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terry frei

CU can't overstate Dizon's worth

By Terry Frei
The Denver Post

Article Last Updated: 11/26/2007 12:29:54 AM MST

BOULDER — In hoarse-throated celebration, Colorado linebacker Jordon Dizon left the Folsom Field turf for the last time as a player Friday afternoon.

With the Buffaloes bowl-eligible and likely headed for a postseason game in the wake of the 65-51 victory over Nebraska, he isn't through wearing the Colorado silver, gold and black over shoulder pads, yet his playing run in Boulder is over.

Dizon joined a program in turmoil; he leaves one in transition.

On Dec. 7, he will find out if he will become the third CU player — joining Alfred Williams and Matt Russell — to win the Butkus Award as the nation's top linebacker. The Buffs' unimpressive team numbers defensively (opponents averaged 30 points) won't help. Plus, the other two finalists, Penn State's Dan Connor and Ohio State's James

Laurinaitis, also come from schools renowned for turning out NFL linebackers.

"It's a longshot," Dizon, listed at 6-feet and 225 pounds, said Friday in an otherwise deserted Dal Ward Center hallway. "Laurinaitis was the runner-up last year. I watched (Connor) play last week, and he was awesome. The only way to pick a Butkus winner between those two is to pull a name from a hat, because that's how good they are. For me, to be nominated is something special for me."

But that award won't be necessary to validate Dizon's career.

Where would the Buffs be without him peering more around, than over, the men in front of him? And providing leadership and inspiration?

They'd be done.

With other starters knocked out, and with Michael Sipili's suspension extending through the season, Dizon persevered among a lineup that was short of experienced talent to start with and became more patchwork each week. Projected as a running back coming out of high school on Kauai, Hawaii, Dizon will finish as CU's fourth-leading career tackler, behind Barry Remington, Russell and Greg Biekert.

"I'm not banged up enough not to play," Dizon said. "I have a lot of mileage on me as a four-year starter, and linebacker's a tough position, especially how small I am. But I've got a great D-line, man. They're taking on

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those 300-pound blockers, and I'm running free. I'm hitting guys the same size as me."

The extra practices and exposure of bowl preparation will help the program move forward, and Dizon will have every right to pat himself on the back if CU takes another step up in Dan Hawkins' third season next fall.

"He puts the team before himself," Hawkins said. "He's very, very tough. This is one of the first games he's played in a while that he hasn't something messed up on his body. The last two weeks, he didn't hit anybody until (Friday's) game.

"He's everything you want in a young man, everything you want in a football player. I just hope everybody votes right, because I know every scout who comes in here, bar none, says he's the best linebacker in the country."

While making their rounds, NFL scouts practice diplomacy, too, so that needs to be taken with grains of salt. Physically, the squat and powerful Hawaiian more resembles Mike Singletary, Tom Jackson and Sam Mills, among the many cerebral, fiery and "undersized" linebackers who had long NFL careers; than he does Brian Urlacher, who fits the ideal prototype.

"Me being little, me being tiny, I've got the feet to make up for it," Dizon said. "I've got the will, I've got the heart and everything you ask for in a small player to do a big man's job."

An economics major on track to graduate in four years next spring, Dizon hopes to get into the

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hotel business in his native Hawaii — and perhaps even if he has a successful NFL career. He leaves the impression that no matter what happens, he will be among the most vocal of former Buffs.

"You kidding me?" he asked. "Coming here, I've met Coach Cabral (longtime linebackers coach Brian Cabral), I've met Gary Barnett, I've met Coach Hawk. These guys have done more things in my life than I ever could do for myself. They've made me the person I am, the man I am. They taught me; they showed me the path."

Sometimes, in our media zeal to chart which coaches are on the hot seat and to handicap award chances, we don't often enough get to that point: Despite its occasional excesses and problems, college football still can be a character-building experience for the young men — both heralded and obscure — who play it.

Terry Frei: 303-954-1895 or tfrei@denverpost.com

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