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cu football

Polk, Stewart showing they have talent, too

The Buffs are in no rush to redshirt any of their freshman tailbacks, even with Scott set to star.

By Tom Kensler
The Denver Post

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CU running backs coach Darian Hagan, giving pointers to Darrell Scott, says fellow freshmen Ray Polk and Rodney Stewart are "special talents" as well. (Kathryn Scott Osler, The Denver Post)

BOULDER — The chances of Colorado's *other* two freshman tailbacks being redshirted, CU running backs coach Darian Hagan might say, are slim and none — and Slim must not be watching practices.

While the nation's top 2008 running back recruit, Darrell Scott, looks like the real deal, Ray Polk and Rodney Stewart also have turned heads.

"I don't think so," Hagan said after a 2 1/2-hour practice Wednesday, when asked if there might be any scenario in which Polk or Stewart would sit out this season. "All three of those guys are special. They're special people, special talents. You've got to play your best people. That's what we're going to do."

"There's going to be enough carries to go around," said Polk, whose

Colorado Football

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father, Raymond, played cornerback at Oklahoma State in the early 1980s. "I've always enjoyed competition. I've always been that way. Whether the competition is better than me or not, it's going to make me better. I'm not going to shy away from that. That would only hurt me."

Hagan considers Stewart the steal of the Buffaloes'

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freshman class. The Columbus, Ohio, native wasn't highly recruited or known nationally. That happens to 5-6, 175-pound running backs.

Despite rushing for 2,036 yards and 33 touchdowns as a senior against quality competition, Stewart was choosing between Mid-American Conference schools until Colorado called — thanks to a tip from another CU recruit from Ohio, linebacker Doug Rippy. Michigan later showed interest in Stewart, Hagan said.

"Since I'm a little guy, a lot of teams didn't really look at me," Stewart said.

With a best time of 10.7 seconds for 100 meters, Stewart has carried the nickname "Speedy" for years. He is competing for starting duties as a kickoff and punt returner. Hagan said Speedy also will tote the ball out of the backfield for the Buffs.

"He is a real shifty running back," the coach said, referring to the nickname Stewart has answered to for years. "He's strong, and he's very competitive. I think the other guys back there are feeding off him."

Stewart opened up some eyes during Monday's scrimmage when he ran over 5-11, 190-pound defensive back Jonathan Hawkins en route to a 29-yard touchdown catch-run after taking a pass from Cody Hawkins in the flat.

Stewart said he bench presses more than double his weight — 379 pounds.

Major injury.

Freshman linebacker Jon Major suffered a torn ACL and will be lost for the season.

Surgery will be performed at a date yet to be determined. Major, a Ponderosa High School all-

stater last fall, is the third CU player to be lost to a non-contact ACL tear during August drills.

Footnotes.

CU coach Dan Hawkins said there is a "great probability" freshman safety Patrick Mahnke will play this season. Mahnke, a Parker resident and an all-stater last fall at Mountain Vista High School, has shown a propensity for blocking punts. "That was the great thing about him in high school, there were a lot of ways he made plays," Hawkins said.

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Ballenger making his case to be Buffs' backup QB

CU redshirt freshman getting reps with Nelson out

By Kyle Ringo
Thursday, August 14, 2008

Colorado football coach Dan Hawkins thought he might have discovered a special athlete when he first saw quarterback Matt Ballenger on the gridiron as a sophomore in high school in Nampa, Idaho.

Hawkins later became convinced when he watched Ballenger dominate the state championship basketball game, basically willing his team to victory. Ballenger was the two-time Gatorade player of the year in basketball in his home state.

"He was like Magic Johnson," Hawkins said.

It has taken Ballenger more than a year to reach a comfort level with the Buffs' offense, but he finally seems to be getting there. If the season began this week and starter Cody Hawkins was unable to play for some reason, coaches at least would debate whether to insert Ballenger, a redshirt freshman, in the lineup instead of senior Nick Nelson.

"He's really making moves in the last week or so," Hawkins said.

Ballenger is getting the benefit of extra repetitions in recent practices with Nelson sitting out with a strained abdominal muscle. It's not clear when Nelson might be back to full strength.

Ballenger says he hopes his first significant playing time comes this season, but he doesn't want to be on the field because a teammate has been injured.

"Everyone wants a chance and hopefully I'll get that this year," he said. "If I don't, I'm just going to try to keep getting better and show them I can one day maybe be the starter."

Notable

Cornerback Jimmy Smith is nursing a sore lower back and B.J. Beatty continues to try to practice with a calf injury. ... CU explored the idea of holding this Sunday's scrimmage at Boulder High School to provide seating for fans, but CU coaches did not want to hold the scrimmage on field turf. ... The Buffs practiced in the rain Thursday night, but it didn't prevent them from doing anything, Hawkins said. More rainy unseasonably cool weather is expected today. ... The team has an hour-long walk-through scheduled this morning and an afternoon practice.



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Trio battling to start on D-line

Herrod, Obi, Brace will likely rotate, but all want to be the first guy in

By Kyle Ringo

Thursday, August 14, 2008

It almost looked like paint. Maybe Conrad Obi had used some eye-black — the stuff football players smear across their cheeks to keep the sun from their eyes — to write a message on himself.

When Obi walked off the Colorado practice fields after the morning session in another set of two-a-days on Thursday, the 6-foot-4 redshirt freshman defensive end from Georgia took off his jersey and pads revealing the words “No Fear” stamped on the right side of his chest. It wasn’t paint or eye-black. It’s a new tattoo and reminder of how Obi wants to play the game.

“Some people have fear and it holds them back from doing certain things basically,” Obi said. “If you don’t have fear, you can just live your life, you know?”

Obi is one of three defensive ends locked in a fierce competition for the starting job on the right side of the defensive line. Sophomore Marquez Herrod entered fall camp atop the depth chart at the position with junior Jason Brace and Obi just behind him. All figure to play this year as coaches continue to develop more depth on a line that features three senior starters in Maurice Lucas, Brandon Nicolas and George Hypolite.

Coach Dan Hawkins’ goal is to build his defensive line up to levels reached when he directed the program at Boise State. Ideally, he wants eight to 10 defensive linemen rotating in and out of games to keep a steady intensity on the opposing offense.

“We’ve got some guys we want to get in the game,” defensive coordinator Ron Collins said. “We’re getting close. I think that’s the point where we want to get to, but we’re not quite there.”

All three ends believe they are making progress toward earning more playing time. None is willing to say he believes he will be the starter as they each continue to work on better footwork, using hand placement and knowing their calls. And at CU where Hawkins favors personnel groupings and cringes at reporters who pay too much attention to depth charts, that mind-set makes sense.

It doesn’t mean that they all don’t covet the starting role.

Herrod, who is in his third year in the program and has spent most of his time on the field doing the grunt work of special teams, was asked this week how badly he wants to be the fourth member of the line during that first defensive play of the season later this month against Colorado State.

“More than anything in life right now,” Herrod said. “I’ve been here three years now, and I didn’t see

much playing time last year. I'm really anxious to get on that field and show people what I can do."

The Buffs hope to improve a pass rush that got to the quarterback only 19 times last season. All three ends figure to play a part in that improvement, but with so much speed and talent at linebacker on the roster, the young ends might not even be on the field in some passing situations. Coaches could choose to use linebackers such as Brad Jones and B.J. Beatty to test opposing left tackles instead.

Linebackers and ends alike are getting all they can handle in pass rush drills from massive tackles Nate Solder and Ryan Miller. CU defenders aren't likely to see anyone bigger or stronger this season.

"Monsters, what did they say they were? Ginormous?" Obi said. "They're big guys, but they make us better."

Coaches are still at least a week away from deciding which of the three ends deserves to be the first on the field against CSU. Herrod knows he will play in every game regardless. He came to CU from Southern California with a reputation as a guy who loves covering kicks and hitting people. He is a member of every special teams unit this season.

"That's something I'll never stop. I love that," he said. "I'll run down on kickoff and kill somebody any day."



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Bufs look to Smart for leadership

Boulder High grad draws comparisons to standout Dizon

By Ryan Thorburn

Thursday, August 14, 2008

The Colorado football team doesn't feel like it has completely lost Jordon Dizon to the NFL.

According to coaches, a little bit of No. 44 rubbed off on Jeff Smart and is still showing up on the practice field as the Bufs prepare for the 2008 season.

So what did Smart learn playing inside linebacker last season next to the Butkus Award runner-up?

"I don't know where to start with that," Smart said. "Jordon has great instincts and is always around the ball, obviously with his 160 tackles or whatever he had last year. His toughness, his smarts, his leadership. He wasn't always yelling at everyone, but when something needed to be said he would say it and people would listen to him. I can just go on all day about what I learned from him."

Dizon, now a member of the Detroit Lions, was clearly CU's best defensive player and the team leader as a senior. Now Smart, a former walk-on out of Boulder High School, is suddenly the old veteran in the middle of the defense, even though he's only a redshirt sophomore.

Despite the return of Michael Sipili from a suspension and a much deeper group for linebackers coach Brian Cabral to work with inside, Smart is the leader of the unit.

"Last year coach Cabral basically played with three inside linebackers," CU head coach Dan Hawkins said. "We traveled three guys and played with two and hoped like heck we didn't have to go too far into the depth chart."

Dizon led the Bufs with 160 tackles. Smart was third on the team behind safety Daniel Dykes (83) with 80 tackles and was on the field for 677 snaps.

"Anytime you spend that much time next to a guy in practice and meetings you kind of start figuring out what he did and what you need to do," Hawkins said when asked about Dizon's influence on Smart. "They have similar styles. They're kind of similar size and similar speed. Both of them are very smart football players."

No pun intended.

"Jordon was obviously a phenomenal player, but we really lacked the depth and experience. We only had a couple guys that played, and Jordan really made up for that with his outstanding play," Smart said. "I probably have the most experience out of the inside guys now, so I definitely try to show the young guys things that I've learned from being out there. I know the defense pretty well, so I try to help them

out in that area and in general. I know coach really looks to me to lead the linebackers."

Ignoring the pain

It's not a surprise that talented sophomore Jalil Brown is in the mix for a starting cornerback spot. That he's competing at a high level in practice with a fractured hand makes the effort more impressive to the coaches.

"It just speaks to the kind of character that he has," Hawkins said. "He's never said boo about it."

Brown, who is wearing a cast on the injured hand, is currently listed behind junior Cha'pelle Brown on the depth chart at right cornerback.

Plan B(ackup)

For the first time since Joel Klatt was breaking the huddle, CU will start the season with an experienced quarterback capable of running the offense the way the head coach wants it run.

But what if Cody Hawkins gets injured? None of the three candidates for the No. 2 spot -- Nick Nelson, Matt Ballenger and Kyle Black -- have separated themselves from the pack yet.

"In many cases the backup hasn't had a lot of snaps. He's the backup," Dan Hawkins said when asked about the lack of experience behind Cody. "So they've got to be ready to go. We give them a lot of reps in practice and try to keep their mental edge on. And if you need them you go to the bullpen and they come in and throw strikes."

Special freshman

Patrick Mahnke's ability to play special teams, especially his penchant for blocking kicks, will likely get him on the field as a true freshman.

Last year at Mountain Vista High School in Parker, the 6-foot-1 Mahnke was in on 100 tackles, made eight sacks, forced three fumbles, recovered eight fumbles and blocked four kicks (three punts, one field goal).

"I think he'll play," Dan Hawkins said after Wednesday's practice. "Some guys I think just have a little more knack than others. That was the great thing about him in high school, there were a lot of ways he made plays."



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CU's 'Speedy' backs up his talk

By Ryan Thorburn

Wednesday, August 13, 2008

Darian Hagan is a good recruiter.

Sometimes it's better to be lucky and good.

Fearing that Colorado's prize prospect Darrell Scott — widely regarded as the best high school tailback in the nation — could possibly change his mind and decommit late in the process, the Buffs' running back coach went on the road looking for an insurance policy.

Hagan and Jeff Grimes, CU's offensive line coach and running game coordinator, made recruiting visits as far away as Mississippi and Ohio looking for some more depth in the backfield.

Since they were already in the Buckeye State, the coaches checked in on linebacker prospect Douglas Rippy, who decided to play at CU instead of rival Nebraska after the Cornhuskers made a coaching change.

When Rippy found out that Hagan was in the market for another running back pupil, he recommended not flying home without taking a serious look at his friend, Rodney Stewart.

The flight home after a long road trip quickly got a lot shorter for the assistant coaches.

"The stars were aligned right that we got that kid," Hagan says. "There's going to be a lot of teams, when they see this kid perform, that are going to wonder how we got him here. It was just the grace of God, hard work, searching and finding guys committed to helping us out."

Scott, of course, kept his word and signed with the Buffs in February. So did Ray Polk, who has been equally impressive so far.

But the Buffs also have big plans for the 5-foot-6 Stewart, a very strong kid already nicknamed "Speedy."

Keep an eye out for No. 43 between the tackles, in the passing game and on the punt return.

"I played everything in high school — punter, kick returner, receiver, corner, running back," said Stewart, who was being recruited mostly by Mid-American Conference programs before Hagan knocked on his door. "I could play it all. So however I get in a game, it's going to be fun for me."

Competing against Stewart isn't fun. He showed up in Boulder ready to talk trash with his new teammates on the field, despite his quiet demeanor away from the sport.

During Wednesday's practice, after Ryan Walters intercepted a pass intended for Stewart, secondary coach Greg Brown had to scold the aggressive freshman for going low and taking the safety down with a dangerous tackle.

"He's physical and he loves to win. He's street smart and one of those kids who likes to talk a lot," Hagan said. "So we had to kind of reel him in and tell him we don't do that here. Just go out and let your pads and your play speak for you. And he has gotten that.

"At first it was a little difficult for him, especially with the coaches not being around the kids in the summer. He was able to mouth off a little bit. But he's gotten better and he has been backing it up. ... I love that kid. He's awesome."

Stewart and Rippy, who grew up near Columbus, were the best of friends since the day they met. Something just clicked between them.

Just this year, while attending a cookout together, the talented duo learned from some of Rippy's extended family members that they were actually second cousins.

So the move to Boulder turned out to be all in the family.

"It really didn't shock us because we were like family in the first place," Rippy said. "I'm so happy he's out here. I don't know what I'd do if I was by myself. He's family and also a friend. With him around, whenever I'm down he brings me up and talks to me and gets me straight. It's good to have him around."

Stewart also has good hands. Which makes sense as an insurance policy at running back that appears ready to pay off.

"I think it's great," Stewart said of joining Scott and Polk in what could be a legendary class of tailbacks four years from now. "A lot of running backs means more competition. We just make each other better."



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Longmont, Colorado
Friday, August 15, 2008

TIMES-CALL

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A tough day to stomach

Miller's ills are the talk of morning workout

By Patrick Ridgell

Longmont Times-Call

BOULDER — It was a sight to see.

Offensive tackle Ryan Miller spent Wednesday morning at Colorado football practice working as he normally does. Only at one point, Miller was working and losing his breakfast at the same time.

Miller was tangled with fellow-offensive tackle Nate Solder in a hands drills when he began to vomit.

He did not stop his work, even when Solder appeared near to getting sick as well. Teammates watching from the side cheered Miller on.

Miller explained after practice he was not sick.

"I just had a little too much for breakfast," Miller said.

Sophomore cornerback Cha'pelle Brown is working with a cast on his fractured left hand, an injury he said he sustained last weekend falling to the ground.

Brown said it does not hinder his ability to catch.

"I can't take no time off," Brown said.

"We're competing for jobs right now, so I'm still playing."

Receivers coach Eric Kiesau kept his entire group after practice for extra conditioning as punishment. Seven of the 12 wideouts arrived late.

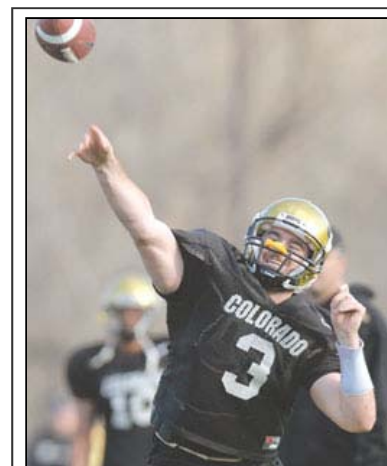
Kiesau said he wants his guys there 10 minutes before practice starts.

Head coach Dan Hawkins said he did not know what was going in the far corner of the practice field while Kiesau's receivers worked in the hot sun.

But asked about Miller's intestinal adventures, Hawkins said: "A little toughness always helps. Just trying to push through some things."

And regarding Brown's injury, Hawkins added: "That's just part of it. A lot of people go through life, whether they have back problems or health problems, and they have to strap it on every day and go to work, or get it going and that's part of the deal.

"That just speaks to the kind of character he has. He's never said boo about it." Brown is battling Jimmy Smith,



CU senior Nick Nelson is in a three-way battle for the Buffs' backup quarterback position.

Joshua Buck/Times-Call file

Gardner McKay and Anthony Wright for playing time at cornerback.

QB RACE: Midway through camp, CU is not about to name a back-up quarterback.

At least, that's what Hawkins said Wednesday practice.

Senior Nick Nelson, redshirt freshman Matt Ballenger and freshman Tyler Hansen are, by all accounts, holding a spirited battle for the right to spell Cody Hawkins should Hawkins ever need relief. Offensive coordinator Mark Helfrich said last week Hansen will give the others everything they want in the battle.

Only Nelson has played in a Division I game. He saw spot duty in three in 2007, going 3-for-6, while the durable Cody Hawkins took the rest of CU's snaps. Nelson played in an offense at Saddleback College in 2005 and 2006 that's similar to what CU runs now.

Dan Hawkins said entering 2008 without much experience behind Cody is not a concern, nor is it that unusual. He said he's confident someone will do fine, when and if they're called. He added CU's current experience is much better than past years.

"We've been playing guys who have no experience – starters , back-ups, everybody," Hawkins said.

Nelson said he's "really motivated" with his eligibility winding down.

"This is my last go around," Nelson said. "I'd like to get on the field and show them what I got, if I get the chance."

EXTRA POINTS: Freshman safety Patrick Mahnke will probably not redshirt in 2008, Hawkins said. Mahnke blocked a punt in Monday's

scrimmage ... Hawkins called CU's depth at middle linebacker much improved over a season ago. Last year, the Buffs traveled three players for those two positions, and, "hoped like heck we didn't have go to goo far in the depth chart," Hawkins said. ... Today's practices are scheduled for 9:30 a.m. and 7 p.m.

Patrick Ridgell can be reached at pridgell@times-call.com.



CU report: Major in a redshirt, reluctantly

By B.G. Brooks

Thursday, August 14, 2008

Brian Cabral knows linebackers like **Bill Gates** know microchips. So when Cabral says **Jon Major's** preseason productivity was steering the freshman more and more away from the redshirt route, it carries credibility.

"He was having a good camp, and that was a bonus for me," Cabral said Thursday. "He gave me the depth I didn't have (in 2007). It's unfortunate - he'd worked hard to play and was prepared to play."

Misfortune struck Wednesday morning when Major, playing middle linebacker, tore the anterior cruciate ligament in his left knee. A date for surgery was to have been set Thursday night, contingent on ACL surgeries required for two teammates - defensive end **Drew Hudgins** and offensive lineman **Mike Ittis**.

Of the three ACL injuries in a nine-day span, coach **Dan Hawkins** said, "It's kind of a freak deal," adding that the only preventive measure would be to "stop running because, basically, that's when they happened. It's not because guys are hitting you, or cutting. I mean, they're all noncontact."

Major, of Ponderosa High School, was philosophical about his season-ending injury, calling it "the nature of the beast. . . . It's kind of unfortunate to have to be forced into a redshirt, but as far as timing, it's all right. You can always use the extra year to develop."

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CU report: Early work pays off

By B.G. Brooks

Wednesday, August 13, 2008

BOULDER — **Patrick Mahnke**'s summer lasted all of three days.

He graduated May 24 from Mountain Vista High School, and by May 27, he was on the University of Colorado campus, enrolled in two summer courses and absorbing as much as he could in the football team's voluntary summer program.

"I didn't have any summer," Mahnke said, with no hint of regret.

Couple that work ethic with his physical attributes, and it's not surprising that, among CU's freshmen defensive players, Mahnke has "a very good probability" of playing early.

That word came Wednesday from coach **Dan Hawkins**, but secondary coach **Greg Brown** uttered it two days earlier and senior safety **Ryan Walters** two days before that.

Said Walters: "Oh, yeah, he's not scared to make contact, which is what you like to see in a safety. He's got good ball skills and he makes plays. That's something you can't really teach - that physical attitude."

The 6-foot-1, 205-pound Mahnke blocked a punt in CU's first camp scrimmage, a regular occurrence in high school (seven blocked kicks). Said Hawkins: "He has a knack. . . . There were a lot of ways he made plays in high school."

CU's first 2008 commit, Mahnke shunned interest from Missouri, Arizona State and Colorado State.

THE TOP THREE, PLEASE

Receivers coach **Eric Kiesau** kept his players on the field for an extra 20 minutes of conditioning as punishment for seven of the 12 being tardy for morning work.

Despite that, Kiesau is seeing a bit more urgency from his guys in this camp. He won't use the personnel groupings he favored the past two seasons because CU's switch to the no-huddle, up-tempo offense won't allow that much substitution.

Instead, Kiesau is identifying his three "most well-rounded" receivers, who should excel in both the passing and running game, and three strong backups.

The first three will likely will be **Patrick Williams**, **Josh Smith** and **Scotty McKnight**. Kiesau said **Cody Crawford** and **Steve Melton** have shown well in camp, which, in all likelihood, will allow freshman **Chance Blackmon** to redshirt.