



Defensive line key position for Buffs this spring

Buff must replace three senior starters

By Kyle Ringo
Wednesday, April 1, 2009

BOULDER, Colo. — To some it's a trouble spot. To others, a question mark. No matter the perspective, the Colorado defensive line is a high-priority this spring.

The program lost three senior starters -- George Hypolite, Brandon Nicolas and Maurice Lucas -- at the end of last season and assistant coach Romeo Bandison began his search for replacements Tuesday during the first session of spring practice.

It's a search that will likely continue into the fall when four recruits arrive and make their case for playing time.

Bandison isn't saying so publicly, but players say his mantra during winter talks and early spring position meetings has been, "We're not going to be the weak link."

In order to make that goal a reality, Bandison has to coax improvement out of several upperclassmen who haven't earned much playing time in their careers, such as senior Taj Kaynor and junior Eric Lawson, while bringing along a large group of young and mostly unproven hopefuls.

"I trust those guys and I believe in those guys," Bandison said. "They are nothing like Brandon or George. They are totally different players in every which way. So we're going to be a different defense, but I think those guys can handle it. They can step up and do the job."

"We have enough guys so that we can have more than three or four guys play. That's what I look forward to. Maybe we've got less experience, but we've got more depth."

Junior Marquez Herrod is the most experienced player in the group, but even he was in on only 187 plays last season, making 14 tackles. Curtis Cunningham, a true freshman in 2008, earned 145 snaps from scrimmage. They are the only two players in the group who were on the field for more than 100 snaps last season.

"Definitely I think coach (Dan) Hawkins has put the pressure on the defensive line to pick it up because that is where we are," Cunningham said. "We're young and not a lot of people have experience. Spring ball is going to be a chance for us to see what we're made of and see what we're capable of for next fall."

Cunningham said he believes he earned playing time so early in his career because he dedicated himself to knowing his responsibilities. He said every defensive lineman has to take that approach this spring and during the summer if they expect to participate. Cunningham will be trying to fill Hypolite's shoes. All Big George did the past three seasons was earn a spot on one or both of the All-Big 12 teams each

season.

Kaynor is in his fifth season. He spent the first four competing with Hypolite as well, and that meant spending a lot of time watching from sidelines. Kaynor vowed Tuesday to make that change in 2009.

"This is my year," he said. "I've been thinking about it every day. This is all that's on my mind. I've got big goals. I don't really want to say them yet. I just want to show them."

Spring ball is always about learning, but that fits right in with what life has been like for redshirt freshman Will Pericak the past year. He came to CU last summer as a recruited tight end from Boulder High School. He had never played defensive line, but coaches approached him with the idea and he made the move.

He has had a steep learning curve since making the move, but he says he's beginning to feel at home. He has bulked up to 275 pounds in the offseason and will compete to fill Nicolas' shoes as the nose tackle.

"For sure I feel green," Pericak said. "These guys have all been here for awhile and me playing tight end and linebacker in high school and having no d-line experience, I'm still green at the position and in the college football venue. I'm learning for sure and have gained strides, but I've still got a ways to go."

If the season started today and the Buffs chose to play with four defensive linemen -- something that might happen less this year than in the past -- the starters might look like this. Marquez Herrod and Conrad Obi at ends and Cunningham and Eugene Goree at tackles. Fortunately, there are more than 30 practices between now and the time those decisions must be made.

The Buffs will need those practices because they are also switching up how they have attacked the offense in the past.

Coaches are putting a big emphasis on creating more pressure on quarterbacks in the pass-happy Big 12. To do so, they are getting away from the gap-responsibility defensive of the past and allowing players to play more off each other.

"We still run a very disciplined defense, but now there are more places for guys to run," Kaynor said. "It's like if you hit A, then I know the linebacker will hit B. Everyone is just running a lot more. I think the speed of the defense is going to be a huge change for us."

Herrod is the old man on the defense in terms of experience. He tied for second on the team with four sacks last fall, despite playing much less often than his older teammates. The fourth-year junior feels like he learned a lot from his part-time role last season, when he made 14 tackles. He knows he will be looked to for leadership now that the stalwarts of the past three years are gone.

"It's kind of cool that I have that experience now and can pass it on to other guys, kind of show them the ropes and show them how we do things around here," Herrod said.



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Buff QBs don helmet cameras

Film allows coaches to see action from players' perspective

By Kyle Ringo
Wednesday, April 1, 2009

Watch quarterback Cody Hawkins talk about the use of the helmet cameras.

buffzone.com

Colorado coach Dan Hawkins has been known to slap the table in staff meetings when informed of other programs putting technology to work in unique ways he and his staff hadn't yet considered.

He doesn't like being beaten to the punch.

There are bound to be more than a few of Hawkins' counterparts around the country having the same reaction today after CU began spring practices Tuesday with each of its three quarterbacks equipped with a helmet camera.

"We're always trying to stay on the cutting edge here technology-wise," Hawkins said. "We'll see how it meshes in with what we do, but it just basically gives us a picture of what the quarterback is looking at."

The tiny cameras are designed to film the quarterback's point of view during each play. The film is later synchronized with standard overhead coaches' film to give coaches a better idea of what the player was looking at when he made each decision.

The technology was brought to Hawkins' attention during the offseason by Jamie Guy, director of sports video at CU. The cameras record to a chip which is housed inside a recording unit placed inside hand warmers the quarterbacks will wear around their waist.

"It's an entirely new perspective," quarterback Cody Hawkins said. "It puts you in the fire. You get to see exactly what the quarterback saw because if you're watching a game from the stands, you're not exactly sure how the passing lanes are moving or how backers are moving based on routes that are passing them. So you can look at the frames at the exact moment in time that you threw the football."

The technology is unproven at this point and coaches were eager Tuesday evening to get back to their offices and get a look at how it worked. The cameras, which are primarily used by the military, were only used during parts of Tuesday's practice.

CB Wright has

partial ACL tear

Cornerback Anthony Wright is not optimistic about being able to participate in spring practices this year after suffering a partially torn anterior cruciate ligament last month "goofing around," he said.

Wright said he also suffered damage to his MCL. He said doctors and team athletic trainers have assured him he doesn't need surgery and will be ready for fall camp.

"I couldn't even sleep last night," Wright said. "I was thinking about today like, 'Man, I can't even practice. I've got to go face my teammates and I'm on the sidelines.' They're out here working hard and I'm on the sidelines riding a bike."

Massive line

No matter who ends up starting at quarterback this season, they will likely have issues at time just seeing over or between a massive group of offensive linemen. The starting five on Tuesday appeared to be 6-foot-6 Bryce Givens at right tackle, Ryan Miller (6-8) at right guard, Mike Iltis (6-3) at center, Matt Bahr (6-4) at left guard and Nate Solder (6-9) at left tackle.

Miller's move to guard, though not written in stone, caught some off guard. Dan Hawkins said Miller is better suited to guard than Givens, who redshirted last season. Miller has played guard at times in his brief career at CU.

"We want to play our best five guys," Dan Hawkins said.

Notable

Running back Darrell Scott has lost nearly 30 pounds since reporting to CU last summer. The former five-star is a lean 200 pounds with four percent body fat. ...

Running back Rodney Stewart apparently got himself and members of his accountability group in trouble in the offseason when he took off a cast and walking boot six weeks early after suffering a broken leg at Texas A&M in November. Stewart said he felt fine and thought he could do without them. ...

Quarterback Matt Ballenger has changed his jersey number from 16 to 4. ...

The team has today off before resuming spring drills Thursday and Friday with 4 p.m. practices. ...

Walk-on Cameron Wright spent last season as a quarterback, but he is practicing as a wide receiver this year. ...

DaVaughn Thornton, a tight end from Denver East High School who signed a letter of intent to play at CU in the fall, visited practice and spent time throwing the ball around with several of his future teammates.



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cu football

Gadget joins QBs' duel

By Chris Dempsey
The Denver Post

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CU coach Dan Hawkins is happy to use the newest technology to help him decide a player competition this spring: a helmet camera on the quarterbacks. (RJ Sangosti, The Denver Post)

BOULDER — In spring football, a close companion for "competition" could be "separation."

At Colorado, the separating process in the once-again-open quarterback competition will be

determined in part to what coach Dan Hawkins and offensive coordinator Mark Helfrich see on video via their newest toy, a helmet camera.

Quarterbacks were introduced to the latest piece of technology during Tuesday's opening day of spring drills. The idea is coaches will get to see what the quarterback is looking at from the player's point of view. Corrections on where the quarterback should be looking and what his reads should be then can be made.

"We're always kind of trying to stay on the cutting edge, technology-wise," Hawkins said. "We'll

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see how it meshes in with what we do. But it just basically gives us a picture of what the quarterback is looking at."

The principal players in the competition, junior Cody Hawkins and sophomore Tyler Hansen, said they are looking forward to what it shows.

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"We're going to be a lot better with our eyes and moving people," Hansen said. "I think it's going to be good."

Both quarterbacks talked about upcoming changes to CU's offensive scheme. Expect to see less no-huddle, more motion and an increased use of running backs in the running and passing games this fall.

"I need to definitely learn this new offense we're running," Hansen said. "Definitely learn the new terminology and stuff, and understand defenses more."

Hawkins took most of the snaps last season but was thrust into a timeshare with Hansen late in the season. Hawkins brushed aside the suggestion he's frustrated to be in a competition when he took most of the snaps last year.

"Competition makes everybody better," Hawkins said. "I think I'm the starter next year because I know I'm doing everything I can, but Matt (Ballenger) and Tyler are thinking the same way."

Hawkins threw for 1,892 yards, 17 touchdowns and 10 interceptions in 12 games last season. CU burned Hansen's redshirt about halfway into the season, and he ended up throwing for 280 yards, one touchdown and four interceptions in five games.

"There's definitely more tension," Hansen said of the competition. "It's not as friendly as last year. Now, you're competing. Only one guy can play at a time."

Dan Hawkins prefers to come out of all this with a clear-cut starter.

"It's tough on them, it's tough on us, it's tough on the team," he said. "Sometimes, like last year, you get shoved into that position. You don't like it. You've got to deal with it."

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CU's Stewart, running backs fight for carries

By Patrick Ridgell
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BOULDER — Speedy is still speedy.

That's according to Speedy himself, Rodney Stewart, the Colorado sophomore running back whose 622 rushing yards in 2008 led the team. That total marked the program's fourth-highest for a freshman, and had he not broken his right fibula after being on the wrong end of a horse-collar tackle on Nov. 1 at Texas A&M, the season's ninth game, Stewart's total might have neared 1,000 yards.

"I'm feeling good. I'm ready to get the ball rolling," Stewart said. "I'm more anxious than a lot of people. I haven't been in pads for more than a minute since I got hurt."

That belief also comes from his position coach, Darian Hagan, who claims Stewart is as confident as ever, a statement that shouldn't surprise anyone. And last year's starting quarterback, Cody Hawkins, had some insight to share, too.

"Speedy was Speedy over Christmas," Hawkins said. "That guy was running around playing basketball, breaking ankles. The guy's doing a great job. He hasn't held back at all, and I don't know whether that's good or bad for him, but he's feeling great."

Stewart is one of several running backs entering CU's spring drills, which began Tuesday, who's fighting for carries. Coaches are saying they'll be creative when it comes to using their tailbacks, possibly using some combinations in the backfield previously unseen. Stewart's return to full health from a nasty injury creates more choices.

Stewart's quick return is not a big surprise, however. Hagan said Stewart is "a guy that does not like to be down and out," adding the way he handled the recuperation process was "funny." Stewart had surgery in November. He removed his cast by himself, well before the proper time. He was also running and wearing dress shoes way early.

CU players split up during winter conditioning into what Hawkins called "accountability" groups, where a misstep by one member of a group resulted in punishment for all. Hawkins said Stewart's group received punishment when Stewart was spotted in early January on campus without wearing his walking boot. Early January was, of course, about a month and a half before Stewart was supposed to be without his walking cast.

"That's just who he is," Hagan said. "He didn't want to be down, and he wanted to speed up the process as fast he could. He's just one of those guys who says, 'Hey, I'm going to do what I have to do to get back out there right now.'"

Tuesday's practice was in shorts and helmets; the team won't don pads and hit until Friday, the spring's third workout. Stewart, now wearing No. 5 instead of last year's 43, ran well.

In March, the program held a pro-timing day for its non-seniors, during which returning players took part in drills NFL scouts ran the program's outgoing seniors through on March 9.



CU running back Rodney Stewart, right, rests between spring practice drills Tuesday in the practice bubble. Stewart broke his right leg after being on the wrong end of a horse-collar last season at Texas A&M. **Morgan Varon/Times-Call**

Stewart said he ran a 4.5 40 that day, which was a time he didn't like for a couple reasons. One was because he says he ran a 4.3 upon his arrival from Ohio last fall. The other is because he expects to be faster, and he ran that day with a back sore from "all the power cleans I'd been maxing out" in the weight room.

"I'm not losing speed," Stewart said. "I'm building it back up as the weeks go on. "I ran (the 40s), but it wasn't the time I think I can run right now."

Said Hagan: "He's always been confident. He's a guy that walks around with a swagger, plays with a swagger; he has that confident air about him. He's back. He's Speedy."

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Buffs' O-line making moves

By Patrick Ridgell
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BOULDER — Six screws, a bolt and a rod now reside in the left leg of Colorado offensive lineman Ryan Miller. He might be residing at a new position come September.

Always a right tackle during his 11 previous starts in 2008 and 2007, Miller said he'll be playing some guard in spring drills. Miller, who missed the final eight games of 2008 after he broke his leg against Florida State, shrugged when asking why he might move inside. "It's spring ball," he said. "We're putting different pieces of the puzzle and seeing what works out best," Miller said.



CU tackle Nate Solder and the rest of the offensive line run through drills during spring practice Tuesday in the team's practice bubble. **Morgan Varon/Times-Call**

Head coach Dan Hawkins said only Nate Solder at left tackle is a solid in his spot entering spring drills. The Buffs have to replace center Daniel Sanders, but return five other offensive linemen with starting experience.

Hawkins said Miller, who had his broken leg surgically repaired last fall, is probably a little more suited to playing inside than someone like redshirt freshman tackle Bryce Givens, who said Tuesday he's up to 280 pounds. Givens dropped below 250 last year while dealing with health issues while he redshirted. Givens' presence improves the talent on CU's line, which is under the eye of Denver Johnson, CU's fourth offensive line coach in five years.

"We want to play our best five guys," Hawkins said.

CU has the makings for a huge offensive line in 2009. Solder is listed at 6-foot-9 and 305 pounds. Givens, at 6-6 and also very lean, could be Solder's brother, Miller said.

Sione Tau, 6-foot-5 and 325 pounds, is working at guard and tackle like Miller, who's 6-8, 310. Quarterback Cody Hawkins, 5-11 and fighting for the starting job he held last year, said throwing over so much height is no big deal.

"Joe Flacco (who's 6-6) isn't going to see over Nate Solder either," Cody Hawkins said about the Baltimore Ravens' quarterback. "It's not something I worry about. It's always about finding throwing lanes." Several Buffs took turns Tuesday at center, including 6-3, 275-pound Mike Iltis, a third-year sophomore who missed 2008 with a torn ACL, and 6-3, 290-pound Blake Behrens.

Iltis could receive an extra year of eligibility. Since he already redshirted, he can't receive another from the NCAA until after his senior season.

A LITTLE TESTY?

A long winter's conditioning preceded by a football season without a bowl might have left the Buffaloes a bit testy.

The team held its first spring practice of 2009 on Tuesday, which was not in pads and featured no hitting. Still, things were spirited and loud, just the way you'd expect the first practice to be.

"We're ready to go, we just wish it was September or August instead of spring," Miller said. "We wish we could strap it up and unleash some of this aggression." Miller stopped short of saying anger lingers from last season's 5-7 mark, which included a frustrating, last-minute loss at Nebraska in the season finale. Players vowed that day in Lincoln, Neb., the loss would motivate them in the offseason. Miller repeated that sentiment Tuesday.

"I don't think there's an anger, but it's motivation, definite motivation," he said. "We've watched a lot more film. The meetings have been very precise. There's not as much lolly-gagging or dilly-dallying."

Dan Hawkins said he liked his players' attitude and said he believes they are bigger, stronger and faster than in past years. While most coaches trumpet their offseason conditioning, Hawkins pointed out the players' demeanor as something he especially likes.

"We have more swagger, we're older and we have a little more confidence," he said. "Guys know what's going on. Young guys just look more polished."

PLAYER UPDATES: CU lists linebacker Lynn Katoa as out for spring due to academics. He was not at practice Tuesday.

Cornerback Anthony Wright is out with a sprained knee. Defensive tackle Curtis Cunningham, whom CU listed as limited due to shoulder surgery, is now out. Walk-on fullback Matt Burgner will miss at least a week or two of spring due to a herniated disc. CU only has two other fullbacks.

Linebacker Brandon Gouin sprained an ankle in winter conditioning and is out.

EXTRA POINTS: CU unveiled a helmet camera for quarterbacks on Tuesday. Coaches will use it in film study to see where the quarterbacks are looking and what they're seeing. Offensive coordinator Mark Helfrich said he has tried it in other places, but with limited success. "We're trying to stay on the cutting edge there technology-wise," Dan Hawkins said. ... Tuesday marked the 20th anniversary of former CU quarterback Sal Aunese being diagnosed with stomach cancer. Doctors gave him six months to live. He survived five months and three weeks. CU dedicated its unbeaten 1989 season to Aunese.

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Simas happy to shed scout-team status

Mar. 31, 2009 No Comment [Email This Story](#)

By B.G. Brooks



BOULDER — Sleep did not come easily Monday night for Markques Simas. On Tuesday afternoon, when the University of Colorado opened spring practice, Simas knew he would shed his unofficial tag as a scout-team legend and assume a position on the two-deep football roster.

His wait has been lengthy — two seasons, in fact — and primarily self-imposed. A redshirt season (2007) was followed by one of academic ineligibility (2008), relegating him to another tour of scout team duty that left him, his teammates and coaches shaking their heads and wondering what the Buffaloes offense might have been had he been in the lineup.

“Everybody knows if we’d had a playmaker outside, it would have helped us,” Eric Kiesau, Simas’ position coach, told InDenverTimes on Tuesday. “You never know for sure, but with (Simas), you do know the potential is there.”

So with his Saturday afternoons scratched, midweek potential became as much as Simas could demonstrate. And did he ever.

“When you heard everybody from the scout team screaming, you’d know Markques made another great play,” quarterback Cody Crawford said. “And that was an extremely frequent occurrence.”

Added Kiesau: “I’ve never had a player who got so much attention on a scout team. ... His first year, I had defensive coaches telling me how many incredible catches he made — one-handed, behind-the-back, that kind of stuff.

“That was encouraging because it was against our starting defense. As a player, the sky’s the limit for him. But for him, his success and his future here is how he handles himself off the field. On the field, he’s as gifted as they come. He just has to make sure he goes to class and takes care of business.”

Kiesau was “very hard” on Simas last season: “I wanted to drill home the point that he let his teammates down. I would never say, ‘Markques, you lost this game for us.’ I just drilled home the point that you’ve got 100 guys on this football team, and you let them down (by being ineligible).

” ‘We brought you in here to be the playmaker outside we need, and it was you who decided not to go to class. You made the decisions that hurt the team.’ I tried to channel that in a way that it would become a positive for this year, the next year and his senior year.”

But the main message was don’t let last year’s bad experience devolve into one that haunts and colors the rest of your life. Let it be a springboard to a time when a successful Simas can reflect, Kiesau said, “on a time when I was young and dumb.”

Simas, standing 6-foot-2 and weighing a lean 215 pounds, vows party time has passed. He concedes that upon his arrival at CU, studying and attending class lagged a distant second behind “extracurricular activities, which I put before everything.

“Now, I’m prioritizing my time. I’ve figured out that school comes before everything,” he said.

For reasons other than the player’s sheer talent, Kiesau is anxious to spot Simas behind the talented Josh Smith at the “X” receiver position. If Simas performs as he did on the scout team, Smith will get a push he never has experienced, making him and Simas better.

Or so Kiesau hopes. Simply put, he wants Simas to get the best out of himself and whoever happens to be ahead of him on the depth chart.

“I love Cody Crawford (2008 senior walk-on) with all my heart,” said Kiesau, who recently was promoted to assistant head coach by coach Dan Hawkins. “But if I’m Josh Smith, and I have a walk-on behind me who didn’t earn any scholarships out of high school, there’s no threat there.

“But if I’ve got Markques Simas, who was recruited by everybody in the country and everybody knows who he is, I’ve got to work my tail off.”

Smith, said Kiesau, never has been challenged as he might be this spring because “in high school, he was always the best guy. There was no one behind him. He’s never been pushed to where I’m going to push him.”

Cody Hawkins agreed that not having Simas last season “definitely hurt us,” and said Simas “probably has got the best hands on the team. He can run, jump, he’s big — he’s everything you want in a receiver.”

In addition to finally being able to utilize Simas, Kiesau wants to develop redshirt freshman Chance Blackmon, who has added 22 pounds and now weighs 190.

“But he still has skinny legs,” Kiesau said with a laugh, adding his “No. 1 priority” this spring is to develop the 6-0 Blackmon.

“I haven’t had a chance to put my arms around him and teach him technique,” Kiesau said. “I’ve got to see how far I can push him, what his limit is — if he’s ready to play or if he needs another year to learn. I’ve got to find that out.”

Blackmon opened drills behind Scotty McKnight at the “Z” spot, with Jason Espinoza and Ryan Maxwell 1-2 at the other receiver position.

Kiesau’s fall additions will include Andre Simmons, Terdell Ussery, Jarrod Darden and possibly one more in-coming prospect.

But Kiesau and most everyone else is hoping a contrite Simas fills a major void in CU’s passing game. Having to tell his teammates he was ineligible last August ranks with the biggest disappointments in his young life, he said.

So does an autumn spent as a spectator.

“As far as me helping the defense (as a scout-teammer), I think I did my part, did as much as I could,” he said. “I think I can make plays; it’s what I do as a football player.”

Said Kiesau: “The light’s been turned on, but it’s still dim. ... It’s not totally on, but it’s getting there. It stung him when he had to sit, burn a year and watch his buddies play.

“Last year was a big reality check for him. When he gets on the field and realizes how much fun he can have, I think the message will be driven home. Right now, he’s still kind of in the dark; he’s never experienced an actual game day. He’s gone through the redshirting and a disciplinary year. ...

“He’s still sitting in the dark; he hasn’t had the fun yet. That Colorado State game (the 2009 opener), I guarantee he’ll be smiling ear-to-ear if he’s out there playing. He really wants it bad.”

Bad enough to stay eligible and avoid another season as a scout team star? The Buffs hope so.

BUFF BITS: Dan Hawkins said Day 1, the first of two practices in shorts, was an attitudinal success — a carryover from the Buffs’ intense winter conditioning work. “I love what we’ve done this winter,” he said. “There was a little more swagger, a little more confidence today.” ... Offensive lineman Ryan Miller said his surgically mended left lower leg has completely healed and he’s feeling like the broken lower limb is as good as new. Miller, who played right tackle last season before his injury, likely will be given a look at guard as new line coach Denver Johnson tries to identify his five best offensive linemen. ... Hawkins said left tackle Nate Solder, whom Miller said is being called “the son of Zeus” by his teammates because of his chiseled physique, might be the only interior lineman who doesn’t go through spring experimentation at other line positions. ... The quarterbacks are experimenting with small cameras mounted on their helmets that will allow offensive coordinator Mark Helfrich to help “determine exactly what the (quarterbacks) are looking at as the play progresses,” according to CUBuffs.com. “It’s still a little bit in the testing phase,” Helfrich told the school

Web site. “I’ve tried to do it in places in the past, and it’s never really worked how it should. But I’m hoping technology has advanced and these cameras will do the trick.” The footage from the helmet cameras will be synchronized with the overhead coaches’ video.

