



Ringo: Five Buffs make strong cases to play in 2009

By Kyle Ringo
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BOULDER, Colo. — Spring football practices have been over for just a few days and Colorado fans are already beginning to suffer withdrawals as reality sinks in that the football season is still more than four months away and fall camp doesn't start for another 99 days.

Today we're looking back at spring ball and the five players who did the most to help themselves and their case for more playing time in the 2009 season. There were definitely more than five such cases on the CU roster this spring, but these are the five who made the most of the 15 practices completed over the past month.

There is no better place to start than quarterback, where sophomore Tyler Hansen had an impressive spring. He might not be the starter when Sept. 5 rolls around and the Buffs run out of the Thunder Chute onto Folsom Field behind Ralphie the Buffalo, but there is no doubt he closed the gap that was apparent between him and junior Cody Hawkins.

Hansen still has a way to go in improving as a passer, but he threw more and ran less than he did as a true freshman who was thrown into the fire last fall. He made it through all three spring scrimmages without throwing an interception and was able to take advantage of his athleticism at times to make positive plays on the run, something Hawkins doesn't do nearly as well.

If the season began today, we're betting Hawkins would be the starter, but there is no doubt Hansen is nipping at his heels, with a few weeks of fall camp to make the decision even tougher on coaches.

Another offensive player who really helped himself this spring was center Mike Iltis.

When spring ball started, the center position was up for grabs with the departure of Daniel Sanders, a guy who started the past two years and logged major snap totals during each of his four years in Boulder.

Iltis has never played center for any length of time at any level of football prior to this spring. Yet, he stepped right in and took control of the position from the first practice session back on March 31.

He was competing against two walk-ons this spring in Keenan Stevens and Evan Eastburn, but both of those players have extensive history at the position. It should be noted that Iltis was coming off a torn anterior cruciate ligament suffered on the first day of fall camp last year and there was some uncertainty about how he might perform on the knee and how much punishment it was ready to absorb.

Iltis was one of the strongest players on the team the day he committed to Colorado three years ago and he continues to pack a punch now. He should only get better in the fall and could be a three-year starter

if all goes well.

Wide receiver Jason Espinoza is the final offensive player in our list of five spring stars.

If Espinoza surprised anyone this spring, it's someone who hasn't been paying much attention to the program through the past year. The diminutive walk-on nearly won the punt return job in fall camp last August with steady hands, rarely dropping a ball.

Espinoza, who was sidelined twice last season with a broken collarbone, could claim that job next fall along with a little playing time on a roster very thin at wide receiver. He led the team in receiving in the three main spring scrimmages and just finds ways to make plays.

Our first defensive player is a true feel-good story.

Marcus Burton came to Boulder in 2005 and earned playing time as a true freshman. He even returned an interception for a touchdown at Oklahoma State that year crossing the goal line while yelling to reporters in back of the end zone to "write it up."

Burton hasn't been heard from much since. He has struggled at times on and off the field with grades and with adjusting to life as a father. He stuck it out and corrected his mistakes and now appears ready to claim the starting job at middle linebacker in fall camp.

Burton led the Buffs in tackles in the three spring scrimmages and capped the past month with a solid spring game that included a fumble recovery and two sacks. If he continues to progress, Burton could be a candidate for the most improved player in the Big 12 Conference next fall.

Another guy who might make that list will be playing right in front of Burton in 2009. Fellow fifth-year senior Taj Kaynor hadn't been able to sniff much playing time to this point in his career and fans and coaches alike were wondering just what he would provide this spring.

Beginning back in early January whenever Kaynor would cross paths with this reporter, I would ask him if he was going to finally earn the starting job in his senior year. Kaynor always answered with a yes. Occasionally, he would liven it up with a bit of sarcasm or wit at my expense. Perfectly fair, good-natured stuff.

In fact, one time he was bold enough to guarantee it, which I sort of disregarded as the hubris of a young guy who is prone to wearing baseball caps of teams he doesn't much care for because they match the rest of his outfit.

I'm a believer now after watching Kaynor practice and play this spring with a fire I wasn't sure he had. It will be interesting to see if he builds on the attention and "attaboy" pats on the back he has received this spring from coaches and teammates.

Whether they start or not, I'm expecting to see all five of these guys on the field quite a bit next fall. It's been a long wait for most of them, but it's almost over.



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