

Walters a big hit with his big hits

But it's crucial that CU safety remains healthy this season

By Kyle Ringo Saturday, August 25, 2007

The moment he realized he could play safety is still fresh in Ryan Walters' mind.

It happened during Colorado football practice two years ago. Walters sprinted toward the sideline in pursuit of on-rushing former CU fullback Lawrence Vickers. The players collided, producing an enormous clack of helmets and shoulder pads absorbing force and weight.

Then came the part Walters loves best. The "Oooooooooons" from his defensive teammates, followed by slaps on the helmet and even an acknowledgment from Vickers himself — and Vickers was only one of the toughest guys on the team.

"From there everybody was like, 'Man, you can hit.' It felt like an accomplishment," Walters said.

And so the kid who came to Colorado in 2004 as a life-long quarterback was finally sold on his position switch to safety. He was smitten with each opportunity to hurl himself at an offensive player — be it a teammate or an opponent — and hope when the air cleared he'd be living that congratulatory moment all over again.

Walters has become the most feared member of the CU defense — with a tip of the cap to linebackers Jordon Dizon and Michael Sipili as well — because he likes to make his victims see stars. The problem is, he's also been seeing them a little too often. While Walters can hit, he has also developed into one of the smartest players on the defense. Coaches are relying on him to be a guide to his teammates, a coach on the field. That can't happen if he's giving himself concussions or neck and shoulder stingers as he did on several occasions last year.

"First of all, he's a very smart guy by nature, and then he works at it," secondary coach Greg Brown said. "He's always in there on the film. In the offseason he'll run some meetings for us since the coaches are not allowed to be there.

"He'll get the players together on his own and say, 'Hey, let's meet.' And he'll teach 'em. He's a guy you can see one day down the road easily being a coach."

Walters, the son of former CU quarterback Marc Walters, finished tied with three other players with the fifth-most tackles on the team at 57 last season. He played in 11 of 12 games with 10 starts, but was on the field for fewer plays (553) than seven other players.

He made the most of his opportunities with two interceptions in one game against Texas Tech—earning the Big 12 Conference defensive player of the week award—and snatching a fumble and

returning 95 yards for a touchdown against Kansas.

His goal this season is to stay on the field as much as possible, which means avoiding injury. And that means he's going to have to pick his spots when it comes to trying to knock someone's block off.

Walters said he will probably become a better player as well if he focuses on making good solid tackles more often instead of going for the "Oooooh." He admits he has missed tackles in the past in pursuit of his guilty pleasure. He said he loves hitting people hard because he knows he won't get in trouble for it on the football field.

"When I switched over to safety, that's what I wanted to be known as, you know, a dude that comes downhill," Walters said. "All the great safeties that ever played were guys that came downhill."

Coaches hope Walters can stay healthy this year not just because he's a heady player and a leader but because there isn't any depth behind him at free safety. It's likely that if Walters was injured again this season, coaches would turn first to whoever loses the battle for the starting strong safety job between Lionel Harris and D.J. Dykes. The two players behind Walters on the depth chart are true freshmen Anthony Wright and Anthony Perkins.

"I have a different mind-set right now," Walters said. "I feel great right now and every day I tell myself I feel great. I just think I'm going to feel great every day, so I do feel great every day."

Despite growing up playing under center and trying to avoid getting hit, Walters said he always appreciated good safeties. One of his favorites was former Denver Bronco Steve Atwater. These days he likes Troy Polamalu, Bob Sanders, Brian Dawkins and Rodney Harrison.

All of those guys come downhill. They make opponents think about the repercussions of taking them on. Walters loves picking himself off the ground looking into an opponent's eyes and knowing he has their respect.

"You just can't care about how you feel after the hit," he said. "It's sort of like a reckless abandon out there. I figure if I hit the dude harder than he hits me, he's going to hurt more than I am.

"You've got to love the 'Oooohs' from the crowd after the bit hit. It fires you up. Every chance I get I try to get a de-cleater out there."

Notable

The Buffs' third and final scrimmage of the preseason Friday focused on specific situations and lasted just over an hour. The team ran 72 plays and coach Dan Hawkins did not speak afterward because of a previous commitment. ... Linebacker Brad Jones missed Friday's scrimmage while having some dental work done. ... Injured true freshman wide receiver Josh Smith was back on the sidelines for the scrimmage in shorts and a jersey. Smith, who suffered a bruised kidney in the second scrimmage of training camp Aug. 18, is expected to miss at least the season opener as he recovers. Smith did not speak with reporters.



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Hawkins does away with Buffs' chaplain, retains spiritual link

By John Aguilar Saturday, August 25, 2007

Buffs players will have to work a little harder to communicate with the Lord this football season.

For the first time in years, the University of Colorado football team does not have a chaplain — at least not officially.

When former Buffs player Mike Spivey left as the team's chaplain at the end of last season, coach Dan Hawkins didn't seek a replacement for him.

It's not that Hawkins — a Catholic — isn't spiritually minded, but the second-year CU coach said he simply didn't see a need for a full-time chaplain this season."I think it's very important, but I also think there are different avenues for that, different places for that and different times for that," Hawkins said. "We want to make it available to those who want it, but don't want to make anyone do anything they don't want to do."

Instead, the coach is allowing Chip Simmons, a chaplain with the Fellowship of Christian Athletes, to have a limited presence with the team.

But don't call Simmons the Buffs' chaplain, Hawkins said.

He won't travel with the Buffs like Spivey did and he won't hold prayer groups or worship activities in the locker room, the coach said.

Hawkins also emphasized that Simmons, a chaplain with the Colorado School of Mines and Colorado Crush football teams, is not paid by the university.

A spokeswoman for the Fellowship of Christian Athletes, which provides chaplains to athletic teams at private and public universities and colleges throughout the country, confirmed that Simmons' salary comes from the organization.

Simmons referred all questions to Hawkins.

"He's just around — more than anything else, he's a football fan kind of guy," Hawkins said.

However, Simmons will still hold services for the players at Broomfield's Omni Interlocken Hotel, where the team spends the night before home games. Hawkins said the services are strictly "voluntary" for those players who want to attend.

"I feel like there is no problem with that," junior wide receiver Patrick Williams said. "I'm a really spiritual person. I always connect what I do on the field with my faith. You see me pray every day when I get off the field."

Church and state

Yet Simmons' unofficial status with the team is still too much for William Corn, a retired public accountant and longtime Boulder resident, who said there should be no official ties whatsoever to religion on a public university football team.

He faxed two letters to Hawkins this summer asking that the Buffs do away with its chaplain program, claiming it violates the Constitution's separation of church and state.

Corn said simply changing the job title and removing a few responsibilities from the post doesn't alter the fact that the team is choosing to retain a connection to a Christian religious figure.

"These guys who want to bring religion in, it's a scandal," Corn said. "You cannot have religion in a public institution. Whose religion should you have?"

The issue over team chaplains at public universities came to a head this past spring in Ames, Iowa.

More than 130 members of the faculty and staff at Iowa State University signed a petition against appointing a chaplain to the school's football team — even if he or she was paid with private funds.

Last month, ISU's administration conceded somewhat on the issue by naming a Texas pastor as the football team's non-denominational "life-skills assistant."

Judd Golden, chairman of the Boulder County chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union, said public universities have to be careful when drawing religious leaders into school programs.

"The idea that football has some transcendental need for spiritual guidance that is different than what other students at the university need is constitutionally flawed," Golden said. "Football should be treated no differently than an English class."

He said giving a Christian spiritual figure special access to the players runs the risk of excluding nonbelievers or players of other faiths.

"When you're trying to recruit Jewish athletes, Muslim athletes, atheist athletes, do they feel that this is their place?" Golden asked. "This is a state school, this is not Brigham Young University."

Ongoing issue

CU has faced criticism in the past when former men's basketball coach Ricardo Patton and former football coach Bill McCartney were accused of promoting Christianity among players.

Ariel Solomon, a former CU offensive tackle who went on to play for the Pittsburgh Steelers and Minnesota Vikings, said he remembers open displays of Christian worship among his teammates in the late 1980s under McCartney's leadership.

"I didn't know what football had to do with religion," said Solomon, who is Jewish. "If it was up to me,

people would go outside of the football program to get those sorts of services."

However, Solomon said neither players nor coaches forced their religion upon him and he still felt very much a part of the team.

Hawkins said that's all he's trying to do — provide an environment for his players where they can still get religious inspiration without excluding anybody that doesn't need or want such inspiration.

"It's more about implementing a program which I was comfortable with," said Hawkins, whose football team at Boise State, where he coached for five years before coming to CU last year, was without a chaplain.

The coach said he is completely open to giving an imam, rabbi or Buddhist monk the same kind of access to the team that Simmons has if his players asked for it.

Camera Sports Writer Kyle Ringo contributed to this report.

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Woelk: CU season could hinge on these seven players

By Neill Woelk Saturday, August 25, 2007

Safe to say, the Colorado Buffaloes are not a team of superstars. There are no All-Americans simply waiting to be anointed; no Heisman candidates in waiting — at least not this year.

That's not to say there aren't a handful of players from whom top-shelf production will be expected rather than hoped for.

For instance, the only surprise from Jordon Dizon will be if the senior linebacker *doesn't* play well. Ditto for cornerback Terrence Wheatley, defensive tackle George Hypolite and offensive tackle Tyler Polumbus. You could even throw CU's tight ends as a group into that bunch.

Those player are, in a sense, the cornerstones on which the Buffs will lean this year.

But then comes that group of players who have the ability to become difference-makers — but for a variety of reasons, have yet to reach that level.

These are the players upon whose shoulders a large portion of the Buffs' hopes rest. If these players achieve their full potential, if they consistently produce up to their abilities, the Buffs will have a successful season. If not ...So, at the risk of administering a little extra pressure from the beginning, here's our list of Buffs that must get past the level of "hoping to play well" and into the category of "you can count on it."

TB Hugh Charles — He's a senior, he's been the Buffs' leading rusher the last two seasons, and he's shown flashes of being the big-time back Buff fans have yearned for.

But he's also being pushed oh-so-hard by redshirt freshman Demetrius Sumler. If Charles can step up and take firm control of the position, it will be great sign for a position desperate for some stability and consistent production.

QB Cody Hawkins — Here's the opposite of Charles — a redshirt freshman who's never played a down of college ball. But the potential is there, both physically and mentally, and that intangible that comes with being a natural-born winner makes it even more tantalizing.

Hawkins doesn't have to win games by himself. But remember this — with any kind of consistent quarterback play a year ago, the Buffs win three, maybe four, more games (Montana State, Colorado State, Georgia and Baylor).

Consistency, game management and good decisions here will go a long way in making the difference in those close ones.

DE Maurice Lucas — One of the more highly recruited players to choose CU in recent years, Lucas arrived on campus with big-time credentials.

He has yet to live up to the billing.

It's imperative that the Buffs find a way to fill the 11½-sack hole created by the departure of Abraham Wright, who had virtually half of CU's sacks over the entire season.

Lucas would be a heck of a place to start.

C Daniel Sanders — Sanders started 11 games at guard last year, but now takes over as what amounts to the quarterback of the offensive line. He'll make the calls up front, direct traffic in the trenches and be depended upon to be a steadying influence on a line that will likely have a handful of freshmen getting significant playing time.

"For a young guy, he has the most knowledge of our offense," said O-line coach Jeff Grimes. "He and Tyler (Polumbus) are the two guys that really have to step up."

FS Ryan Walters — It's a little unfair to put Walters on this list because when he's healthy, he's everything a coach could want at safety: big hitter, savvy player and a guy who knows only one speed.

But if he's going to be the every-game, every-down contributor he can be, he has to stay healthy. If he manages to have a little luck in that department, he'll have a very, very good season.

LB Brad Jones — Another guy with all the physical tools necessary to become a top-notch Big 12 player. Jones started 11 games for the Buffs last year, and as linebackers coach Brian Cabral noted, "He probably made as many mistakes as plays — but that's something he can build off of this year."

Good linebackers are a constant at CU. As long as Cabral has been coaching the position, it's been a strength, with Dizon just the latest in a long list of very good 'backers.

Jones has a chance to be the next.

"This should be his breakout year," Cabral said. "I predict he'll take the next step up."

K Kevin Eberhart — This might be the most unenviable position on the team right now. Eberhart is following in the footsteps of Mason Crosby — an All-American, fan favorite and virtual legend among CU fans.

Nobody expects Eberhart to match his predecessor in leg strength and distance. But he has to make up for it in the accuracy department.

On a team with little margin for error, those mid-range field goals can't become a dicey proposition.



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Longmont, Colorado Saturday, August 25, 2007



Publish Date: 8/25/2007

Buffs filling in the blanks

By Patrick Ridgell
The Daily Times-Call

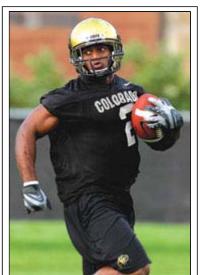
BOULDER — The University of Colorado held its third and final scrimmage of camp Friday.

It lasted an hour, included 72 plays and stressed specific situations coaches wanted to address before all work points toward beating Colorado State next Saturday. Camp is over.

Three weeks ago, we posed 10 questions that merited close attention while the Buffs prepared for 2007.

Answers won't be irrefutable until November. But, for now, here's what unfolded over the past three weeks.

1. Who are the playmakers?



CU will look to starting tailback Hugh Charles for some big gains this fall. Times-Call/Joshua Buck

When freshman receiver Josh Smith bruised a kidney last weekend and put his season in doubt, the list of playmakers shrunk by one very electrifying player.

Head coach Dan Hawkins said Smith might return by Sept. 15, when the Buffs play Florida State. The Buffs will have to rely on others, though, and unlike a year ago, candidates abound.

Hugh Charles has heeded the words of running back coach Darian Hagan and is running hard. Hagan said Demetrius Sumler is playing well enough to receive as many carries as Charles.

Receiver Patrick Williams had a fine camp, benefiting from an adjustment in catching technique implemented by position coach Eric Kiesau. Redshirt freshman Scotty McKnight made a fast recovery from a broken ankle and figures to play a lot as well. Freshmen Kendrick Celestine and Markques Simas earned spots in the mix.

Four tight ends will contribute.

Bernard Jackson missed much of camp to focus on school. His status remains uncertain.

What's important to note is 19 receivers caught passes during CU's second scrimmage. While it's unclear who'll be the main playmakers, it appears there'll be someone to fill that role in 2007.

2. Who'll be the quarterback?

Cody Hawkins. The redshirt freshman beat Nick Nelson for the starting nod because, according to offensive coordinator Mark Helfrich, of his consistency, his command of the scheme and his ability to make the routine plays.

For an offense that appeared limited in 2006, that final reason can't be overlooked.

3. How will the pass defense improve?

After allowing a 66.9 completion percentage, it figures to improve because it might be difficult to get much worse.

Time ultimately will tell, but coaches and players emphasized how they have better knowledge of the scheme. They say that'll spur improvement.

"It was like for the first six games, we were just out there, and we didn't know anything," cornerback Terrence Wheatley said about 2006.

4. How will the Buffs replace Abe Wright?

Wright led the Big 12 in sacks last year and gave the pass defense the luxury of applying pressure without blitzing. But Hawkins said this defensive line has a chance to be good. Starting end Alonzo Barrett has something bigger in mind.

"I believe in our starting four. I'd put them against any other line in the country," Barrett said.

Barrett based that belief on the toughness he sees. He earned praise when he got the defensive line to work late in recent days when practice didn't go well.

Like the pass defense, how much pressure CU can get is to be determined. But the front four figures to be a strength.

5. Is there enough depth?

No. True freshmen comprise the offensive line's entire second string. Michael Sipili's suspension and Marcus Burton's ineligibility leave coach linebacker Brian Cabral with three walk-ons filling out his depth chart.

"I've never been this thin," Cabral said.

Other CU assistants might be able to say the same thing.

6. Which freshmen are ready?

Smith was. Until his debut, he'll be missed.

Simas and Celestine look like they might contribute.

In the defensive secondary, Anthony Wright and Anthony Perkins have earned praise. On the offensive line, Mike Iltis, Kai Maiava, Sione Tau, Matthew Bahr and Ryan Miller are in the mix.

Freshmen are all over the two-deep depth chart. For all of them, the challenging transition to college football continues.

"We don't really watch a lot of film in high school, and here, film is your best friend," Miller said.

7. How much will CU miss Mason Crosby?

Kevin Eberhart hasn't kicked much the past four seasons, so how the fifth-year senior handles game pressure is also to be determined.

Tyler Cope handled most of the kickoffs in the second scrimmage.

- 8. What'll happen in Michael Sipili's absence?
- R.J. Brown will happen.

The junior walk-on and special teams captain will start in Sipili's place, and Cabral said Brown had a great camp. Hawkins said Brown asked why he was given a scholarship, and Hawkins told him he possessed the work ethic and attitude any coach seeks.

Sipili's return once his legal matters are resolved will strengthen CU's run defense.

9. Are the Buffs tough enough?

After Smith hurt his kidney, he continued to play. And everyone noticed.

Coaches also liked the willingness to work late and the the maturity to avoid the big fights that broke out in spring ball.

Still, the overall tone will be set by the offensive line, which is a challenge coach Jeff Grimes relishes.

"First and foremost, your offensive line is going to determine the toughness of your offense, because those other guys will follow the guys up front," Grimes said Friday.

"You can't expect the little skinny guys wearing sweat bands and biceps bands and all of that stuff to be the ones leading the charge into battle. It starts with us."

10. What will Dan Hawkins be like?

He has, in some ways, been the same coach Hawk, spouting life philosophy and seeking good times, like when he had his offensive and defensive linemen square off in 7-on-7 passing drills late one afternoon. He's listened to his players' request for rest and let them take an afternoon off to engage in paint ball battles.

He's also been eager to voice his displeasure, like when he "got his horns out" with the offense Thursday because its play was far from perfect.

Hawkins has a young team, and he knows young teams take their lumps.

"They have to take a very aggressive approach to learning," he said.

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Running game will be a simple matter

Assistant coach puts emphasis on quality of plays

By B.G. Brooks, Rocky Mountain News August 25, 2007

BOULDER - Given the only real offense the University of Colorado could manage last season was by running, Jeff Grimes' plan to redo some of what the Buffaloes were doing with their legs might have seemed ill-advised.

Don't believe it.

Grimes, hired in late February as CU's running game coordinator/offensive line coach, has not done as much wholesale revision as simplification.

While trying to bump up the Buffs' 172.9 rushing yards a game in 2006 (fifth in the Big 12 Conference, 22nd nationally), Grimes has had to factor in what his returning players might have absorbed in only one season under their previous coach (Chris Strausser) as well as having more than half his scholarship players only a year removed from high school.

Not that any of his troops were incapable of keeping pace, but there might not have been a more appropriate time to pare plays, then emphasize running a handful of them efficiently rather than a bushel full badly.



Cliff Grassmick © Boulder Daily Camera

Hugh Charles (2) might have Demetrius Sumler (8) looking over his shoulder in the battle for starting tailback.

"If they feel like, 'Man, we've got all these different plays,' it adds up on them - especially the young guys," said Grimes, Brigham Young's offensive line coach for the past three seasons.

"I'm trying to make it sound like it's as little as possible . . . and make it look like it's more than it really is."

It is the offensive equivalent of smoke and mirrors: employ a variety of personnel groups, formations, shifts and motions.

Keep the defense guessing while eliminating the guesswork from your own game plan.

"We want to present as many looks as we can to a defense, yet run as few plays as possible so we can get good at doing (them)," Grimes said. "So we've really got it narrowed down to basic concepts. What we're trying to do is help those concepts carry through to a number of different schemes."

Senior tackles Edwin Harrison and Tyler Polumbus said the conceptual approach appears to be working. The Buffs won't have to wait much longer to see if it works against someone else; they open a week from today against Colorado State at Invesco Field at Mile High (10 a.m., FSN Rocky Mountain).

"As long as we know the concepts - the main goal of each play, where the ball is supposed to go and what's happening on the play - then we pretty much know how to run it against any defense," Harrison said.

Added Polumbus: "If you're not good at something, you're not good at anything. So we're definitely going to become good at certain things and work other plays off of that."

Grimes' approach might have aided the ascent of redshirt freshman tailback Demetrius Sumler, who said the conceptual work "has made things simpler and easier to understand. If you can just read specific (defenders), you're not running around like a chicken with its head cut off."

Meanwhile, Grimes has narrowed his list of which players likely will be used in the opener. Harrison and Polumbus are solid at tackle, with Daniel Sanders set at center. The greenest position is guard, where Devin Head and Wes Palazzi count one start between them.

While Grimes still is unsure about freshman guard Ryan Miller's role, he seems certain of Kai Maiava playing, mainly because Maiava can work at guard or center and has "grasped the offense unbelievably well for a true freshman," Grimes said. "Plus, he's tough and confident; he doesn't act like a freshman."

The second line is composed entirely of true freshmen, any or all of whom could redshirt, Grimes said.

Miller, though, wants to play. His weight has dropped from 335 in July to 308, and he says his pass- and run-blocking from a two-point stance have improved.

"My mind-set right now is, there's nothing stopping me I've just got to keep going 100 miles an hour in practice, keep getting help from the older guys," he said. "I definitely think I've got a chance to make an impact in that game. But the only person that's limiting that right now is myself."

ETC.: As a condition of allowing the media to watch the final camp scrimmage Friday, CU prohibited reporting on the situational work, which consisted of 72 plays and lasted an hour. Heavy contact work won't resume until Tuesday. . . . If offensive captain **Bernard Jackson** is ineligible, the most likely stand-in is Polumbus. Coach **Dan Hawkins** said Polumbus has been leading pre-practice warm--ups in Jackson's absence.

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college football

Buffs turn focus to Rams

By Adrian Dater Denver Post Staff Writer

Article Last Updated: 08/24/2007 01:30:56 PM MDT

Boulder — After a one-hour, 72-play scrimmage Friday morning, Colorado assistant football coach Jeff Grimes said only one thought should now occupy the minds of his Buffs players:

"We've got to have all our attention focused on beating Colorado State next Saturday," Grimes said.

With coach Dan Hawkins absent from the scrimmage for a luncheon, Grimes gave his thoughts on the team's final scrimmage, and where things stand with the team.

"I would say, right now, it appears that we're on track to be as tough as I'd like our group to be. We're not there yet, but we're making progress," Grimes said. "I think we made excellent progress the first two, two-and-a-half weeks, and we're at the point right now where we've got to kind of push them through this phase, where you kind of start lagging. Guys get tired of hitting each other."

One player the Buffs likely won't have against the Rams is last year's starting quarterback, Bernard Jackson. Coach Dan Hawkins, who was not at Friday's scrimmage, said Thursday he does not expect Jackson to play against the Rams.

Jackson, who is the offensive team captain, is

College Football

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waiting to get his final grades to see if he will be academically eligible for the fall season. He has missed a lot of preseason camp because of family and academic obligations.

Grimes said the play of the offensive line could largely determine the Buffs' success this season — and that there is work to do still in that area.

"Your offensive line is going to determine the toughness of your offense," he said. "Those other guys will follow the guys up front. You can't expect the little skinny guys wearing sweat bands and bicep bands to be leading the charge into battle. Ultimately, I think our team will only be as tough as

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our offensive line, because the defense will only be tough if they're used to somebody hitting them in the mouth every day."	
On Thursday, Hawkins was asked how he saw the team's progression:	
"We're getting close," he said. "The next week, they'll be a little more rested, a little more focused. I'm one of those guys that thinks you're never quite there. We could be doing awesome, and I'll think we're not quite there. But I think we're headed in the right direction."	
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