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Leadership role awaiting Walters

*By Patrick Ridgell
Longmont Times-Call*

BOULDER — As the Colorado Buffaloes prepare for Alabama and the Dec. 30 Independence Bowl, now is not the time coach Dan Hawkins expects his juniors to start acting like seniors.

Some of them are anyway. Asked who, Hawkins pointed to junior safety Ryan Walters.

"He's been doing it all year," Hawkins said following Friday's practice.

By "doing it," Hawkins means behaving like someone who'll be a captain in 2008, who'll display the sort of leadership skills Hawkins saw in departing seniors like linebacker Jordon Dizon and cornerback Terrence Wheatley. Other juniors — like George Hypolite, Daniel Sanders, Brandon Nicolas and Patrick Williams — are frequently mentioned as those who'll be expected to pick up the slack next year. But Walters' name comes up most.

"Ryan Walters, no doubt," quarterback Cody Hawkins said. "He was probably close to being a captain this year just because he's a really tough guy and gets along with everybody and does a good job of both leading by example and he's a good vocal leader."

Wheatley quickly cited Walters, too, but with one footnote.

"Hopefully, he doesn't get too many concussions," Wheatley said.

Walters suffered "only" two in 2007, he said. Both occurred when an opponent's knee kicked him in the head. The first came against Kansas on Oct. 20, and the second two weeks later against Missouri.

Walters' latter episode included a trip out of Folsom Field while he laid passed out on a stretcher. He spent a night in Boulder Community Hospital and missed the following week's game at Iowa State.

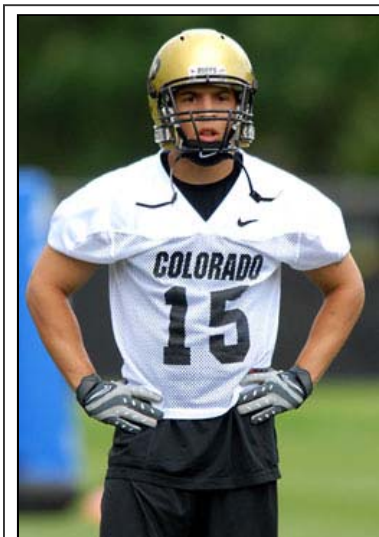
Walters said he also suffered a concussion as a redshirt freshman, but no others.

A teammate, linebacker R.J. Brown, has seen multiple concussions shorten his career. Walters said there is no cause for alarm in his situation.

"The reason why we got concerned is they came so close together," he said.

"It's football. Especially if you play like I play, with a physical mentality, you're going to get your head dinged up and you're going to get your head rung a little bit. ... There are no discussions about if it's a problem or not."

Walters, said Wheatley, is the kind of safety who tries to "kill" opposing receivers. But against Iowa State in 2006, Walters flattened Wheatley with a hit intended for a Cyclone. Wheatley remembers picking his head up briefly to see what had happened before everything blacked out on him.



CU safety Ryan Walters has missed time this season due to a pair of concussions. **Joshua Buck/Times-Call**

"I'm still mad at him for that one, actually," Walters said. "I think that's the hardest I've ever been hit. Ever."

But Wheatley said Walters already provides more than just a physical nature in the secondary.

"Ryan talks more than I do," Wheatley said. "He says a little bit of everything, including a few choice words whenever we blow a coverage."

Walters said this final game in 2007 is for CU's current seniors. His time can wait.

"They work so hard and have been through so much," Walters said. "This last bowl game is a testament to what they've gone through and how hard they've worked."

"This is their team still. It'll be the juniors' team as soon as we come back in January."

EXTRA POINTS: Dan Hawkins said there is no word yet on any eligibility problems for any players. Finals concluded Thursday. ... Seven Buffs completed degrees this week. They include defensive end Alonzo Barrett, tight end Tyson DeVree, safety Lionel Harris, offensive tackles Edwin Harrison and Tyler Polumbus, receiver Dusty Sprague and Wheatley. An eighth, punt returner Chase McBride, has only student teaching next semester to complete. ... CU will practice again tonight and Sunday morning before taking two days off for Christmas. The team will reconvene Wednesday in Shreveport, La., the site of the Independence Bowl. Friday's practice was the second with most of the game plan put in. "We need to polish it up," Sprague said. "I think we'll go down there ready to go."

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QB Wilson: Tide ready to roll

Alabama QB confident in team's state of mind after break

By Kyle Ringo

Saturday, December 22, 2007

The Colorado Buffaloes will face a revitalized Alabama team in the Dec. 30 Independence Bowl, Crimson Tide quarterback John Parker Wilson said.

Alabama finished the regular season on a four-game losing streak a month ago, including consecutive disheartening setbacks to a huge underdog in Louisiana-Monroe and rival Auburn. But Wilson said spending about three weeks away from football before resuming practices last Sunday helped his teammates get back to enjoying themselves.

Alabama concludes its pre-Christmas bowl work today and will reconvene in Shreveport, La., on Christmas night. The Crimson Tide will meet the Buffs in Independence Stadium in a game that will make the difference between a winning and losing season for both programs. The teams have identical 6-6 overall records and 4-4 conference marks.

Wilson said Alabama has put the roller-coaster ride of its regular season behind it, and he feels good about the team's frame of mind as bowl week approaches.

"I think we've had some of our best practices all season since the bowl practices started back," Wilson said in a telephone interview this week. "I think we're all feeling pretty confident right now, and we're just trying to keep this momentum going until we get down there to Shreveport."

Alabama's record is somewhat deceiving. It lost one game in overtime and five others by seven or fewer points this season, playing in the dogfight that is the Southeastern Conference.

Wilson leads a balanced offense against a CU defense that he said features one of the best front sevens he has seen this season.

The Buffs surrendered 55 and 51 points in their final two home games and a total of 137 points in the last three regular season games combined, but Wilson said he expects it to be a challenge to get the ball in the end zone.

"We'd like to come out and score 50 points, but we're going to go out there and do what we need to do," he said. "We're not going to look at them and say, 'Well, they gave up this many points and they're not any good.' We don't believe that."

"We think they're a good team, but we're going to focus on our assignments and what it takes for us to win."

Wilson didn't name specific Buffs because he didn't have all their names committed to memory, but he pointed to an outstanding linebacker and a good cornerback and defensive linemen who have distinguished themselves in game film. Those players are Jordon Dizon, Terrence Wheatley and George Hypolite, all first-team members of the Big 12 coaches' All-Conference team.

Alabama was off to a hot start this season under new coach Nick Saban, but the team began to fade down the stretch and several suspensions for disciplinary reasons affected chemistry.

Wilson said he was as much to blame as anyone for his team's inconsistency. He said he performed well at times but also fell well short of his capabilities on some Saturdays this fall.

"We kind of coasted it seemed like after the Tennessee game we won," Wilson said. "We just couldn't figure everything out and get to where we were after we won. We'd have one or two bad practices in the week and it would just kill us on Saturday.

"I think with our team a big thing is, how we practice is how we're going to play."

Alabama's most impressive victory this season came in Week 3 when it defeated Arkansas 41-38. It also came close to beating Louisiana State, which will play for the national title next month. It's overtime loss came against Georgia, another SEC team playing in a Bowl Championship Series game.

Wilson enters the bowl game ranked 97th among college quarterbacks in passing efficiency, 12 spots behind CU starter Cody Hawkins. Wilson has thrown for 2,590 yards and 15 touchdowns this season, but he has completed only 55 percent of his throws and has been intercepted 11 times.

Wilson said he has learned a lot from this season and believes he is much better now than he was in training camp.

His best weapon is senior wide receiver DJ Hall, who is considered a sure-fire NFL prospect. Hall has caught more passes for more yards than any other receiver in Alabama history and could go over the 1,000-yard mark for the season against CU.

Alabama is playing in the Independence Bowl for the second consecutive season. Wilson and his teammates lost 34-31 to Oklahoma State last year.

"Right now, we're just lucky to be in a bowl," he said. "For a time there we thought we weren't going to be able to play anywhere."



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CU report

By B.G. Brooks

Saturday, December 22, 2007

Assist to Logan

The University of Colorado's pickup of **Bryce Givens**, who initially committed to Nebraska, can be traced to a telephone call from his Mullen High School coach to CU coach **Dan Hawkins**.

After Nebraska fired **Bill Callahan**, Mullen coach **Dave Logan** said Givens told him he wanted to reopen his recruitment. Logan called Hawkins and CU reopened its interest in Givens, a first-team offensive lineman on the *Rocky Mountain News*' All-Colorado team.

Logan called the 6-foot-6, 240-pound Givens "a real motor guy. . . . He loves to play hard and he picks up things very fast. And physically, he'll fill out."

Logan called Givens "a joy to coach" and said he was glad Givens committed to CU instead of Texas, adding the player will have an outstanding career wherever he goes. But he said Givens was more apt to have an impact at CU.

Hold the celebration

Thursday was the two-month anniversary of Alabama's most recent - and arguably its most impressive - 2007 victory.

On Oct. 20, the Crimson Tide beat then-No. 20 Tennessee 41-17, then lapsed into a four-loss free fall that sent it to a 6-6 record and a berth opposite CU in the Independence Bowl.

Although coached by another staff, Alabama also concluded 2006 with four consecutive losses.

New coach **Nick Saban** told reporters this week his postseason approach has been "kind of going back and starting all over. I think it's never too late to start the season over."

Among the Crimson Tide's postseason goals are avoiding a nonwinning record for only the second time since 2002 and posting a second bowl win since 2001.

Listen to this

Gifts given by the Independence Bowl to Alabama and CU players include a \$300 Sony Bravia theater system, with a digital media port, five-disc DVD/CD player and five-speaker surround system with subwoofer.

Taking the walk

Seven of CU's 17 seniors graduated Friday: defensive end **Alonzo Barrett**, tight end **Tyson DeVree**, strong safety **Lionel Harris**, offensive tackle **Edwin Harrison**, offensive tackle **Tyler Polumbus**, receiver **Dusty Sprague** and cornerback **Terrence Wheatley**.

Sitting it out - again

CU's bowl travel roster features 99 players, but that number doesn't include senior offensive captain **Bernard Jackson**, who missed this season because of academic ineligibility.

Jackson remains ineligible, which prohibits him from making the trip. Asked about the possibility of Jackson petitioning for a sixth year of eligibility, Hawkins said, "He needs to focus on school work and graduating."

Etc.

* Wheatley (broken bone in his left foot) is expected to play, but he likely will relinquish return duties to running back **Hugh Charles**.

* Defensive tackle **George Hypolite** (two partially torn tendons near his left hamstring) said he is "not perfectly where I want to be (healthwise), but I'm not complaining." Injured during the bye week before Nebraska, he played in that game and will play in the bowl.

* Hawkins said he has not been contacted by any schools wanting to talk with his assistants about jobs. Several received overtures last season, but only **Chris Strausser** (assistant head coach/offensive line) elected to leave, returning to Boise State. Most movement involving assistant coaches occurs after bowl season concludes.

Numbers game

331**points** this season are the most CU has scored since 2002 (398).

He said it

"There were many things about last year that were painful. I always say there is a reason for it, and you always wonder, 'God, why me? Why now? How can I embrace this meaning?' But when you're sitting there watching ESPN in the bowl weeks and you're seeing 275 teams playing . . . and you're not one of them, you're going, 'Boy, they just put up every mascot in America but I didn't see Ralphie.' "

Hawkins, on being a spectator last postseason.