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Bufs' D-line rock-solid

CU's rugged defensive front making strides, big plays

By Chris Dempsey
The Denver Post

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CU's defensive linemen, from left, Maurice Lucas, George Hypolite, Brandon Nicolas, Jason Brace and Marquez Herrod, aim for the foe's QB. (Karl Gehring, The Denver Post)

Colorado wanted some of that. The defensive line had its moments in recent years but, by and large, was inconsistent. A line that could pressure the quarterback was near the top of CU coaches' wish lists this season. An encouraging start against Colorado State last week has given the coaches hope that that wish will come true. Week 1: Four sacks, three quarterback hurries.

"Those guys played well," CU defensive line coach Romeo Bandison said. "We, across the board, were pretty consistent, made some

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BOULDER — There isn't a defensive coach who doesn't extol the value of his line getting pressure on the quarterback. So much more can be done in coverage if the front four is taking care of business in an opponent's backfield.

plays."

Brandon Nicolas and Marquez Herrod each had 1 1/2 sacks, and Jason Brace and Taj Kaynor recorded a half-sack apiece. Kaynor also added a quarterback

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hurry, while George Hypolite, who gave the unit "a B+" for their effort, had two.

It was a solid start for a unit that had only 12 sacks from linemen last season. These Bufs already have four.

"Pass rush, pass rush, pass rush," Brace said. "Get to the ball. Hit that quarterback as many times as you can."

Said Hypolite: "The No. 1 thing is probably stop the run. But second to that, and probably 1A, is to put pressure on the quarterback because, hey, in this league, the guys we play against can pick you apart. So, you can't let them sit back there for three or four seconds and have our DBs cover guys five, six seconds. There's not too many DBs in the country who can, so you've got to put pressure on them."

In fact, if passes are completed against Colorado's secondary, the first finger of blame is pointed at the defensive line.

"We set a time limit on ourselves and say, 'Hey, you've got this much time to get to the quarterback,' " Bandison said. "If it takes any longer, and they complete a ball, that's on the front. We have set standards, and we have to achieve those every rep."

Eastern Washington, CU's opponent Saturday, figures to test Colorado's ability to rush the quarterback. The Eagles passed the ball 63 times in a 49-24 loss at Texas Tech last Saturday, against just 22 rushes.

Conventional wisdom said EWU's early 21-point deficit contributed to a near complete abandonment of the run, but nevertheless, Colorado is prepping for an aerial assault.

"They completed some balls and scored some

points," Bandison said. "We're not taking these guys lightly. They moved the ball well on Texas Tech. It was pretty impressive to me; I don't care what league they're in. They made some things happen. We've got to be solid and play well."

Three returning starters have helped. Hypolite, Maurice Lucas and Nicolas are seniors. Brace, a junior, was moved from the interior line to a defensive end slot, dropped 20 pounds and said he feels as comfortable as he has at any point in his career at Colorado.

"It's gone really well," Brace said. "I don't have to gain weight or all that, so I like it. I feel like I've gotten a lot faster since last year. I think I'm more naturally a defensive end."

Brace did not record a tackle last season but had two against Colorado State. He is the newest part of a line that boasts better depth with Herrod and Kaynor and the up-and-coming Curtis Cunningham, a freshman from Columbine High School.

"You got three guys that played a lot, so we kind of know what we can expect from us," Hypolite said. "Everybody that we rolled in had a good game, did some good things. So I think that's very encouraging."

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The Lowdown

By Tom Kensler, The Denver Post

COLORADO (1-0)

Player to watch: WR Josh Smith.

His 93-yard kickoff return for a touchdown against

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CSU was his first score in college, and the sophomore speedster is eager to finally score on a reception. After catching just one pass for 15 yards in the opener, Smith could be Cody Hawkins' go-to target against Eastern Washington.

Key for the Buffs: Shake the Eagles.

CU can't allow the EWU to "hang around," as happened last week at Texas Tech when EWU pulled to within 11 points of the Red Raiders in the third quarter. CU juniors and seniors who witnessed the Buffs' 19-10 loss to Montana State in the 2006 opener know the horrors that can occur when coming out flat against an underdog with something to prove.

EASTERN WASHINGTON (0-1)

Player to watch: QB Matt Nichols.

The junior (6-feet-2, 220 pounds) has NFL aspirations after earning 2007 Big Sky Conference offensive MVP honors with 3,744 yards passing and 34 touchdowns, with just nine interceptions.

Key for the Eagles: Nonstop offense.

Eastern Washington relies on its offense and has enough firepower to make it a shootout. Nichols attempted 61 passes and threw for 335 yards against Texas Tech. Star wideout Aaron Boyce (85 catches in 2007) and running threat Dale Morris (930 yards, 12 touchdowns) will try to help keep CU's defense guessing.

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cu football

'Speedy' Stuart hot on trail

By Tom Kensler
The Denver Post

Article Last Updated: 09/05/2008 01:40:38 AM MDT

BOULDER — Darrell Scott, on the verge of already attaining folk hero status among Colorado fans, wasn't the only freshman tailback to make a successful debut for the Buffaloes.

Rodney "Speedy" Stewart, a 5-foot-6, 175-pound darter from Columbus, Ohio, lived up to his nickname by averaging a team-best 9.5 yards on four carries in the 38-17 victory over Colorado State. Stewart had the Buffs' longest run from scrimmage (17 yards) but did lose a fumble in the second quarter.

Coaches say Stewart's skill set can be utilized in a variety of ways. Look for the speedster to get more touches Saturday against Eastern Washington.

"You saw what Rodney can do, so we need to be smart about using him," CU coach Dan Hawkins said. "He

excites people. He will continue to get better. We just need him to hang onto the rock. Once he does that, he'll explode."

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Game-time decision. Yes, that was Ralphie IV that ran onto Invesco Field on Sunday. For the first time, CU has two live buffalo mascots.

The newbie, Ralphie V (23 months old), was unveiled at the spring game. Ralphie IV (11 years old) has not retired. CU officials said it will be a "game-time decision" as to which Raphie will be used for each home game.

Footnotes. Hawkins said he expects all true freshmen who did not play against CSU will remain as redshirts for the season, barring a rash of injuries at certain positions. CU players are excited to play on Folsom Field's new natural turf for the first time. The sod, from a turf farm near Greeley, was installed in July and not painted until this week.

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"We were out there for (team) pictures; it's nice," Hawkins said. "I mean, it's really nice. It's a flat, firm, fast track." CU cornerback Jimmy Smith (back) is not expected to play Saturday. Last year's Eastern Washington head coach, Paul Wulff, now heads the Washington State program. EWU set 10 school records on offense in 2007.

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Longmont, Colorado
Friday, September 05,
2008

TIMES-CALL

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Making most of last chance

Now a senior, Buffs' McKay is a new-look cornerback

By Patrick Ridgell

Longmont Times-Call

BOULDER — The changes Gardner McKay have made feature shifts in stature, attitude and confidence. Colorado coaches say they've combined to make McKay a different player.

This is McKay's senior season at CU, and if that fact wasn't enough to spark major urgency in the cornerback, little chats he had with Ashley Ambrose starting last spring completed the job. Ambrose is CU's defensive technical intern and a former All-Pro NFL cornerback who works closely with the Buffs' defensive backs.

Ambrose talked. McKay listened.

"I always tell him you don't get that many opportunities," Ambrose said. "This is his last year, and I told him you don't want to go out not being able to tackle and regretting that you didn't play football like you're capable of playing football.

"He's really buying into it, because he realizes to be successful and play and finish out on a high note, he has to go out and make tackles and do whatever to get on the field.

"Our main thing is when we get into the games, a lot of teams will make him tackle. ... That's why you have to have more confidence in yourself. You can't worry about the weight; you just have to get him down."

McKay made six tackles Sunday in CU's opener. That total upped his career numbers from 25 to 31 tackles. He said competition for playing time is forcing him to be more aggressive, and he fully understands what to do when he's on the field.

Defensive coordinator Ron Collins said McKay is performing better than ever.

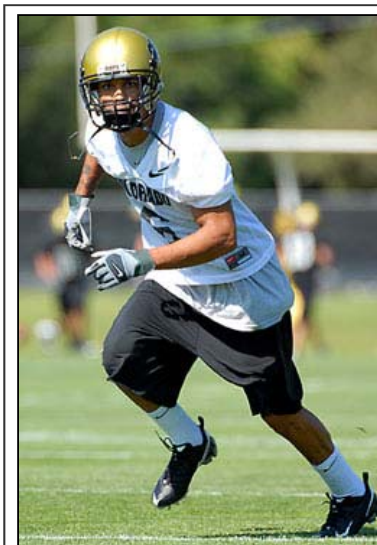
McKay said he never lifted weights in high school, where speed was the only factor that mattered in his game. Upon arriving in Boulder, the thought of pumping iron inspired disdainful groans.

He credits strength coach Jeff Pitman, calling his arrival a "blessing" and adding, "I wish he was here from the beginning."

McKay remains slender, but at least now he grins when he reveals his weight.

"One-seventy," he said this week. "I was 149 when I got here.

"Not just my mindset on the field — my mindset in the weight room has changed, too."



Colorado cornerback Gardner McKay is hoping to make the most of his senior season this fall. **Kira Horvath/Times-Call file**

Injury problems slowed McKay over the past three years, and he was stuck behind some good cornerbacks in Terrence Wheatley and Ben Burney, both of whom played physical football when necessary. Of course, Wheatley and Burney — both bigger than McKay — also got pretty beat up in 2007. Burney, in fact, will sit out this season after undergoing several offseason surgeries to repair the damage.

Their plights don't really matter to McKay, though.

He said he heeds the advice of Ambrose and cornerback coach Greg Brown, both of whom tell him he'd better hit people.

"You have to," McKay said. "It's a must. Every game, they come to me and say, 'You can't miss any tackles.'"

Ambrose calls McKay "very skilled," a player who has realized that the key to good corner work is confidence and someone with enough confidence now to thrive — or at least to make tackles.

The question is: Will McKay hold up? Burney and Wheatley fought through broken bones and other injuries last year playing the style coaches demand. Now McKay is, too.

The answer will come in the weeks to follow.

"If I was an offensive coordinator and I want to run the ball and I see someone who's not physical, that's who I'm going to isolate on," Ambrose said. "That's just how it is. I told him he has to be ready for that."

McKay said: "You just have to go out there every play and play as aggressive as you can."

Patrick Ridgell can be reached at pridgell@times-call.com.



CU's defense earns rave reviews vs. CSU

By B.G. Brooks

Thursday, September 4, 2008

A "complete" defensive effort might have resulted in a shutout, but at game's end Sunday night, the scoreboard at Invesco Field at Mile High showed Colorado State with 17 points.

Yet given the game his secondary played in the University of Colorado's 38-17 win, position coach Greg Brown was *almost* willing to attach "complete" to the effort. His veteran players couldn't remember too many times in the recent past when Brown reviewed a game tape and was all smiles afterward.

From the play of new cornerbacks Gardner McKay and Cha'pelle Brown, to that of veteran safeties Ryan Walters and D.J. Dykes, to Jalil Brown's role at nickel back, the secondary was a primary reason for CU's opening- night success.

And, Brown noted, please don't forget the linebackers: "Everybody in the back end functioned well - they were mostly in the right place all the time. That guy (CSU quarterback Billy Farris) could throw the ball. . . . It could have been a much closer game if our entire defense hadn't responded."

Out of 63 defensive plays, Brown's grade sheets for the secondary "showed about four minuses" for mental errors or being out of position, according to Dykes.

"We're really trying to limit the mental errors. . . . With me and Ryan communicating with the corners, we have a good feel of what's going on," Dykes said. "We're able to control it - our technique and our mental errors. We're making sure we get that right."

Most eyes were trained on Mc- Kay and Cha'pelle Brown, the newbies who replaced 2007 starters Terrence Wheatley (graduated) and Ben Burney (injured). McKay, a senior, and Brown, a junior, each finished with six tackles, including one each for a loss.

Plus, they were good in coverage and, according to Greg Brown, "really ran to the ball - but the whole defense did."

McKay, who arrived at CU rail thin and now is by no means a hulk (he's 5-foot-11, 165 pounds), needed to answer ever-lingering questions about his run-support role. And Sunday night's performance was a start.

He said he proved to himself that, "I could play, I could make tackles, that I could go out there and be myself, do what I was taught to do. I had so much fun - the big crowd (69,619) was there, my parents were there."

Cha'pelle Brown, a muscular 5-7, 180-pounder, said he and McKay "have become like brothers. I saw

him grow (Sunday night). He's been waiting longer than me to play, to get a chance to start. He grew up a lot and is ready to take on that challenge of being a starter."

But Greg Brown says growth also was evident in Cha'pelle's play.

"He's a gym rat," the coach said. "Any free time he has, he's watching tape, working out or shooting basketball. Don't let his size fool you - he's fearless."

CU's secondary, which McKay says has dubbed itself the "Dawg Pound," faces a different kind of test Saturday against Eastern Washington, which threw 63 passes for 335 yards in last week's 49-24 loss at No. 12 Texas Tech.

The Buffaloes will spend most of the game in nickel (five defensive backs) and dime (six) packages.

Greg Brown's view of the Eagles: "It's ironic they opened with (Texas Tech) because that's who they look like. They favor a wide- open throwing game. It's going to be quite the workload for us."

The Buffaloes generated a much-needed pass rush against CSU, sacking Farris five times. CU defensive tackle George Hypolite needs no reminder of how important that type of pressure will be in games to come.

"With our kind of scheme and system, sometimes we put our corners and safeties on an island," Hypolite said. "And when you leave a guy on an island, you don't want to leave him there for 10, nine, eight seven, seconds. . . . You don't want the quarterback to be able to sit back there.

"Putting pressure on the quarterback is very important for our defense because of the things we like to do (schematically)."

For the "Dawg Pound," a good game, a good start, has been filed away.

Referencing it too much isn't wise, Cha'pelle Brown said: "We can't accept what we did last week - we've got to try to do that and improve on it every week. We were excited about how the film turned out, too. But we know it could change week to week. We've got to do what we need to do to make sure coach enjoys watching the film next week."

Next: Eagle in flight

Eastern Washington junior quarterback Matt Nichols set five school passing records in 2007. And he started 2008 appearing set to break even more of the Eagles' marks. His seven career 300-plus passing games:

Yards	Com.	Att.	TD	Opponent	Date
451	37	59	2	Montana	Oct. 6, 2007
434	34	44	2	McNeese State	Nov. 24, 2007
363	19	30	2	Portland State	Sept. 29, 2007
335	36	61	1	Texas Tech	Aug. 30, 2008
329	21	42	1	Sacramento State	Sept. 30, 2006

328	20	29	3	Sacramento State	Oct. 27, 2007
316	17	22	5	Northern Arizona	Nov. 10, 2007

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CU report: Thinking big (numbers)

By B.G. Brooks

Thursday, September 4, 2008

BOULDER — The Buffaloes' passing game produced 214 yards and one touchdown in the opening win against CSU, but those stats aren't close to what passing game coordinator/receivers coach **Eric Kiesau** has in mind.

To compete (and win) in the Big 12 Conference, Kiesau wants to push that passing yardage "closer to 350, just because that's where you have to be in this conference. And about 150 to 200 (yards) running the ball - which is a lot of offense, but that's what this conference is."

Kiesau believes his unit played fairly well for an opener, grading out decently in "assignments, alignments and effort. I think we kind of quietly had our small impact on the game."

But beginning Saturday against Eastern Washington (1:30 p.m., Folsom Field, no television), he said he hopes to see some flash interspersed with the fundamentals: "After the game, we talked about trying to push our level of play a little bit higher - things like the big exciting block, the diving catch that gets people out of their seats . . . something out of the ordinary to push ourselves to the next level."

When the time is right, he also wants more of a vertical passing game to surface. Against the Rams, "We could have taken a couple more vertical shots . . . but again, that's something you don't want to force," he said. "That time will come."

Trickle, trickle

Running game coordinator/offensive line coach **Jeff Grimes** is nowhere near the depth crisis he faced two years ago, but he admits a slow decline in his offensive line numbers is perplexing, saying, "We're kind of on the border; it's a little concern."

He's battling the issue by continuing to cross-train his players, working them at various line spots in practice and, on tests, having each player answer questions on all positions.

"What I've told them is everybody has to be willing to elevate your level of play if we have guys that are down, whether it be for suspension or injury," he said. "The overall group has got to do a little bit more so we continue to get better."

Grimes lost **Mike Iltis** to a knee injury in camp and **Ethan Adkins** to an indefinite suspension this week. Also, starting left guard **Devin Head** was suspended for Saturday. Redshirt freshman **Blake Behrens** moves to the left side to replace Head and true freshman **Max Tuioti-Mariner** will make his first start at right guard.

Redshirt freshman **Shawn Daniels** can play either side and backup center **Keenan Stevens** also has been working at guard this week.

He said it

"I was actually trying to play a little bit of a cruel joke on (the media). . . . I was begging (offensive coordinator) **Mark Helfrich** to get our package out there with him in it so you would be like, 'He started!' "

Dan Hawkins, CU coach, on the first-game use of freshman tailback **Darrell Scott**.

No fuzz on this Peach

Eastern Washington senior defensive end **Greg Peach** is a candidate for the Buck Buchanan Award, presented annually to the top defensive player in the Football Championship Subdivision. Peach, a 6-foot-3, 255-pounder, was first-team All-Big Sky Conference last season after finishing with 63 tackles and 11 quarterback sacks, the fifth-best total in school history.

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Eagles have upset of Buffs in mind

QB Nichols believes team can improve on loss to Texas Tech

By Ryan Thorburn
Friday, September 5, 2008

Matt Nichols remembers the scores as if they just went by on the ticker.

Cal Poly 29, San Diego State 27 ... Appalachian State 34, Michigan 32 ... North Dakota State 27, Minnesota 21 ... And, of course, Montana State 19, Colorado 10, the only time a Football Championship Subdivision team has ever played at Folsom Field.

Make no mistake about it, Eastern Washington -- led by the reigning Big Sky player of the year in Nichols -- is making the trip to Boulder believing it can return home with an improbable victory.

"That was a big thing for the Big Sky Conference," Nichols said of Montana State spoiling Dan Hawkins' CU debut two years ago. "No matter who it is, you root for your own conference when they play up a level. But because of that game we don't think they will be overlooking us at all. And we don't think that they should be. We're going to be ready and so will they."

The Eagles, who are ranked 10th in latest FCS poll, were not quite ready for prime time last Saturday when they took the field against No. 12 Texas Tech in Lubbock. EWU fell behind 21-0 before taking a deep breath and outscoring the Red Raiders 17-7 in the second quarter.

Texas Tech led 35-24 after three quarters before punching in a couple of late touchdowns to make a 49-24 victory look a little more lopsided.

"We gave them some turnovers and dropped passes. The jitters got to a few people I guess and it ended up being a factor," Nichols said. "As soon as we settled down a little bit we were even with them rest of the game. ... In our opinion, we didn't play nearly as good a game as we could have. I had a couple bad throws and we probably had 10 dropped passes."

EWU is looking at Saturday's game as a re-do. Another chance to upset a Big 12 foe and make SportsCenter.

"We think we can play with these guys. We have the talent," Nichols said. "We feel like we have a national championship team here." Appalachian State went on to win the FCS title last season after making national headlines with the win at the Big House to open the campaign. The Mountaineers defeated EWU 38-35 in the quarterfinals of the playoffs.

Nichols finished his 2007 season ranked eighth in the FCS in passing efficiency rating (156.5), fifth in passing offense (288.0) and fifth in total offense (318.2). He passed for 3,744 yards, 34 touchdowns and nine interceptions as a sophomore after throwing 17 interceptions (equaling a school record) and only

eight touchdowns as a redshirt freshman.

The hiring of Beau Baldwin to replace Paul Wulff, who left to become head coach at Washington State, should actually improve Nichols' numbers during his third season running the Eagles' version of the spread offense. He recruited the standout signal caller and was his position coach when he entered the program.

Nichols notched his seventh 300-yard passing game in his 25-game career when he completed 36-of-61 passes for 335 yards and a touchdown against Texas Tech. His completions and attempts in that game both ranked as the second-most in school history.

"He can just keep getting better," Baldwin said at his weekly press conference. "There were times last year when there were things he could have done to spread the ball out even more, and that's something I want to see him do better this season."

Baldwin left EWU last season to become the head coach at his alma mater, Central Washington, where he was Jon Kitna's backup during his playing days. When Wulff left for Pullman the appeal of coaching a talented junior class led by Nichols was too much to resist.

"You never expect a freshman that struggles a little bit to come back and be player of the year in the Big Sky. But if you would have asked me going into last year if he had the talent to do that, I would have said yes," Baldwin said. "And obviously he proved that. ... I think he would trade 100 Big Sky MVP trophies for one Big Sky championship. That's his mindset."

The Eagles are hoping to improve on their 9-4 record in 2007 and advance deeper in the FCS playoffs this season. A victory over a team that plays in a BCS conference would obviously be an incredible momentum builder.

"When you look at the Big 12 Conference, it's teams like Texas Tech and Missouri with smaller, faster players who are doing well offensively. That's because they can spread you out," Nichols said. "We definitely think that's an advantage for us. We're just very confident in what we do on offense. ... Personally, I think we have six or seven guys on offense who could easily be playing on Division I teams. Guys from little high schools who just didn't get recruited."

Nichols isn't ready to predict that EWU is going to be the latest FCS team to end up on the right end of a shocking score. After all, as part of his preparation for Texas Tech he watched the film of CU's 31-26 victory in Lubbock last season.

"I feel they're as good as Texas Tech," Nichols said. "Just because they're not ranked 12th in nation it doesn't mean they're any less of a team. ... It's never fun starting off 0-2. At the same time, we grew a lot last week and we'll grow a lot this week no matter what happens. When we go back down to our level the game will be slowed down a little bit."



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