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These Buffaloes are feeling more at home on their range

By Tom Kensler
The Denver Post

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Buffaloes tight end Ryan Deehan, left, defensive tackle Taj Kaynor, center, and offensive tackle Bryce Givens have had strong performances in spring drills. (John Leyba, The Denver Post)

about surprises, about emerging. It's the same in football, in which players can shoot up the depth chart and late bloomers can finally blossom.

"You're kind of seeing, 'OK, the light is starting to come on,' " Colorado coach Dan Hawkins said. "You can see: 'He's starting to get it. He's starting to figure it out.' Just another year (of experience) and guys are way different."

Defensive tackle Taj Kaynor is a prime example. Last fall, the 6-foot-5, 275-pound junior got on the field for 20 snaps — all season. This spring, he's challenging for the first team as the Buffs look to replace the departed tandem of George Hypolite and Brandon Nicolas.

"This is my last go," Kaynor

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said. "I'm trying to sell out. I want to leave (spring drills) with a good impression going into the fall."

BOULDER — Springtime is about blossoming,

Tight end Ryan Deehan is in a different

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situation. A second-year player, Deehan admits he got by mostly on instinct and athletic ability last season.

"I'm having fun this spring because I'm getting more comfortable with what we do as a team," said Deehan, who coaches believe has the potential to be a go-to player.

Then there's offensive lineman Bryce Givens. The former Mullen High School blue-chipper arrived last fall at 6-6 and 240 pounds, looking more like a Q-tip than a tackle. He redshirted, ate well and is up to 280 pounds and competing for a starting spot.

"Bryce is a long guy with a lot of talent," said Denver Johnson, CU's new offensive line coach. "He has the arm length that you're looking for in a tackle."

Players develop at different rates. Some pick up major-college ball quickly. Others might take years as their bodies fill out and their minds adapt to a much faster game.

"You never totally know (why)," Hawkins said. "You just throw a rock on the gas pedal and wonder, 'How long is it going to take?' There are a lot of factors that go into it."

For Kaynor, he always had someone bigger and more experienced ahead of him. He arrived in 2005 from Cherry Creek High School as a 225-pound defensive end. Moved inside after his freshman year, Kaynor has added 50 pounds to his lanky frame the past three years. But with

talented upperclassmen ahead of him, he couldn't get on the field for an extended period of time.

"Waiting for my time was really hard to deal with," Kaynor said. "It definitely bothered me; I've had my down times. But my teammates picked me up. And I never stopped learning."

Kaynor blocked a field goal in Saturday's scrimmage. He said he is playing with more focus than at any point in his career.

Coaches have been hard on Kaynor. They see the potential but haven't been able to get it out of him — yet.

"It's been tough on Taj the last couple of years," Hawkins said. "We're asking a lot of him and pushing him. It's showing up. He's making a lot of plays."

So is Deehan. At 6-5 and 245 pounds, the Californian has prototypical size for a tight end, and his hands are among the best on the team. Now, it's just a matter of figuring out how to beat a defense.

"I have a better understanding of what's going on with the defense, what's going to happen," Deehan said.

Tight ends coach Kent Riddle raves about Deehan's potential.

"Ryan is playing with more confidence, more speed," Riddle said. "He's still learning, but he's

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going to be a big factor for us."

Givens said working with the first team this spring has given him confidence.

"It's a mind game," Givens said. "Every day there is something different. You work on one thing and then maybe something else isn't where it should be.

"You just try to win that job. There are a lot of guys with talent. But it's the guys who stay after it and work hard and focus every day that succeed."

And blossom.

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Spring stars

Tom Kensler looks at three players who are blossoming this spring for CU.

TE RYAN DEEHAN Caught five passes for 61 yards.

6-5, 245, soph.*

2008 —

2009 — Running more precise routes, has improved pass protection; expected to be impact player, sharing time with incumbent Riar Geer.

OT BRYCE GIVENS Redshirted as a 240-

pounder.

6-6, 280, redshirt fr. *

2008 —

2009 — Has added 40 pounds; is working with the first team at right tackle. Will probably start this fall.

DT TAJ KAYNOR Played only 20 snaps all season.

6-5, 275, fifth-year sr.*

2008 —

2009 — Competing for starting job, showing more energy and confidence than in past.

** Class for 2009 season*

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CU sophomores provide safety net

Perkins, Mahnke filling void left by Walters, Dykes

By Kyle Ringo
Friday, April 17, 2009

BOULDER, Colo. — Trading two seniors for two sophomores at safety would figure to lead to some growing pains for any football team. It hasn't been much of a problem at Colorado this spring.

Anthony Perkins and Patrick Mahnke have performed at a high level in coverage, making correct calls and delivering punishment.

Yes, these guys can deliver a blow. Anyone who thought the Buffs would be missing the headhunter attitude former safety Ryan Walters will be happy to know it lives on in two players from Denver-area high schools.

"We certainly don't have the experience we had a year ago, but, hey, we feel very good about those two guys," secondary coach Greg Brown said. "Between the two of them, they both had significant starts this past year in big games and performed well. We feel the safety positions are in good hands right now with the two guys who are the frontrunners.

"They're going to do nothing but get better."

Perkins and Mahnke got a solid head start on life as starters this year when they were both needed to play significant minutes in the final month of the season last fall.

Walters and fellow senior D.J. Dykes were unable to finish their senior years because of an injury in Walters' case and a mysterious illness that has still never been explained in Dykes case.

Perkins played in 11 games and finished the season with 40 tackles and a forced fumble in his redshirt freshman year. Mahnke played in seven games and made 15 tackles with a quarterback sack and two passes broken up.

Both players also finished among the top six in special teams points in 2008.

"I would say I'm a little more confident now," Perkins said. "I know what it's like to be in there playing against Texas and West Virginia and all those teams. I just think the confidence and experience are going to help a lot."

Mahnke said the experience of being on the field last fall is irreplaceable, but he feels he made a lot of improvement in the offseason as well. It afforded him time to study the game and his assignments without the pressure of learning a game plan every week. He also entered spring ball with a sense of confidence he didn't really have during his 157 snaps from scrimmage last fall.

"That goes back to the offseason," Mahnke said. "Just having more time to really work on what you need to work on and being prepared and more comfortable with the system definitely helps out your confidence."

CU coaches were lukewarm on Mahnke when they first began working on the 2008 recruiting class. He didn't stand out on film when compared to the 100 or so other safeties coaches were evaluating. He was just another prospect.

Mahnke attended the Friday Night Lights camp at CU in June 2007 and he began to completely turn around coaches' perception of him. The camp is designed to provide players with a fun experience as they compete in drills and activities normally not associated with football.

When coaches watched him dunk a basketball that night and show some speed, they realized he was a better prospect than they first thought. Mahnke told coach Dan Hawkins and Brown he wanted to come to CU. They invited him to another camp that summer and after seeing him tackle there, they were sold.

Mahnke's athleticism continues to surprise coaches this spring. Brown had seven different defensive backs sidelined early in camp with injuries or illnesses, forcing him to get creative. He asked Mahnke to fill in at cornerback for two days while teammates recovered.

"He can run and he's big and strong, and I'm telling you, he did a good job," Brown said. "Now we're not saying we're going to play him there or we're moving him to corner, but I am saying he filled in very nicely with as thin as we were."

The next day, Perkins was called on to play the other cornerback position and fared well, too.

"Everybody has to come out and prove themselves every day whether you're a four-year starter or you haven't started a game yet," Perkins said. "I just try to take that mindset coming into practice every day."

Colorado has recruited a handful of safeties in the past two classes, including Vince Ewing, Paul Vigo and Parker Orms. Ray Polk, a four-star running back in the 2008 class, also has moved to safety this spring.

All those players might have a tough time earning significant playing time in the coming years because of how well Mahnke and Perkins are developing.

And if they do manage to overtake them, the CU defense will be spoiled with a wealth of talent and depth at the position.



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Friday, April 17, 2009

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Versatility becoming second nature for Buffs’ secondary

By B.G. Brooks
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BOULDER — Greg Brown always preaches versatility to his players in the University of Colorado secondary, but he had no idea how versatile several of them would have to be to help the unit accomplish its work this spring.

"Versatility . . . I mean that's got to be the key word in the secondary right now," Brown said. "We're so depleted with injuries, so thinned out. It's been amazing that guys have been able to step up and play different positions."

The Buffaloes began spring drills without cornerbacks Jalil Brown (shoulder surgery) and Anthony Wright (knee strain) and with corner Ben Burney's participation limited.

And for at least one member of Brown's bunch, the injury bug has been a literal problem.

Senior cornerback Cha'pelle Brown has been slowed by a bout with giardia — an intestinal parasite usually contracted by ingesting contaminated water or spoiled food. Brown has no clue how he contracted the bug and swears he hasn't been sipping from Boulder Creek.

All he knows is he has lost practice time and weight. And listed at 170 pounds, the 5-foot-7 Brown doesn't carry too many pounds that would be classified as extra.

"I couldn't keep nothing down," he said of his ailment. "I got a long ways to go (to be completely well) — a long, long ways. I can do most of the stuff we're doing now, but not at 100 percent. I'm just trying to get through."

CU's other senior corner, Burney (aka "Bionic Ben"), is fresh off a year in which he underwent five different surgeries. After starting 12 games in 2007, he sat out 2008 and is participating on a limited basis this spring, doing seven-on-seven passing work but no tackling and no scrimmaging.

"But he's covering well," Brown added.

In addition to frequent starting corner Gardner McKay, CU lost starting safeties Ryan Walters and D.J. Dykes. Patrick Mahnke and Anthony Perkins got experience filling for the latter pair, and Brown is optimistic each will improve over their debut seasons.

But in Mahnke's case, the depletion elsewhere has had him leapfrogging through the secondary. Ditto for Travis Sandersfield.

"Mahnke spent two solid days as a starting corner and did a heck of a job," Brown said. "But there are plenty of guys wearing two and three hats in the secondary — playing corner, playing nickel, playing safety. I'm really proud of our guys in playing the different positions."

Mahnke, a true sophomore from Mountain Vista High School who came to CU with the reputation as a playmaker, said Brown's mantra of "competing every day" never has been truer than this spring.

"He's always said the best will play at whatever position, so we just have to come out every day and compete," said Mahnke, who has added 10 pounds and now weighs a solid 207.

Mahnke said he has "done all right" in April drills thus far, adding, "There's plenty of things to work on. I definitely need to work on my man coverage, get more familiar with the playbook. You can never be too familiar with it."

He and Perkins started in place of Walters and Dykes in the season finale at Nebraska — an experience Mahnke said was immeasurable from a learning standpoint.

"It helped out a tremendous amount," he said. "Even though at the beginning of the season and midseason I didn't play that much, just those few plays you get acclimate you to the speed of the game and how physical it is."

Come August, depending on who fares well in the remainder of spring work and who is healthy, Brown believes he will field four players who will be as good or better than last season.

"We like the guys we've got," he said. "We obviously haven't arrived yet. We're right in the middle of learning and creating some chemistry . . . we're just in the process of getting to know each other and how we're going to play, the schemes we're going to run."

BUFFS FIT. CU's first four corners in the spring drills were cornerbacks Darnell Brown, Gerald Green, and Anthony Wright, and safety Ben Burney.

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Buffs' conditioning gets childish in hopes of avoiding injuries

By Patrick Ridgell
© 2009 Longmont Times-Call

BOULDER — It was like “Romper Room.”

That description was courtesy of Colorado football coach Dan Hawkins, who compared some of the program’s off-season conditioning to the former children’s television series.

The coach wanted more jumping and rolling — the kind of stuff younger kids do all the time, but adults stray from as their exercises grow more specialized.

One reason why Hawkins sought to stress “overall body movement” was last season’s rash of injuries. For instance, the torn ACL center Mike Iltis suffered on the first day of August camp, when “he jumped and just kind of pirouetted.”

Hawkins once had a punter at Boise State who didn’t backpedal very well, so he worked with the defensive backs, who backpedal a lot, to improve. The punter promptly tore an Achilles’ tendon.

“I just think you have such a specificity of conditioning that if a guy does what he’s been trained to do all the time, he’s fine,” Hawkins said. “When he gets out of that, he puts himself at risk. So how can you train for every jump, fall, things like that? So we just tried, in our conditioning, periods to do a bunch of ‘Romper Room,’ jungle gym, to get them to just do overall body movement things.

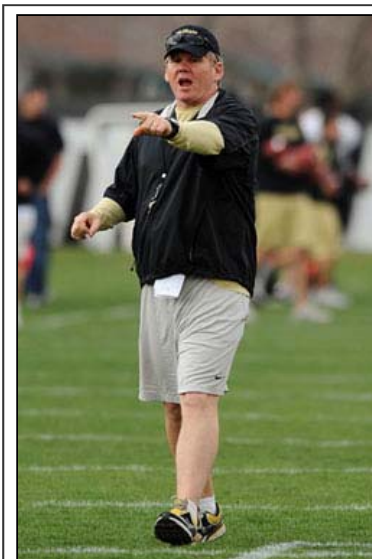
“I think one of the things we’re missing is in a grand scheme of all this stuff is just basic athleticism. I think somersaulting, monkey-rolling, cartwheels ... We take P.E. out of the elementary schools, and kids don’t do basic movements anymore.”

Added strength and conditioning coach Jeff Pitman: “Sports are becoming so specialized, guys are forgetting how to fall down.”

Pitman said he had assistant Jared Aurich design a drill to feature somersaults, monkey rolls, jumping on one leg — “things you do when you’re a kid.” Pitman called it “gut busting.”

“Obviously, coming off the layoff when you don’t go to the bowl, you have an extra month you have to deal with,” Pitman said. “From two years ago when we didn’t go to a bowl, the conditioning level is better ... but I think the guys really bore down and worked hard, and we ran them hard.”

CU’s rash of shoulder surgeries has been a different matter. In its pre-spring notes, the program listed 10 players who had shoulder surgeries in recent months, including some since the 2008 season ended. Several Buffs suffered torn labrums. And several of the shoulder injuries came to players who could be fighting right now for spots on the two-deep, but aren’t because they’re either out or limited in practice.



Colorado head coach Dan Hawkins leads practice in Boulder on April 9. The football program’s off-season conditioning has stressed “overall body movement” in response to last season’s rash of injuries. **Joshua Buck/Times-Call file**

"I've never seen something like it before," fifth-year senior guard Devin Head said, one of the 10. "It's interesting."

Asked if the shoulder injuries were a concern, Hawkins said, "Everything's always a big concern." But he added that an off-season study found CU's plight isn't atypical.

"We compared our data with everyone else around the country, and it's funny — you can find every spectrum," Hawkins said. "There are some people who do what we do who had no shoulder injuries. There are some who had more."

"I think the thing we started when we came here was doing overhead squats to add flexibility in the shoulder. Our numbers, depending on what area you're looking at, are not that far from other people."

Pitman noted that some of the shoulder injuries occurred in endeavors other than playing football at CU. He's right.

Redshirt freshman Ray Polk said he had surgery on one shoulder last fall after he dislocated it in practices. He said an MRI on his other shoulder revealed he had torn ligaments from a high school injury, so he had that one fixed, too.

Tight end Riar Geer said he injured his shoulder sliding into a base while playing softball last summer.

Head said there are some shoulder lifts he doesn't do anymore.

"We used to use hang-s snatch" — which Head described as an exercise in which one holds a bar of weights at shoulder level and lifts it straight up — "and stuff, going over the head, and we don't really do anything over the head anymore," he said.

Pitman said hang-snatches had nothing to do with the shoulder injuries.

Offensive lineman Blake Behrens said he suffered a torn right labrum last spring and played through it in 2008. Behrens would have been a stronger candidate to replace graduated center Daniel Sanders this spring, but Behrens said he still can't snap the ball due to his surgery.