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Wasting no time

Newcomers figure to play prominent role for Buffs

By Kyle Ringo (Contact)
Sunday, August 5, 2007



Photo by Joshua Lawton

CU freshman receivers Josh Smith, left, and Scotty McKnight will be among the young players who are expected to make a strong bid for playing time this season.

Help wanted.

Division I football program seeks strong, fast athletes with a never-say-die attitude, a genuine love for the game and sticking an opponent's face in the mud. Prospects must be of good character with genuine interest in making the most of a free college education, hard lessons in life and plenty of Hawk love. Apply at coach Dan Hawkins' office, Dal Ward Center, University of Colorado campus.

STORY TOOLS

If recruiting could be done in such ways, you can bet ads from the Colorado football program would have been

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pretty similar to this over the past 20 months.

There was an alarming lack of strength, depth and Big 12 Conference-caliber talent on the roster when Hawkins walked into his office for the first time as head Buffalo in December 2005.

In the days since, Hawkins and his assistant coaches have worked tirelessly to upgrade the talent and fill holes in the depth chart. Their job isn't nearly complete, but when the first practices of 2007 training camp begin

Monday there will be a noticeable difference in the size, speed and strength of the athletes on the field.

Remnants of the Gary Barnett era remain, including several of the best players on the roster, but this is now Hawkins' team in terms of both the number of players he has recruited and the group's collective attitude.

"It's been a process of getting everybody on the same page and I have been really pleased with our players' intensity and their effort in coming together," Hawkins said. "And I think we're really starting to become fortified in understanding what everybody's about. ... That freshman to sophomore year is probably the largest jump in learning. And I think that's the same for me and our football team."

The long-term goal in the Colorado program is to never be in this position again. Freshmen should be facing an uphill battle to earn playing time.

Yet Hawkins has made it no secret that he expects a dozen or more members of the incoming recruiting class to play this season. Throw in another dozen redshirt freshmen who have been waiting a year to get on the field and you have a dramatic shift in the program. Fans will get to know plenty of new names and faces in 2007.

"I think coach Hawk is definitely right to say that with their talent, with the way they're working hard, with the kind of season we had last year," redshirt freshman receiver Scotty McKnight said. "It wasn't necessarily that we didn't have the players that could do it. Just things weren't clicking for us."

"I think everybody on the team is really excited about this year because things started to click over the summer in the weight room, getting together in meetings or coming out to seven-on-seven. We're a completely different team from last year."

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Youth and inexperience always come with a few potholes along the way, but it would be difficult to do worse this year than the Buffs did last fall in losing 10 games for only the third time in 117 years of college football.

Freshmen and newcomers figure in nearly every position battle across the board with the exception of tight end, defensive tackle, inside linebacker and one cornerback spot.

Quarterback is the most prominent position on any football team and it is no exception in this renaissance. Deciding whether the best man for the job is redshirt freshman Cody Hawkins or junior college transfer Nick Nelson might be the most important question in camp this year.

But CU fans have become painfully aware in recent years that quarterbacks are only part of the equation in a successful passing game.

The most glaring deficiency at CU over the past two years has been a lack of speed and play-making ability at the wide receiver position. It was a point of emphasis in the recruiting process and coaches believe they have a group of young players who will challenge the veteran receiving corps for playing time.

"A lot of us are real confident and the team can see that," true freshman Josh Smith said. "We're real aggressive players right off the bat and we all want to play."

Wide receivers coach and passing game coordinator Eric Kiesau has been through this before. When he was hired at California in 2002, he faced a similar challenge in recruiting more talent to the program and refining it once it arrived.

"It will change this year and it will drastically change in the following years," Kiesau said. "I promise you that. I've been down this road before. When we took over at Cal, they were 1-10 the year before we got there, and the past two years they have had top-five wide receiving corps in the country."

True freshmen Markques Simas, Kendrick Celestine and Smith along with McKnight and walk-ons Colin Gilbert and Steve Melton are expected to challenge a veteran group led by players such as Patrick Williams, Dusty Sprague, Alvin Barnett and Cody Crawford.

"I'll tell you what, I bet these guys have not had this type of competition in their time here," Kiesau said. "Maybe Dusty and Stephone did when they were freshmen. I would say this will be the most competition they will have had since they've been here."

Smith, Celestine and Simas have become fast friends since deciding to come to Boulder. Smith and

Simas met on their recruiting trip to CU last fall. Both were recruited by the high-profile schools in their home state of California, but invigorating things in Boulder sounded more attractive than sitting on the bench for a year or more at USC, UCLA or Cal.

Celestine said he and Smith have stayed up most of the night on several occasions this summer quizzing each other with plays and what their individual responsibilities are.

"I don't really think anyone comes to college wanting to be second string or third string," Celestine said. "With me coming in and knowing that the coaches believe in me, makes me want to prove myself even more."

2007 schedule

Sept. 1 — Colorado State (Denver), 10 a.m., FSN

Sept. 8 — at Arizona State,

8:15 p.m., FSN

Sept. 15 — FLORIDA STATE, 8

p.m., ESPN

Sept. 22 — MIAMI, OHIO, 1:30

p.m., no TV

Sept. 29 — OKLAHOMA

Oct. 6 — at Baylor

Oct. 13 — at Kansas State

Oct. . 20 — KANSAS

Oct. 27 — at Texas Tech

Nov. 3 — MISSOURI