me, just to have something help jump-start life after football."

Until the NFL comes calling, Uzo-Diribe will focus on trying to lead the Buffs to their first winning season since 2005 -- and their first bowl game since 2007.

"I'm real excited to get this year started," he said. "I've been working really hard in the offseason and this team has and I can't wait to see what we do this fall."

"I've told a lot of people I feel like this program is going to change under coach (Mike MacIntyre) and his coaching staff. The foundation they're building into this football team, it's going to breed success. This coaching staff, they're going to win games."

"It would mean a lot just to see that my senior class, we helped set this program into the right way. We played the right way and we went out with a good last season."

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