



# Ballenger must be more assertive to win Buffs' starting QB job

## Quarterback battle sure to be hot topic for spring practices

By Kyle Ringo

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BOULDER, Colo. — If Matt Ballenger wants to leapfrog Tyler Hansen, who leaped over him last fall, and unseat Cody Hawkins as the starting quarterback at Colorado, he has to accomplish two things this spring.

He must consistently move the team during practices and scrimmages, and he has to stop being such a nice guy. Well, at least on the football field.

None of this is a mystery to the third-year sophomore from Nampa, Idaho, who previously has deferred to Hawkins and older players when it comes to providing leadership expected from quarterbacks.

Ballenger wasn't expected to compete for playing time right away when he came out of high school as a star in basketball but still somewhat of a project on the gridiron.

Entering his third year in the program, however, he ought to "have his horns out" as coach Dan Hawkins often says.

Ballenger's biggest challenge is that he is a quiet, lead-by-example type playing a position that demands a steely eyed confidence.

"Urgent in everything, aggressive, more assertive, know the offense a lot better," Ballenger said when asked where he needs to make the biggest strides this spring. "Being a good leader and showing the guys that I can lead this team to where we want to be. Not over-thinking things like I usually do. Just going out there and playing like I know I can play."

Some unfamiliar with CU football and even seasoned followers of the Buffs might look at the three quarterbacks competing this year and wonder what is keeping Ballenger off the field.

If looking the part was the primary criteria for winning the job he would have settled this long ago. At 6-foot-5, 230 pounds with a strong arm and decent mobility, he has potential star written all over him.

In fact, Dan Hawkins had that very feeling when he first saw Ballenger on the football field in high school warming up before a game against his son's team.

Offensive coordinator and quarterbacks coach Mark Helfrich said Ballenger has made significant advances in his first two years in the program. He has improved his mechanics, his release and his

knowledge of the playbook. Now he needs to put it all together on the field with consistency.

When he does that, he will be hard to keep on the sidelines. But getting there will require Ballenger to find his comfort zone and play with more confidence than he has previously shown -- calling plays in the huddle, making the right read, being a leader teammates look to in a pinch.

"That's always a tough situation for your back-up quarterback because you want your starting quarterback to be the leader, you want him to be the vocal guy, you want him to be the trend-setter, all those things," Helfrich said. "When you're a backup quarterback, you have to try to develop those things without interfering and without being in the way and without stepping on toes.

"Matt is a very, very nice kid, who, at times, is too nice. Sometimes that comes across as showing a lack of assertiveness. That whole chemistry part of a guy's confidence and his leadership at the quarterback position is huge. For a guy who is not naturally inclined to do that, it's kind of easy to fall in a rut."

Ballenger acknowledges that he didn't do enough last season to merit significant playing time, despite the fact both Hawkins and Hansen had trouble moving the team with any real consistency.

He earned his first action in mop-up duty in two games in 2008, completing eight of 12 passes for 118 yards and a touchdown. He said he learned from the experiences even though they were short-lived.

"It proved to me that I've got to get a lot better," Ballenger said. "I took too many sacks. I was slow on my drops. I didn't make the right reads when I should have. There are numerous things I could have gotten a lot better at. That's what I've been working on."

The Buffs will switch back to a more conventional approach to offense this year, returning to huddling up more often and using personnel groupings with a greater variety of formations.

It could help Ballenger because he was in the program in 2007 as a true freshman when the system was previously used prior to last year's experiment with no-huddle. Ballenger said he is comfortable with both approaches.

Ballenger admits he has been fueled this winter by getting passed over on the depth chart by Hansen last fall. Hansen's ascension in his true freshman season was, in part, a product of circumstance. The team was riddled with injuries through its offensive line and needed a quarterback who could make plays on the run, one of Hansen's best traits.

Hansen actually started one game and played the majority of several others.

"It was definitely tough but I think they did what they thought was best for the team," Ballenger said. "It just makes you think. I'm grateful that it happened. It made me realize that I've got to work a lot harder than I've been working and get a lot better."



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