



Wheatley looks for challenge

Not many QBs will test All-Big 12 cornerback

By Ryan Thorburn
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Life as a "shutdown" cornerback can get a little lonely.

Champ Bailey has been complaining about the lack of attention from opposing quarterbacks for years. During training camp, Denver's best defensive player has practically been begging for more footballs to fly in his direction by talking about how great the addition of Drè Bly will be for the Broncos.

Colorado's defense will feature its version of Bailey again this fall with the return of first-team All-Big 12 cornerback Terrence Wheatley for his senior season.

And until the Buffs find some impact players for the other side of the field, it could be a quiet season for the promising NFL prospect.

"I would think the other guy had better be ready to go because he's probably going to get some action," CU head coach Dan Hawkins said. "(Wheatley's) pretty good, he really is. He's smart, he's fast and he's got good ball skills. He's a good player."

Right now the cupboard in the CU secondary is half-bare. Or half-full, depending on your point of view.

Wheatley is a player the coaching staff simply shouldn't have to worry much about. Ryan Walters is clearly the best safety in the program and will be a name Big 12 fans will know well before his career is over.

And the other spots?

"We're just kind of holding judgment," CU secondary coach Greg Brown said. "All the young guys have a certain individual skill that they bring to the table. But we're a long way from getting there. We're just trying to build that foundation and let those young guys play and see what they can do."

"Right now there is no one player in particular where you just say, 'Wow.'"

Lionel Harris, a senior, has the inside track at winning the strong safety spot after filling in for the injured J.J. Billingsley during the second half of the 2006 season. He finished fourth on the team with 67 tackles, including 60 in his six starts, and made an impressive interception of a Nick Nelson pass this week in the rain.

Daniel Dykes, who sat out last season after transferring from Idaho, will challenge Harris and also has the skills to play some cornerback. He had Hawkins' attention in the WAC while recording seven tackles

and an interception for the Vandals in two games against Boise State during the 2004 and 2005 seasons.

"(Dykes) figures to see a lot of playing time one way or another. Whether he's a starter or the third safety he's going to see playing time," Brown said. "He showed up even as a guy on the scout team last year that did heck of a job."

The other starting cornerback position is up for grabs and will probably remain that way throughout the preseason camp. Junior Benjamin Burney is listed at the top of the depth chart at this early stage of the competition. Jalil Brown (redshirt freshman), Anthony Perkins (freshman) and Anthony Wright (freshman) all have the skills and versatility the coaching staff is looking for, but lack the experience.

Wheatley has been on the field for 1,579 plays during his collegiate career and could be a Thorpe Award candidate if enough quarterbacks cooperate. He enters the 2007 campaign 12th on CU's all-time list for interceptions with nine, despite undergoing four different surgical procedures on his wrist.

"I was pretty frustrated last year. I called my dad and I was like, 'You know this is the first time I've ever complained about them not throwing my way.' It's frustrating because you want to go out there and make plays," Wheatley said. "I guess it's a good thing because you're taking away one side of the field so everybody else doesn't have to worry about it. But from a personal standpoint you feel like you want to contribute and you kind of feel like you're not, even though you kind of are."

CU plans to have Wheatley blanket the opposing team's best receiver instead of just staying on one side of the field like Bailey usually does.

That should keep Wheatley busy and he will need to be in order to make seven interceptions, the number required to tie him for the single-season record (Dick Anderson had seven in 1967 and Cullen Bryant had seven in 1972) and for the program's career mark (John Sterns had 16 interceptions from 1970-72).

"I probably should have broke the record last year if you count how many I dropped," Wheatley said. "I think if you counted them I probably should have had like anywhere from 10 to 11."

"It's something to work on. It's always the easy ones that get me. It's the hard ones where I'm jumping and flipping over backwards that I get."

Brown, a longtime NFL assistant, believes Wheatley has been destined for the next level for some time based on his talents. Since the new coaching staff arrived he has also been preparing like a pro.

"He has spent a lot of time in the film room," Brown said. "I've noticed the guy in there when everyone has gone home and he's still in there looking at film. So he's got that good habit. He's a very studious guy and a very sharp individual. This is a guy who, in my opinion, probably has known for quite some time that he's got a future in the NFL. And right now he's going about maximizing his chances by doing all he can on and off the field."

It's lonely at the top.



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Defense gets best of offense

Bufs hold first full-squad workouts

By Ryan Thorburn
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Colorado took the field for the first full-team, full-pad practice of camp on Friday evening.

Early edge: defense.

"A lot of edge," CU head coach Dan Hawkins noted after watching his offense struggle to get much of anything going against George Hypolite, Jordon Dizon, Terrence Wheatley and Co.

Cody Hawkins and Nick Nelson had a little success throwing to tight ends during some of the drills, but neither quarterback could complete a pass in the goal-line period. As a result, the offensive players were running sprints and the defensive players were smiling at the end of the practice.

To be fair, coaches usually expect the defense to be ahead of the offense at this early stage of the preseason. But the Buffs really need to make some strides after finishing the 2-10 2006 campaign ranked 102nd in total offense (291.4 yards per game).

"Everything's good," Dan Hawkins said. "Just no execution on offense. ... It's hard when you have that much discontinuity. Other than a couple of pop plays, there was less than a handful of plays really that got off the ground."

The Buffs will practice twice today and hold the first scrimmage of the camp at 10 a.m. on Sunday. All practices and scrimmages through Aug. 18 are open to the public.

"We're going to try to make it a little more game-like than a normal first scrimmage," Dan Hawkins said. "We're going to try to get coaches off the field, get a few drives going. You've got to work a couple situations, but try to make it a little more game-like than normal just so we can kind of get in the flow, get going."

Going international?

CU's football schedules are set through 2011, but Dan Hawkins didn't rule out the possibility of playing a game on another continent in the future. His former school, Boise State, is reportedly negotiating with Oregon to play a nonconference game in China.

"I think it's great," Hawkins said. "But going to Hawaii is tough, so the logistics of getting to China will be interesting. And getting back."

The Buffs will travel to Florida State in 2008, to West Virginia in 2009, to California in 2010 and to

Hawaii in 2011. The program does have an opening on the 2012 schedule, which already includes seven home games.

"I'm an out-of-the-box guy," Hawkins said when asked about possibly playing an international game. "It's probably something up my alley."

Extra blockers

The Buffs' offensive line was dominated by the defensive line for the most part on Friday, but at least there were plenty of big bodies breaking the huddle. The coaching staff had to make do with only six offensive linemen during spring drills and during Sunday's scrimmage it will finally be time to see what the group can do in conditions that will simulate fall Saturdays.

"They need to get used to playing and going on a couple eight- or 10-play drives," Hawkins said. "It would be good for those guys to get that kind of work in where that was very hard to do in the spring."

Notable

Bernard Jackson, Alvin Barnett, Keenan Stevens and Erick Faatagi are expected to join the team for on-field work today after missing most of the practices to focus on summer school. "If they're not (back), I'm on the wrong schedule because they took finals today," Hawkins said. They will not be allowed to participate in full-pad work until they are considered to be in football shape. ... Wide receiver Steve Melton limped off the field in the middle of practice. A few minutes later he was moving dirt from one end of the field to the other in a wheelbarrow as part of Hawkins' new policy that keeps players from standing around and watching.



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Pitman's progress: Buffs stronger

Coach gaining disciples with his stern style

By B.G. Brooks, Rocky Mountain News
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BOULDER - The first impression Jeff Pitman made on his new job was, well, wooden.

"The guy had the personality of this board," said University of Colorado defensive tackle George Hypolite, slapping the table supporting his well-distributed 285 pounds.

Not that the Buffaloes weren't briefed: "Coach (Dan) Hawkins had told us (Pitman) had the personality of a block of wood," cornerback Terrence Wheatley added.

Those observations came two springs ago, when Pitman, brawny and leaning toward bashful, arrived from Boise State as CU's new strength and conditioning coach.

A grueling 15 months later, the Buffs can't honestly say they've seen Pitman morph into a Comedy Central candidate. He still appears able to melt steel with a stare and might belly laugh only in even-numbered years.

But the Buffs have glimpsed changes - a few in "Pit," most in themselves. Players have warmed up to him, and once given tangible proof his intense approach had taken, he has embraced them.

"'Pit' comes off as a real hard guy, almost kind of cold," offensive lineman Edwin Harrison said. "But he's really a funny guy, and more importantly, he cares."

Added Hypolite: "He knows what he's doing, but you've got to get to know 'Pit.' He's a man of his word, and in this business, you respect that. Everything he said (he would do), he's done for us.

"Point blank, he's gotten us so much stronger and ready to play. He's done what a strength and conditioning coach is supposed to do."

By Pitman's and their own standards, the Buffs claim they are stronger, more explosive and will have more fourth-quarter endurance when it counts. That is to be determined, and overall depth, which CU still lacks, will be critical in close games.

But for whatever reason, offensive tackle Tyler Polumbus conceded the 2006 Buffs fizzled in the fourth-quarter: "I don't feel like we were just getting manhandled, that teams were tossing us around. But there's something to it; whether it's conditioning or overall strength, we declined in the fourth quarter."

Players promise that won't happen this season. Tight end Joe Sanders believes the Buffs "will tend to recover better" and even enjoy a mental edge. "You line up against a team and a couple of series pass, you can see and feel that you're dominating. It's very reassuring for the rest of the game."

Earlier this week, Pitman revealed a set of eye-popping strength numbers. When he arrived, he said only 15 CU players could power clean 300 pounds. Now, that number is 63 - seven more than on his strongest Boise State teams.

Polumbus offers a qualifier: "We didn't do a lot of power cleans before he got here." Yet differences in teamwide strength are "night and day, not even comparable," Polumbus added.

Equally significant is a mental transformation Hawkins believes is more apparent now than when CU started the 2006



Joe Mahoney © The Rocky

University of Colorado strength and conditioning coach Jeff Pitman has won converts on the football squad in the past 15 months and improved the Buffaloes' team strength in the process.

season. By Pitman's count, 18 players left the program last offseason, underscoring Pitman's pledge "to lay the hammer down," Polumbus recalled. "He said the guys who stayed were going to be the champions, the guys who left wouldn't be able to cut it. And that's pretty much been true."

Said Pitman: "That goes along with what 'Hawk' tells them all the time - they're going to be blue collar and tough. We just felt with the way the (2006) season went, and where we were personnelwise, that we had to make some adjustments."

Hawkins didn't "rein in" his taskmaster initially, noting, "He kind of played off me, and we knew that these guys had been beat up, beat down and beat around. And again, 'Finny' (former strength and conditioning coach Greg Finnegan) was a very popular guy. I think discretion in easing into the thing (was the best approach)."

Also, former CU coach Bill McCartney told Hawkins the late Bo Schembechler could coach his Michigan players "hard because the guys knew he loved them; he could destroy them, but they knew he loved them," Hawkins said.

"It's harder now in this day and age, just to come in and do the 'Bear Bryant thing.' Those kids need to know you care about them and love them and have their best interest at heart. Then you can kind of take them to the wall a little bit."

Pitman has taken the Buffs to the wall and beyond. He initially had players running bleachers for offseason conditioning, but "the pitch" of Folsom Field's seats "wasn't what we'd hoped for," said Pitman, who during his Boise State tenure ran the Broncos in a stadium whose steep upper deck was perfect for his needs.

So he herded the Buffs out of Folsom and onto the steep hill that leads from a parking lot to the Dal Ward Athletics Center. The hill's grade probably is 20 percent - a leg- and lung-burning experience.

"I hate that hill," Wheatley said. "I'll celebrate when I walk it for the last time."

Pitman called improving the team's overall toughness a work in progress but noted the number of players not practicing because of injuries has declined in this camp. That might be because of a new wrinkle in rehabilitation.

Instead of standing on the sidelines during practice, players with minor injuries now shovel sand into a wheelbarrow, cart it the length of the practice field and dump it. 'Pit's' plan: Move the pile from one end of the field to the other. Next day, start over.

Playing in the sand isn't what it used to be. Neither, apparently, is playing for CU.

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