



CU's Hawkins embraces QB battle

By Kyle Ringo

Tuesday, March 10, 2009

BOULDER, Colo. — Cody Hawkins has to be a better quarterback this year than he has been ever before if he wants to keep his job as the starter for the Colorado Buffaloes.

His mission is just that simple. And he is the first to say so.

When spring drills start March 31, he will undoubtedly face the stiffest competition he has seen since he was unleashed from a redshirt year prior to the 2007 campaign.

He faces a third-year sophomore in Matt Ballenger, who now seems to be embracing all that goes into being a quarterback at the Big 12 level. He also must fend off sophomore Tyler Hansen, whose athleticism and fearless spirit allowed him to get on the field as a true freshman and even take away the starting job for a week from Hawkins last fall.

Both of those players have superior physical ability, but the mental part of the game has slowed them down to this point. The cerebral side always has been Hawkins' strength.

He is a good leader and has command of the entire playbook, but if the competition has caught up in those areas, his days with the first string could be numbered.

He has been focused on producing better results since the day after last season ended in heartbreak in Lincoln, Neb., where one Cornhusker kicked an improbable 57-yard field goal and another returned a Hawkins pass for a touchdown after it was batted into the air at the line of scrimmage to cap a fourth-quarter rally.

The Buffs finished below .500 for the third straight year and missed a bowl game. His two years as the primary starter have been quite a turn of football fortune for Hawkins, who never lost a game at the high school level. The Buffs have gone 11-14 with him as the primary starter with the offense sputtering much of the time.

"I think we're kind of getting to a point in our program's history where we've all kind of been here for awhile," Hawkins said. "Matt is going into his third year and Tyler is going into his second year, but he got a chance to play. So they're both guys who have some experience and they're both great players, too. It's going to make me better. It's going to make this team better, and I'm really looking forward to competing with those guys every day."

There is no more honest critic of Cody Hawkins than Cody Hawkins. He is acutely aware of his shortcomings, to the point that he jokes about them. He has a major league understanding of how the game is supposed to be played but he is trapped inside a minor league body.

He seems generously listed at 5-foot-11 on the team roster, and his height is one of two problems

observers and critics pick at when evaluating his play. The other is arm strength.

That batted ball at Nebraska last fall was just one of many that have made some cringe and others angry for the past two years. Eleven of his 25 career interceptions have been passes batted into the air at the line of scrimmage before being picked off.

That's a problem he might never correct no matter how much film he watches or how many hours he spends on the practice field outworking the vast majority of his teammates. But he is certainly going to try.

"I really kind of enjoy football more than I ever have," Hawkins said. "You know, you come to a point where you're sick and tired of being mediocre because I've never been mediocre at anything in my life, which is probably why I hated playing basketball because I'm an awful athlete.

"I think it's really kind of understanding that 'All right, I may have always been good before this and I hate losing. So I'm going to have to ask much more of myself and go above and beyond. I really have to eat and breathe football all the time, even if it is the offseason.'"

As a fourth-year junior, it's certainly fair for expectations to be high. He must improve his career completion percentage of (.567) to north of 60 percent.

He has to cut down interceptions and add significantly to his 36 touchdown passes.

Hawkins has to lead the team to points much more often. Otherwise, why not just go with the younger player with a bigger upside?

"We've had to pull the plug on guys before and promote guys and demote, and he handled it great," offensive coordinator Mark Helfrich said. "We're always up front and honest with those guys with what we're trying to assess. Like right now going into spring ball. Those guys aren't going to be out there going, 'Man, I wonder how I did in the last couple days.'

"They're going to know. Not in a threatening way, but in an up-front way. If we're thinking about making a change, we're going to talk to them. I think that just goes to you have to have good relationships with those guys."

Hawkins said he participates in seven-on-seven with teammates three days a week, but also throws with a smaller group of teammates on two or three of the other days.

He always has been a voracious watcher of film and classic games, but he is doing even more of that this winter as he readies himself for the proving ground once again.

If someone is going to take the starting job from him this year or next, he's determined to make sure they've earned it. As much as some seem to want Hawkins out of the driver's seat, he is steadfastly determined to lead the Buffs to a winning season and bowl victory to prove them wrong.

"I think that is a guy taking ownership in the results, and we've got to get better," Helfrich said. "The quarterback obviously is always going to be a lightning-rod type guy for criticism and a lightning-rod type guy for praise. But we've got to get better at every position.

"Cody can certainly play better and we can certainly play better around him. Coach (Denver) Johnson

made a hilarious comment the other day that is very dead on. He said for all of the stuff that happened to us last year, and having guys in situations where they probably shouldn't be, he goes, 'We're drowning three feet from the dock.'

"It's not like we're watching film going, 'If these seven things would have happened differently, we would have had a chance.' It's one guy here, one guy there. We're not that far away, but that's where your margin for error from a guy like Cody needs to be very, very tuned in. He needs to play very consistently and not perfect but near perfect to give us a chance. ... We want a guy who wants to play the perfect game and chase down that perfect game, and we can certainly do a lot to help him both as coaches and players around him."

Hawkins would appear to have a small advantage over Ballenger and Hansen, at least in the early going this spring, with the program switching back to the version of offense used in 2007 when Hawkins started every game.

There will be much less no-huddle and much more game planning and personnel groupings this season, which plays to Hawkins' strengths.

He did lead the Buffs to a bowl game and a win over Oklahoma using that system in 2007.

Hawkins said he doesn't believe the system will give him an advantage, but maybe the guys within the system will.

"I think one thing that is really important for me is I've always been pretty obsessed with football, and I've always put in a lot of time, but in order to be a better player it's learning to communicate with the guys and bringing the best out of other people is something I need to work on," Hawkins said. "As far as getting extra guys out to throw and we're getting in the time and I'm explaining stuff to guys in a way that they know how to do it."

"It's making sure I'm on the same page with my receivers and my offensive linemen. It's one thing to work on your own individual things. I have a lot of individual flaws that I can work on, but I think the most important thing is getting rolling and having a great team cohesiveness going."



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Bufs' QB Hansen has something to prove

Mobile sophomore must show he can win with arm

By Kyle Ringo
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BOULDER, Colo. — Tyler Hansen shared a good laugh with Mark Helfrich during a recent visit to the Colorado offensive coordinator's office one afternoon as they watched film of last season when Hansen broke into the CU lineup at quarterback as a true freshman.

One play in particular got them going.

Hansen rolled out and looked down field where three receivers were simultaneously wide open or at least a few yards separated from the nearest defender. Hansen chose to run the ball instead of throwing it. In Hansen's defense, his decision and his athleticism created a gain of more than 20 yards, but who knows what might have happened had he thrown the ball to any of his open teammates?

That particular moment on film is as good an example possible of where Hansen must improve most this spring if he hopes to earn even more playing time in 2009. He aims to wrestle away the starting job on a more permanent basis from junior Cody Hawkins and hold off sophomore Matt Ballenger, who has been in the program a year longer.

In his true freshman season, in which he finished as the Bufs' third-leading rusher in only five games, Hansen clearly proved he can make plays with his feet. He still has a lot to prove, however, when it comes to making them with his arm.

"Understanding the defense and what their weaknesses are," Hansen said when asked what areas he has focused most on in trying to improve this winter. "Another one would probably be understanding the offense a lot more, knowing where my check downs are. If they are blitzing here, where can I go real quick? It's stuff like that. I need to understand what people are trying to do against us."

Hansen is viewed as the biggest threat to unseat Hawkins because he has already done so once. What isn't known though is how he will react to a change in offensive philosophy that will have the Bufs huddling again more this season and a return to using more formations and multiple personnel groupings. Hawkins and Ballenger both ran the system before when the team used it in 2007 and might begin spring practices with a bit of an advantage in terms of recognition and understanding.

Playing more from under center and less out of the shotgun also might be an adjustment.

"I think it's good as an offense and I think it helps me a little bit because you know, when you huddle, it's more calmed down and you're relaxed," Hansen said. "In the no-huddle, it's more high tempo and you're more emotional a little bit I guess. When you're huddling, you can game-plan better."

Helfrich said coaches plan to put each of the quarterbacks in positions that best suit their skill sets. Players will be judged "apples to apples" so to speak.

"For him, we kind of threw him in and geared back a little bit on what we would do scheme-wise to put him in his best position to succeed as a true freshman," Helfrich said. "So as he kind of adds to his arsenal and adds to his command of the offense in being confident and fully understanding what he is trying to do on any given play is big because he can make a lot of throws and a lot of plays. He has a good feel for things."

Hansen earned a scholarship offer from CU coaches two years ago because he was a play-maker in every sense for his high school team back home in Temecula, Calif. He rushed for nearly 1,000 yards and threw for nearly 4,000 yards in his junior and senior years combined.

He came to CU not expecting to play last fall. In the third week of training camp, that expectation seemed to become reality when he stopped studying the CU playbook because he was being used as the scout team quarterback and spent much of his time learning the opponent's plays instead.

As the Buffs began to struggle at midseason after a slew of injuries wreaked havoc to the offensive line, coaches figured they needed more mobility than Hawkins was able to provide. They asked if Hansen would consider burning his redshirt year at the midway point and he agreed because he wanted to help his team.

Hansen led the Buffs to a win over Kansas State in his first outing and he seemed poised to become the starter. Much of his initial success came because he was able to run much more effectively than Hawkins and that added a dimension to the CU attack that had been lacking. Opponents weren't prepared for it.

As the weeks went by and other injuries mounted, Hansen and the entire offense became more predictable. That led to his playing time decreasing at season's end instead of increasing as first hoped. He finished the year with 34 completions in 65 attempts for 280 yards and one touchdown -- that came in his first game against KSU. He also threw four interceptions.

In the months since the season ended, Hansen said he has realized he really wasn't ready to play even though he wanted to so badly.

"I've definitely been working hard and trying to get stronger to be more physically ready to play," Hansen said. "Coming in as a true freshman I wasn't ready to play physically-wise. I definitely watching a lot of film and getting the offense down and getting other defenses down. I'm understanding that a lot more. I think that was my weakest link last year."

Hansen considers the experience of being called on at midseason and burning his redshirt for limited playing time as a good one in total. Sure, there are things he wishes he had done differently, or better perhaps, but there were plenty of thrills as well. At the very least he is better prepared to challenge Hawkins and Ballenger now than he would have been if he had continued with the scout team last fall because he has game experience to draw upon and already has earned respect from teammates.

"It's going to be intense," Hansen said of the looming quarterback battle. "I know we all want the position. We're all working really hard right now. It gets heated at times down there in seven-on-seven. We're all fighting for reps. It's a competition, but we're all really good friends so we're all going to deal with it the right way."

"Whoever wins it is going to be the best person we can win with."



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Bufs shine on pro timing day

Williams turns in strong efforts in front of pro scouts

By Kyle Ringo
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BOULDER, Colo. — When pro timing day ended Monday in the bubble the Colorado football team calls home during the winter months, several former Bufs had reason to feel encouraged.

Linebacker Brad Jones and wide receiver Patrick Williams might not be drafted April 25-26, but they had many more scouts asking for personal information and questionnaires to be filled out than they had previously.

Brandon Nicolas and George Hypolite, a pair of defensive tackles who played side-by-side in black and gold the past three years, still might be the most likely Bufs to be selected or signed as free agents this year, but Jones and Williams surely helped themselves with strong performances in a series of physical tests administered in the Dal Ward Center weight room and the bubble.

Williams caught every ball thrown to him during receiving drills. He ran a 4.49-second 40-yard dash and blew everyone away in the standing broad jump with a leap of 11 feet on the button. That jump is further than all but three players leaped at the NFL scouting combine in Indianapolis last month.

None of the Bufs were invited to the combine this year, a fact that was a sore subject Monday. "I feel I did good," said Williams, who has been working out with former teammate Maurice Cantrell at Impact Sports in Broomfield. "I mean, there is still work to be done, but for the first test, first day, all the nerves going on, I feel like everyone collectively to performed well."

Jones said he has been told he would be an outside linebacker in 3-4 defenses at the next level. He has added about seven pounds to his frame in the past three months and now weighs 235 pounds.

He did all the lifts, sprints and drills at average or above average levels Monday, including running a consistent 4.57-second 40-yard dash. Jones said his hard work the past few months in the Chicago area paid off for him.

"I feel I did well," Jones said. "...I've got a lot more scouts than I had talked to, talking to me today. I've got a bag full of paperwork to fill out."

Every current and future college football player should take note of the position Hypolite finds himself in these days. Hypolite earned a spot on the All-Big 12 Conference team in three of his four years at Colorado, but might go undrafted next month. He said he was the lone CU senior invited to play in a postseason all-star game (Texas vs. The Nation) but he turned it down on the advice of his agent.

One of the most quotable players ever to wear a CU uniform often said in the past that he didn't grow up

dreaming of playing in the NFL. On Monday, he admitted his dreams have included the league lately after long days of working out at Athlete's Performance in Los Angeles.

"It means a lot to me," Hypolite said. "It's a job and it's the one thing in my life that I love more than anything else. I think how special it would be to hear my name called and be able to stand around with my family and know that I have an opportunity to get a job. That would be amazing."

Healthy Walters

does well

Ryan Walters' senior season came to a bitter end in November when he suffered a high-ankle sprain that kept him out of all but one play of the final two contests. He looked good Monday and said he feels as healthy as he has in a long time.

If Williams' 11-foot- broad jump was the highlight of the day, Walters pushing up 225 pounds 27 times on the bench press was a close second. Only Hypolite (32 times) counted out more reps under the watchful eye of scouts and strength and conditioning coach Jeff Pitman.

"It felt good to get those extra two reps in there," Walters said. "My legs feel good. My shoulders feel good. I'm happy with the day's events so far."

Notable

Former CU linebacker Thaddaeus Washington participated Monday. Washington is living and working in the Atlanta area and keeping his hope of a pro career alive through regular workouts. He was under contract in the Canadian Football League last year but suffered a bad hamstring injury that kept him off the field. ... Former CU linebacker Jordon Dizon, a rookie with the winless Detroit Lions in 2008, was also on hand to support his old friends.



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Buffs strut stuff for pro scouts

Receiver Williams gives strong show

*By Patrick Ridgell**Longmont Times-Call*

BOULDER — All Pat Williams wants is a chance.

So with that in mind, Williams, along with nine of his former teammates from the Colorado football program, took part Monday in the program's pro timing day. Scouts from an estimated 15 NFL franchises poked, prodded, weighed, timed and tested the former Buffs, all of whom will do nearly anything to land a spot on one of their rosters come fall. Williams might have turned the most heads.

His broad jump of 11 feet and vertical of 38 inches revealed to scouts a level of explosiveness and athleticism they may not have known he possessed. He ran a 4.53 40-yard dash, a decent time he hopes to improve. The wide receiver also caught each pass thrown his way, which was noteworthy for someone who dealt with drops during his college career.

"I might have created a little buzz for the scouts and people that might have overlooked me," Williams said. "That's all I wanted to do — let people know I have ability and I just need a shot."

Williams wasn't the only Buff muttering such sentiment. No CU player received an invitation to last month's NFL Scouting Combine in Indianapolis. According to Dave Plati, the program's long-time sports information director, there might have been one other year since 1988 when no Buff received an invite to the Combine. But only one.

No Buff played in one of the several postseason all-star games designed to give scouts more chances to gauge players who'll be available in the NFL Draft, April 25 and 26. Defensive tackle George Hypolite said he and his agent chose to turn down an invitation to one of them.

While the 5-7 Buffs placed no one on the all-Big 12 first team, and only Hypolite on its second team, several said Monday they were either perplexed by their absences at Indianapolis, or they just didn't want to cite the reasons.

"I don't want to talk about that ... I don't like stirring up drama," said former CU linebacker Brad Jones. "There are reasons behind it. I was very, very surprised none of us were (invited). Especially considering a lot of agents, including mine, and scouts were saying that it was likely three of us from the University of Colorado would go. ... I train as hard as I can always, but it was definitely a little extra motivation."

Jones said he spoke with more scouts Monday than he has since the process started. Like most of the Buffs on hand, he's been out of state preparing for Monday since school ended in December. Jones has been in Chicago working with personal trainers, including Bob Christian, a NFL fullback from 1992 to 2002.

Jones, up to 235 pounds from his playing weight of 228, said he's being told he could play outside linebacker in a 3-4 set.

"That'd be cool," he said. "I'd have no problem playing anything. I'd play receiver if they wanted me to."

Hypolite's 32 bench-press repetitions of 225 pounds were the most. Former safety Ryan Walters benched 225 27 times.

Williams' jumping was the most noteworthy performance. No receiver at the Combine jumped as far as Williams on Monday. Only two at the Combine — Ohio State cornerback Donald Washington and Connecticut corner Darius Butler — exceeded Williams with leaps of 11-3 and 11-2. Notre Dame safety David Bruton jumped 11 feet.

Williams' vertical jump Monday was 38 inches. Only five receivers at the Combine had a higher vertical.

Williams' productivity in college — he totaled 104 catches for 1,060 yards in four years — was below that of a typical NFL receiving prospect. Nor was he someone whose omission from the Combine surprised people. So Monday was important for him. He hopes it was a beginning.

"They (the scouts) said they were impressed by my workout, that it was a good showing," Williams said. "But I have to take that with a grain of salt. You never know how the draft will go, and all you can control is what you can control.

"My agent said he thinks I'll get some personal workouts (with NFL clubs). I just have to go back to work."

EXTRA POINT: The Colorado-Nebraska football game will be played on the Friday after Thanksgiving once again in 2009 on ABC.

CU announced the game date and time, 1:30 p.m., on Monday. It'll be the 14th straight season CU and Nebraska will meet on that Friday. Nebraska leads the series 9-4 over the 13 previous meetings.

The game gives CU three games already set for national TV in 2009. The other two are at West Virginia on Oct. 1 and at Oklahoma State on Nov. 19. Both will air on ESPN.

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