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O-line coach funny, good fit

By Tom Kensler
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BOULDER — Colorado offensive linemen ought to be loose and relaxed before they play this fall. Their new position coach, Denver Johnson, is a hoot.

"He's got one-liners that just make you stop and laugh," sophomore Ryan Miller said.

Johnson, a native of Seminole, Okla., and most recently head coach at Illinois State for nine seasons, said that considering his first name, destiny must have brought him to Colorado. Johnson's parents apparently followed their homespun sense of humor in picking names for three sons.

"Well, I've got a brother named Houston and a brother named Dallas. At one time, when I was playing pro ball for the (USFL's) Houston Gamblers, I lived in Houston and Houston lived in Denver. It just drove my mother nuts," Johnson said.

With a grin, Johnson agreed it's a good thing his parents didn't take a liking to Nacogdoches.

"I don't try to be funny. It's just my nature, I guess," said Johnson, 50. "I never claim to be very smart, but I think God gave me a gift of observation."

Observational skills come in handy for a coach beginning a new job. Johnson said he is impressed with what he has to work with, although it will be young by Big 12 standards. His starting offensive line could include junior Nate Solder (6-feet-9, 300 pounds) and redshirt freshman Bryce Givens (6-6, 275) at tackle, Miller (6-8, 310) and sophomore Blake Behrens (6-3, 290) at guard and sophomore Mike Iltis (6-3, 275) at center.

"We're probably not as deep as we will be over time," Johnson said. "We're still trying to develop depth and recruit depth. But we've got some guys that are extremely talented. And there are other guys that certainly have a chance to develop. I'm very optimistic."

Humor aside, Johnson is a no-nonsense stickler for fundamentals.

"Missed assignments will beat you quicker and uglier than mismatches will," Johnson said. "We're going to be fundamentally sound, physically fit and mentally tough."

A two-time all-conference lineman at Tulsa during his playing days, Johnson began his coaching career in 1985 at Oklahoma State as a

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graduate assistant. He also coached for a season at Oklahoma (1996).

"I grew up watching Big Eight-Big 12 football," Johnson said. "Great stadiums. Great atmosphere. Great players. I just love it. And what a wonderful place this is. Even back in the 1980s when I was at Oklahoma State, I've always thought Colorado would be a great place to live and a great place to coach."

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Denver Johnson

Current job: Colorado offensive line coach

Date hired: Feb. 18. Replaced Jeff Grimes, who joined the staff at Auburn. Age: 50

Hometown: Seminole, Okla.

Alma mater: University of Tulsa

Head coaching experience: Illinois State, 2000-08 (48-54); Murray State, 1997-99 (21-12)

Professional playing experience: Tampa Bay Buccaneers (NFL), 1981-82; Los Angeles Express (USFL), 1983-84; Houston Gamblers (USFL), 1985

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