



K-State QB Freeman elusive

By Ryan Thorburn

Thursday, October 11, 2007

Josh Freeman is listed at 6-foot-6 and 238 pounds. George Hypolite is listed at 6-1, 285.

As Mike Gundy might say: Who's the quarterback here?

That would be Freeman.

Not only is Kansas State's signal-caller big, but he can run and also has a penchant for getting rid of the ball just before defensive linemen get their mitts on him.

The Wildcats have only allowed four sacks this season, including two in the opener at Auburn.

Colorado's defense, which has produced 10 sacks through six games, hopes to at least put some pressure on Freeman this Saturday.

"They have a really athletic quarterback and he gets the ball out of his hands fast," said Hypolite, CU's senior defensive tackle. "Their (offensive line) is pretty big and kind of hard to get around. With the offense they run and the way they get the ball out of their hands it's tough to get sacks against them."

Freeman faced some consistent pressure from Kansas last Saturday and threw three interceptions in the Wildcats' home loss to the Jayhawks.

"Kansas did a great job on field of getting around him and making him feel uncomfortable and making him feel like he had to get the ball out," Hypolite said. "That's what we have to do."

Hypolite is tied with linebacker Jordon Dizon for the team lead with 3.0 sacks.

"You never can be happy with the pressure you're getting," Hypolite said. "It has to be a constant thing where you have to keep getting after the quarterback. If we let quarterbacks sit back and have six seconds to look around and survey the field and throw the ball to guys, any defense is going to be torched. So getting to the quarterback, we have to do a better job. Jordon and I should be tied with 14 sacks."

Early honors

Dizon, who leads the nation in tackles, was named a "midseason" All-American by Rivals.com.

"He's playing pretty well," CU head coach Dan Hawkins said when asked if Dizon was performing like an All-American candidate. "Yeah, he's playing pretty well."

Another biggie

Hawkins was also asked if this would be one of the tougher tests for his team this season. The coach paused and smiled as thoughts of Arizona State, Florida State and Oklahoma danced in his head.

"We've played three teams that were in the Top 25, and there's more coming," Hawkins said. "Strap it on."

The Wildcats were ranked before losing to KU.

Notable

Hawkins said he still doesn't know if Chase McBride will be healthy enough to return punts this Saturday. He suffered a shoulder injury in practice last week and did not play against Baylor. ... The coach said practices have been going well this week but that he was not pleased with the final drill of Wednesday's session.



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Special teams not an afterthought for Buffs

McKay giving Buffs a spark

By Kyle Ringo

Thursday, October 11, 2007

A flawed approach to football kept Colorado cornerback Gardner McKay on the bench through much of his first two years in Boulder.

But early this season just after the beginning of his junior year, he realized the error of his ways.

McKay came to Colorado as a highly thought-of prospect from Inglewood, Calif., who starred on his high school football team at cornerback, wide receiver and return man. He expected to play extensively right away at CU, and when it didn't happen at cornerback, he turned up his nose at the idea of making it happen in other parts of the game.

It was an odd decision for a player who clearly understood the importance of special teams, having returned three kicks for scores during his senior year in high school.

"When I first got here, I did not want to be on special teams," he said. "I hated special teams. I was not a special teams guy."

Now he is.

McKay is the Buffs' leading active point earner on special teams through the first six games of the season. Four unassisted tackles, two knockdown blocks and a forced fumble are part of his r sum  so far as he continues to earn more respect from coaches and his teammates.

"This year started off rough for me not getting the playing time I wanted, but I proved to them that if I could do it on special teams I might get time on defense," he said. "Last week, I got like 40 plays on defense. It's cool."

CU emphasizes specialteams success by dedicating large chunks of practice time to every phase of the kicking game. It has paid off with key contributions in the kicking game leading to victories in the first half of the year.

The Buffs face another team this week led by coaches who emphasize special teams play just as much as CU coach Dan Hawkins.

When the Buffs take on Kansas State at 7:20 p.m., Saturday night (ESPN2), they will be tested by the No. 1 punt return team in the nation. The Wildcats average 25 yards per return, but those numbers are inflated somewhat by an 89-yard return for a touchdown by Jordy Nelson in a win over then-No. 7 Texas and an 80-yard return by fellow punt return man Deon Murphy against Missouri State.

"We lean heavily on those things," second-year KSU coach Ron Prince said. "That's a part of the formula that we need to use right now while we're still developing in some areas and in some players. "

The Wildcats have scored three touchdowns on kick returns in their first five games and have several other long returns that have changed the momentum of games or flipped field position in their favor.

"They're very sound," CU special teams coach Kent Riddle said. "They don't make many mistakes. They're not going to

hurt themselves. They're trying to create a big play and they've got the guys to do it."

The Buffs were not good in most areas of the kicking game last year. They ranked 104th in punt returns and 95th in kickoff returns. All-American place-kicker Mason Crosby was their saving grace in kickoff coverage because he blasted the ball out of the back of the end zone, allowing only 17 of his 48 kickoffs to be returned.

Part of the problem last season was a lack of depth, but there were also too many players on the roster who approached the kicking game with the same attitude McKay once had.

"I think we were definitely battling that a little bit," Riddle said. "Not to say that the guys weren't in to it, but I don't think they truly understood how important it was until it killed us last year."

The numbers have turned around this season after coaches dedicated plenty of spring practice time and fall camp to improvement on special teams. And they are doing without special teams captain R.J. Brown, who has missed the past three games after suffering the sixth concussion of his career.

Riddle said Brown was a true difference-maker on special teams and the points awarded by coaches in the kicking game back that up. Brown earned 12 special teams points in the first three games of the season. That number is still good enough to lead the team, despite the fact he hasn't been on the field since the midway point of a home loss to Florida State.

"He just did such a great job establishing the tempo and the way we do things," Riddle said. "It has really carried over and been contagious and other guys are stepping up now."

McKay says he now loves specials teams. "That's my thing," he said. The Buffs need another solid outing Saturday to beat the Wildcats. While they have made a few big plays so far, they have just missed on several other opportunities.

Just last week against Baylor, wide receiver Cody Crawford barely missed blocking a punt. He said he felt it nick his fingertips. And McKay almost came up with a muffed punt from the Bears.

"So far this season we've seen it with game-winning field goals, good punt returns, good coverage on kickoffs, kickoff returns," Crawford said. "All of that comes into play with field position, which plays a huge role in games. And that's basically what special teams is is a fight for field position."



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The finishing touches

By JEFF GRAHAM Colorado Daily Sports Writer
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For those not familiar with Colorado head coach Dan Hawkins, there is one thing to understand.

He has never met a challenge he didn't think he could overcome.

In his first year many pesky challenges presented themselves, as only a first year college coach can understand. One unforeseen but altogether fixable challenge last year illustrated that late in ballgames, the Buffs ran out of gas.

In the fourth quarter last year, CU was outscored 106-40, effectively taking them out of five games in which they were in a position to win going into the final quarter. Taking a massive proactive approach to prepare his team for a full 60 minute game, Hawkins sought the expertise of strength and conditioning coach Jeff Pitman.

Pitman's off-season workout regimen, coupled with a year under Hawkins' system, has all-but turned that challenge into a resounding success. Whereas the Buffs were giving up 108.1 yards per game in the fourth quarter last year, this year's 54 - yard average proves the resolve to meet challenges head on.

A byproduct of the time spent on being able to "finish" in Hawkins mind is an increased level of physicality that has 2007 opponents keying on the Buffs toughness. Over the course of the first half of the season, CU have proven that not only can they hang with some of the top programs in the country, but they match-up better than predicted.

"I have been very pleased with their leadership, toughness, work ethic and their ability to start fast and finish," Hawkins said. "All those things that we talk about that are so important, not only in football but other things. That, to me has been awesome and that is why we have played better.

"Clearly when you have your sophomore season (as a coach) you have a little more experience and your guys have a better understanding of what is going on and that helps."

Another tough physical test awaits these Buffs (4-2, 2-0 in Big 12) this weekend against a Kansas State team that was ranked 24th before losing their conference opener last week against Kansas.

The Wildcats play an unusual defense with only three defensive lineman and four linebackers. Unlike CU's starting linebackers that average 218 pounds, KSU's starting four average 20 pounds heavier at 238 pounds.

"I think the thing that really sticks out is how aggressive and physical they are, and I mean all of them," Hawkins said of KSU defense. "They come off the ball and come after you, they can run and they have good size and strength. They are very sound in all of that."

Much like the Florida State and Oklahoma games, Kansas State brings a physical defensive nature that the Buffs have seemingly matched up well with this year, but again the Buffs offensive line will be battle tested this week.

"I think this d-line in particular is going to be really bring it," senior offensive lineman Tyler Polumbus said. "We just got to be tougher. We got to come off the ball harder and move them off the ball."

The Buff offensive line has seemed to find a healthy dose of active participants since the start of the year. Freshmen Ryan Miller and Kai Maiava have been working in at about 35 percent of the plays, helping preserve much needed energy late into games.

"It's more of a mentality that you are going to finish more than anything," Polumbus said. "But sure having those guys around helps. Having as many good able bodies as possible is always a benefit."

The Buffs already have righted the wrong against three teams they lost to last year (OU, BU, CSU) and Kansas State is among those CU hopes to continue the trend with. However, the steadfast belief in this coaching staff is not about revenge or any other motivational tactic other than getting better.

"Again, I'm one of those guys where you are never there and you are never not there," Hawkins said. "I always tell our guys that the average ought to be good, your average performance ought to be good. I think we are getting there and getting

used to that but there are a lot of games to be played."

cu football notes

Special teams face challenge

K-State units among best

By Tom Kensler
The Denver Post

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BOULDER - Colorado special-teams coach Kent Riddle gave a surprising answer when asked about more practice time being devoted this week to punt and kickoff coverages. Saturday's opponent, Kansas State, rates among the nation's best at returning kicks.

"We're not doing any more than usual," Riddle said. "But that's because we work really hard every week on special teams."

Riddle no doubt got his squads' attention by tossing out a few statistics. Kansas State (3-2, 1-1 Big 12) ranks first nationally in punt return average (25.5 yards) and is 34th in kickoff returns (23.8).

The Wildcats have returned three kicks for touchdowns this season, by three players: an 85-yard kickoff return by James Johnson and

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89-yard punt return by Jordy Nelson in the 41-21 win at Texas; and an 80-yard punt return by Deon Murphy against Missouri State.

"They've done a tremendous job," Riddle said. "They've got playmakers. The guys up front (blocking) know that if they give them a chance, they'll do something big. They're fast, powerful guys who can find a crease and get through there."

"Everybody has to give great effort against that; you've got to swarm to the ball. You've got to beat a one-on-one block at some point and get out and run and leverage to the ball."

Like Colorado (4-2, 2-0), Kansas State places an emphasis on special-teams fundamentals.

"I'm about as stoic a person on the sideline on game day as possible,

but the kicking game just excites me," Kansas State coach Ron Prince told the Topeka Capital-Journal following the upset of Texas. "I think that's where the game gets fun." but the kicking game just excites me," Kansas State coach Ron Prince told the Topeka Capital-Journal following the upset of Texas. "I think that's where the game gets fun."

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The best strategy against Kansas State's returners "is to not have to punt," Riddle said.

Footnotes. Colorado's return game isn't chopped liver. The Buffs rank 28th nationally in punt returns (13.0) and 30th in kickoff returns (24.2). CU has not returned a kick for a touchdown. ... Colorado freshman wideout Josh Smith said he learned a lesson after being suspended for the first half of the Baylor game for being late to a team meeting. Smith caught two passes for 103 yards in the second half. "It hurt me to be standing on the sidelines," Smith said. ... After getting 15 stops against Baylor, CU senior linebacker Jordon Dizon remained the nation's tackles leader with 14 per game.

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Local college football, October 11

October 11, 2007

CU

Who will be back there?

It is unclear who will be the punt returner Saturday, but if CU's first two options are unavailable, starting strong safety **Daniel Dykes** figures to be a more-than-capable fill-in.

With regular punt returner **Chase McBride** out against Baylor because of a separated left shoulder and replacement **Stephone Robinson** injured on a pass reception, Dykes was inserted as the deep man.

The transfer from Idaho, a part-time punt returner for the Vandals, made two fair catches - one led to **Kevin Eberhart's** 54-yard field goal on the final play of the first half - and returned one punt for 7 yards.

McBride said Wednesday he is "feeling better" and wants to play; Robinson is listed as day to day because of a leg contusion. Dykes, though, is preparing as if he'll have the role.

"That's just an extra something I get to do in the game and an opportunity to put the ball in my hands," Dykes said. "It's something I get excited about and another role I take on."

Odd men out

The Buffaloes frequently face odd defensive fronts (three linemen, four linebackers) on third (passing) downs, but Kansas State shows that look for almost the entire game.

But if their concentration and communication don't slip, CU's offensive linemen say coping won't be difficult.

"They bring one or two guys off the edge (blitzing) on almost every play, or a guy from the middle," center **Daniel Sanders** said. "But we should recognize it, and it shouldn't be a problem."

Offensive tackle **Tyler Polumbus** believes "running against it will be the key" and points to the Buffs' 222.1-yard rushing average during their three-game winning streak. "I don't think it will be that big an issue; we'll be ready for it."

Etc.

- Coach **Dan Hawkins** called practice Wednesday "Good, except for our last period." The Buffs worked for about two hours with a moderate amount of contact.
- Tight end **Tyson DeVree** (concussion) participated in limited contact work but has been cleared to play Saturday.
- The Buffs are 2-3 at Kansas State since the Big 12 Conference was formed.

Numbers game

18 **offensive touchdowns** through six games this season, one fewer than CU managed all last season.

He said it

"He's mobile, and even if you're lucky enough to get to him, you better have somebody big tackle him or you're not going to get him down."



Brian Bahr © Getty Images

Kansas State quarterback Josh Freeman will create a challenge for CU.