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Tuesday, April 14, 2009

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Locked in tight race, CU quarterbacks have room to improve

By B.G. Brooks
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BOULDER – To no one's surprise, the University of Colorado's first full spring scrimmage didn't come close to settling what unexpectedly became a two-man duel at quarterback.

But Saturday morning's roughly two-hour session at Folsom Field did prove revealing for the coach whose vote will count most in settling on CU's starter.

Offensive coordinator/quarterbacks coach Mark Helfrich said Monday that while incumbent starter Cody Hawkins and Tyler Hansen both had their moments in sharing the direction of the first and second offenses, most areas he expects improvement in shouldn't be a mystery for either player.

For Hansen, that would be even more time spent with his mind immersed in the playbook and making every snap in practice count.

For Hawkins, it would be suppressing an instinct to gamble, instead turning to the relatively sure thing when the opportunity presents itself.

The quarterbacks, of course, were graded on more than Saturday's passing statistics, but those were fairly even: Hawkins completed 18 of 27 passes for 328 yards and seven touchdowns, while Hansen completed 13-of-22 for 207 yards and three TDs.

Overall, said Helfrich, both "did some good things (and) graded out fairly close to one another – so that's good. Hopefully, that'll continue to be a tight race."

And it's now down to that pair after sophomore Matt Ballenger (he plans to transfer) pulled out Friday. Hansen and Hawkins will finish out spring drills getting all the work at their position – a prospect Helfrich said should benefit both: "Reps are reps, and both of those guys need as many as they can get."

In assessing Hansen's Saturday work, Helfrich said the sophomore "did a lot of things that he hasn't done before in 11-on-11 situations – just as far as seeing second and third guys (options in the passing game), or throwing on time to the first guy, that kind of thing. I just think he can really grow in his confidence and knowledge."

He also said Hansen showed improvement "just in running the show. He did fairly well there, but there were a couple of times where we might have had a delay (of game) in real life."

The reason for the delay, Helfrich said, was "he had a couple of plays called backwards – but those are things that are very easily corrected."

Of Hawkins, Helfrich said the junior once again demonstrated his knowledge of the offense and his composure before the ball was snapped: "Just communication-wise, he had a couple of route signals at the line of scrimmage – one that led to one of (Jason) Espinosa's touchdowns."

On the flip side, though, Helfrich said Hawkins might have guilty of being "a little too cute with a couple of things instead of being solid and taking what's there. He had a couple of No. 1s (receiver options) in the progression wide open, and he's trying to get the ball somewhere else.

"But they're not difficult things to correct."

The second spring scrimmage is scheduled for Friday (4 p.m., site to be determined).

TURN 'EM LOOSE: The defense wasn't allowed to tackle either quarterback on Saturday, with the whistle blowing each time a defender laid a hand on Hansen or Hawkins.

The defense was credited with six sacks (three on each QB), prompting this from Helfrich: "A couple of times (Hawkins) took sacks, but it would have been interesting (had they not been protected).

"It's one of the things I don't like about not being live. Could he (or Hansen) have escaped? There were a couple of those (sack calls) that we might have cut a little too closely."

DOWN PAT: Since moving from quarterback to tight end three years ago, senior Patrick Devenny has labored to become a better blocker.

"It's been the focal point for me for a long time," he said. "But I think I'm getting better. Coach 'Rid' (tight ends coach Kent Riddle) has worked with me on fundamentals, and now that I'm a senior, I've kind of gotten into the mindset of saying, 'I should be able to block these guys.'"

Maybe that's all it took.

In addition to Devenny making four receptions for 138 yards and a pair of touchdowns Saturday, Helfrich said the 6-foot-3, 240-pound Devenny "did some good things in the running game, too.

"His blocking, which he's always been working on, was better. That was encouraging."

MR. SELF-IMPROVEMENT: Asked who among his group might have made the biggest off-season improvement, running backs

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coach Darian Hagan quickly submitted the name of sophomore Brian Lockridge.

Then Hagan grinned and said, "No, it might have been me."

Huh?

"Yeah, it might have been," he said. "I've committed myself to being a better communicator, a better coach, getting them to understand the running back position."

BUFF BITS: The Buffs lopped an hour off of their on-field work Monday to watch tape of last weekend's 125-play scrimmage. . . . Coach Dan Hawkins is unsure whether Friday's scrimmage will be open to the public, citing a weather forecast that is calling for rain on Thursday and a potentially wet playing surface at Folsom Field. If the field is wet, the school doesn't want to risk resultant damage, so the scrimmage likely would be moved to the lower practice fields. In that case, the scrimmage likely would be closed because of a shortage of room for spectators on the sidelines. . . . Secondary coach Greg Brown got a first look Monday at safety Paul Vigo, who has missed early spring work due to a hamstring injury incurred in winter conditioning. Vigo, a grayshirt from the 2008 recruiting class, "is a big guy who can run," Brown said. "He just needs the practice time." . . . Hawkins said no walk-ons have been awarded scholarships yet this spring, but added, "That time's coming." Based on last weekend's first full scrimmage, receiver Jason Espinosa might be among the first recipients. . . . Big 12 Conference coaches usually attend spring meetings in Colorado Springs held in conjunction with the league's athletic directors' and basketball coaches' meetings. But the football coaches appear to be breaking from that schedule; they're likely to meet in Phoenix on May 6 — a move Hawkins termed more practical. . . . Hawkins said offensive tackle Ryan Miller (sprained ankle) and tailback Demetrius Sumler (strained neck) were OK, although neither practiced Monday. Hawkins said neither would be rushed back into duty. . . . A growing TV trend (ESPN) of showing spring games doesn't seem that popular with Hawkins. He said one of his Boise State spring games that was televised turned out to be "so generic" it bordered on not being beneficial. However, he admitted the national exposure was nice.

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CU's Iltis trying to fill big hole left by 'Girthy' at center

By Patrick Ridgell
© 2009 Longmont Times-Call

BOULDER — Girthy was good.

The only player the Colorado Buffaloes must replace on their offensive line is center Daniel Sanders, whose "Girthy" nickname was appropriate given his stocky build. But it might not have been as suiting as, say, Old Reliable.

He made 40 career starts, including 12 in 2008. According to CU's statistics, he graded out at 80 percent or better a team-high 11 times. He made six blocks that led to touchdowns last year, another team best, plus 601/2 knockdown blocks, second to left tackle Nate Solder's 69. He cut down on the bad shotgun snaps that were problematic earlier in his career. And in 843 plays in 2008, he allowed only one sack.

Sophomore Mike Iltis is receiving praise from offensive coordinator Mark Helfrich for the work he's doing so far this spring trying to replace Girthy. If Iltis hadn't already realized it, the job might be more mental than physical. Helfrich said the center's responsibilities in this offense are abundant.

"They're probably a little higher than the average bear, yeah," Helfrich said.

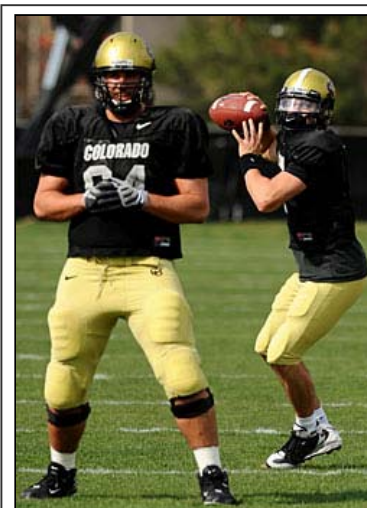
"There's just a lot of nuances in there they need to learn and make mistakes and fight back. He's doing a really good job in there. He's had a few balls on the ground we don't want on the ground, obviously. He's done really well with the mental part of it."

Head coach Dan Hawkins said Sanders had the moxie to make everyone, including the quarterback, stop and wait at the line of scrimmage while he determined the proper blocking scheme. Coaches are trying to encourage Iltis to realize it's his show.

"Mike's getting there," Hawkins said. "Part of that is knowledge, but part of that is also having enough moxie to tell the whole stadium and your whole offense that you guys need to be quiet for a second while I get this thing lined out."

Iltis tore his right ACL on the first day of camp last August, ending his season very early. He had surgery in September and said last week that he has yet to recover all of this strength, but added that'll come with time. He's a sophomore who has yet to play a down of college football.

Iltis said he spent last season studying how Sanders worked because he knew he'd have to learn to play center. He saw Sanders read defenses and call out



CU quarterback Cody Hawkins drops back for a pass while going through drills with lineman Mike Iltis last week in Boulder. **Joshua Buck/Times-Call**

EXTRA POINTS:

Friday's scrimmage may not be open to the public, but not because of practice video winding up on the Internet, Hawkins said. Weather and field conditions will probably keep the scrimmage out of Folsom Field and force it to the practice fields or bubble, where there isn't much room for fans. Hawkins said the final decision on whether to open it to the public has yet to be made. ... Hawkins said he's hopeful offensive lineman Ryan Miller (sprained ankle) will play Friday. He also said running back Demetrius Sumler (neck strain) is fine, but they're trying not to "overdo it" with him. ... Hawkins said no walk-ons have received a scholarship this spring. He added: "That time's coming probably. There are some guys who have been very impressive. You saw one Saturday." That one was receiver Jason Espinoza, who had seven catches for 154 yards and three touchdowns in the scrimmage. ... Hawkins said senior defensive tackle Taj Kaynor is

blocking assignments based on what he saw. Iltis, trying to master such nuances, is trying to keep it simple.

having a good spring.

"The center makes a lot of the calls, directs how to block people, work together," Iltis said. "It's a good amount but, really, it's all about paying attention and understanding and taking reps and watching film. Doing that really allows you to become a natural at it.

"It's a lot, but at the same time, if you just get on top of it and get a hold of it, you'll start to see it to where it's like speaking another language."

Where is Iltis in that process?

"I'm on my way up there," he said.

DEVENNY EMERGING? Patrick Devenny has long been the kind of guy people root for. His switch from tight end to quarterback in 2006 just in case the Buffs, who didn't want to burn Cody Hawkins' redshirt, had an emergency at the position made big fans out of the coaching staff. Now they're rooting for him to become a playmaker.

He caught four passes for 138 yards and a couple of touchdowns in CU's first spring scrimmage on Saturday. One of the scores came when he turned a short pass into a 70-yard gain by breaking a tackle and sprinting past the defensive secondary.

CU needs playmakers in the passing game, and it's hoping walk-ons, incoming freshmen and/or someone like Devenny can come through in the fall. Devenny, who signed with CU in 2005 as a quarterback, caught 14 passes for 116 yards and two touchdowns in 2008.

"Pat's done a nice job all spring," Helfrich said. "That's a good sign. It's nice to see the guy who's worked hard and improved a lot be rewarded in a scrimmage."

Devenny said his goal is to fill that play-making roll. He knows that when Riar Geer fully recovers from the shoulder surgery that's limiting him this spring, just getting on the field will be tougher to do.

"I work out with him everyday, and I know he can do everything I can do better," Devenny said. "I just know for me to compete, even with (sophomore Ryan) Deehan and all of these other guys ... I just have to come out here and have fun, try not put any stress on myself and just come out and play."