



Memo to Scott: Bring it on

Buff RBs say they would welcome the challenge

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It's safe to say if Darrell Scott, the nation's top high school running back, doesn't come to Boulder to become a Colorado Buffalo next season, the people most surprised by his decision might be the Buffs themselves.

It sure sounds like current players are planning on having Scott as a teammate in 2008.

Take Markques Simas, for instance.

The true freshman wide receiver hasn't played at all this season. He redshirted instead while working on his strength and mastering the offense. When asked after a recent practice what part of his game he needs to work most on in the offseason, Simas pointed toward his blocking.

Simas is aware the Buffs have a good shot at landing Scott, and they have already received an oral commitment from Ray Polk, a four-star tailback prospect from the Phoenix area. He wants to make things easier on them when they arrive.

"That's definitely going to be key because we've got two great backs coming in next year and I just want to make sure if they're going to bust for 60, they definitely bust for 60 and there is not going to be a corner stopping them or anything like that," Simas said.

Adding a player with Scott's ability can impact the entire program, but the players affected first and foremost would be the young tailbacks already on the roster.

Redshirt freshman Demetrius Sumler and true freshman Brian Lockridge both played in spurts this season and performed reasonably well. Both have a lot of potential and are looking toward next season as a possible breakout season with seniors Hugh Charles and Byron Ellis no longer ahead of them on the depth chart.

But now they have to fend off Polk and possibly Scott, who led his team to a state championship in California this season at St. Bonaventure High School.

"I think the more competition you have, the better the players get," Lockridge said. "With top players coming in, that's going to make anybody better. It's going to encourage me to step up my game."

Colorado coach Dan Hawkins believes it is possible a true freshman tailback can earn the majority of playing time in the CU offense if that player is a dominant runner, but he said the most difficult part of the position is knowing who to block in pass protection. That responsibility usually falls to a more

experienced back because playing a true freshman has a lot of risks as well as rewards.

"Elements of it can be very hard," he said. "Pass protection is absolutely the hardest. Running the ball, just in terms of general things, not that hard. But, again, it's amazing how many little nuances of what you're doing and what they should be looking at and where they should be going. You're not just quite as efficient as you would like it to be. Part of that is because the world is spinning pretty fast for them."

Sumler will be the man with the most experience in the backfield next fall, but he has been used much of the time in short-yardage situations this season and will still have a lot to learn next season. He said he must improve his pass blocking, speed and focus if he wants to be an every-down back.

Lockridge, who played as a true freshman this season, knows better than anyone what a big challenge it will be for Polk and Scott to join the program and skyrocket to the top of the depth chart. He says no matter how talented a player is, there is a big learning curve between high school and college.

Both Sumler and Lockridge say they already plan to battle for the starting job next fall with one another, so adding more talent to the picture won't bother them. And if they do see a true freshman rise to the top of the heap, they will be happy because it will be good for the team.

"We recruit the best players," Sumler said, talking about Scott. "If he comes in, it's going to be a great competition. I hope he comes here. It will help the team out. I have no worries about anyone coming here."



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Riddle, Buffs solving special teams issues

CU improved 42 places or more in four NCAA statistical categories from 2006

By Kyle Ringo

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Colorado special teams coach Kent Riddle spent a lot of time on game days and in the film room shaking his head in bewilderment in 2006 wondering why his players made some of their decisions on the field.

It wasn't like the Buffs didn't spend plenty of time practicing kicks and returns, specific game situations and all the little nuances that lead to success.

Despite all of his efforts, the Buffs were subpar in four of the five special teams areas in which the NCAA tracks statistics.

The breakthrough Riddle spent an entire season hoping for finally materialized this season, especially in the final half of the 2007 campaign. CU improved 42 places or better in four of the five special teams areas this season in the NCAA statistics, including going from 104th in the nation in punt returns in 2006 to 38th this year. The Buffs also improved from 95th in kickoff returns to 34th.

As the Buffs prepare to play Alabama in the Independence Bowl on Sunday in Shreveport, La., they continue to work on improving in the kicking game. But what they have already accomplished is high on the list of reasons why they are playing in the postseason this year after a miserable season last year.

Only six of 119 Division I teams ranked in the top half of the NCAA in all five special teams categories this season. CU was one of them.

"We've just been a lot more solid in assignments and technique and understanding what we're trying to get done," Riddle said. "We've created a few big plays. Not enough.

"From last year to this year, seen a ton of improvement. Last year we did stuff where it was like, 'Oh, you've got to be kidding me.' "

The improvement has come despite losing a consensus All-American place-kicker in Mason Crosby and replacing him with senior Kevin Eberhart, who has struggled to be consistent.

Look no further than redshirt freshman cornerback Jalil Brown for an example of an individual whose contribution has factored into the overall improvement.

Brown won the Bill McCartney Award for special teams achievement this season with the second-best performance in modern history from a player on special teams.

Brown finished with the team lead with 31 specials teams points and 10 solo tackles. His 31 points tied former strong safety John Sanders (1997) for the second most in school history. He also forced a fumble and seven knockdown or spring blocks on returns. No other Buff had more than three such blocks.

Brown was one of six players to rack up double-digit special teams points totals this season. CU had only two players earn 10 or more special teams points in 2006. Brown improved so much in the second half of the year, he recorded 10 special teams points in one game against Missouri.

Brown said he began to feel more confident about his ability to make plays about halfway through the season. He said the confidence came when he realized he had the speed and strength to make plays. Instead of trying to run around opponents all the time, he began trying to run through them, too.

"When I go out there, I'm trying to go as hard as I can and trying to make a play every time," Brown said.

There are far fewer plays on special teams than the other two phases of football -- offense and defense. Riddle said coaches naturally spend less time in practice on the kicking game, but CU probably devotes a higher percentage of practice time to perfecting punts, kickoffs and returns than most.

Riddle said as much as 20 percent of a typical CU practice is spent on special teams, and many practices end with coach Dan Hawkins challenging punter Matt DiLallo and place-kicker Kevin Eberhart to make challenging kicks. A miss means the whole team runs.

"I think we devote a lot of time to special teams around here, this year even more than last year," Brown said. "I talk to friends playing college ball right now on other teams and they say they don't devote near as much time as we do to special teams."

The Buffs figure to be even better on special teams next fall with 13 of their top 17 points earners returning. Riddle said there is still plenty of room for improvement.

"I do feel like we get a little bit better every week," Riddle said. "Just seeing the practices these last couple weeks, I mean, we put our third team in there and we're performing better than we did last year."



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