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CU is proud of its growing lineage and reputation as 'Lineman U'

By Clay Latimer, Rocky Mountain News
September 20, 2007

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. - Another season had begun at the University of Colorado.

That meant Chris Naeole, Matt Lepsis and five other offensive linemen were pushing a massive seven-man blocking sled up and down a Boulder practice field under a broiling sun.

That meant they were ready to drop, overcome with fatigue and fury and wondering how much was too much.

That meant there were conspiratorial whispers.

"We hated that thing," said Tony Berti, a guard who played for the San Diego Chargers in the mid-1990s. "During two-a-days, it'd rain and we'd end up pushing it through 3 inches of mud. We used to dream of ways to dismantle it so we couldn't have to do it the next day. We used to think if we took the bolts out . . ."

It didn't take long for their feelings to change. All seven members of CU's starting line, including two tight ends, went on to NFL careers, like so many Buffaloes linemen before and after, products of a program that pushed blockers to their limits.

The run of beefy stars from that era isn't over; a decade or so after walking out of Folsom Field for the final time, Naeole and Lepsis will walk into Invesco Field at Mile High on Sunday (2:05 p.m., CBS 4) - Naeole as the starting right guard for the Jacksonville Jaguars, Lepsis as the Broncos' starting left tackle, which is pretty much the way they hoped it would turn out at CU.

"When you went to CU, the next step was the pros," Naeole said. "Everyone had that goal. Every year guys were getting drafted. You definitely knew you had a chance."

Lots of experience

Buffaloes linemen have been roaming the NFL for years. John Wooten in the 1960s. Mike Montler in the 1970s. Pete and Stan Brock in the 1980s. But coaches Bill McCartney and Gary Barnett pushed the inside game to new heights.

"You know how they call Penn State 'Linebacker U'?" said Derek West, who played for the Chargers for three years. "Well, we put a lot of linemen in the NFL for a long period of time."

Andre Gurode, Jay Leeuwenburg, Heath Irwin, Ariel Solomon, Berti, West, Bryan Stoltzberg, Tom Ashworth . . . guards, tackles, centers and tight ends-turned- tackles from Boulder routinely popped up on NFL rosters the past 1 1/2 decades, some with fanfare, others with little notice.

Naeole was the 10th pick of the 1997 draft, the highest offensive guard picked in 14 years. Lepsis, a tight end in college, went undrafted after suffering a knee injury in the Senior Bowl, landing with the Broncos only after CU coach Rick Neuheisel lobbied Broncos coach Mike Shanahan.

"I never thought I was going to play in the NFL," Lepsis said. "I thought it was a long shot at the best. And when they moved me to tackle here, I mean, I'd never played it before, so I thought, 'What chance do I have?'"



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The Rocky

Matt Lepsis was not taken in the NFL draft after playing tight end in college. He signed with the Broncos, learned a new position and has been an anchor on the offensive line.

Two Super Bowl rings later, Lepsis embodies the kind of linemen CU prized: athletic as well as powerful, able to move quickly and block on the run and in open field. A West Coast offense lineman.

"There have been so many great offensive linemen at Nebraska, but you don't see many succeed in the NFL because I think they were so one-dimensional," Berti said. "The problem is that you get in the NFL and you do a lot of pass blocking. You may be a great run blocker in college, but if you don't have that versatility . . ."

"Coach McCartney was very much about being balanced, not being one-dimensional. They coached a lot of the fundamentals of run blocking and pass blocking, recognizing that you need to be able to do both to be effective. Matt has great versatility. The Broncos don't want guys big; they want strong, fast guys who are able to attack in different directions because of their speed. Matt fits the Broncos style better than anyone I've ever known."

Learning system

Lepsis' ability to adapt to the Broncos system and learn a new position while overcoming injury was the result of more than physical talent, former teammates say.

"In the NFL, everyone was big and strong and fast," said Ryan Johanningmeier, who signed with the Atlanta Falcons in 2000. "Everyone was a top-notch athlete. So you had to pick up things quick. You had to put in the time and effort and knowledge and the ability to learn to really keep succeeding. Obviously, Matt Lepsis comes to mind."

Gurode, who learned from Lepsis and Naeole as an underclassman, anchored the Buffaloes lines of the early 2000s, then showed he had the smarts and versatility to become a starting NFL center with the Dallas Cowboys during training camp in 2002.

By the end of the first week, he was deciphering defensive fronts and making appropriate assignment calls to the rest of the offensive linemen. He also consistently aced offensive coordinator Bruce Coslet's pop quizzes.

"Not even the veteran guards know the calls because it's a new offense," Coslet said at the time. "But we checked out Andre's mental capacity before we drafted him; he's a smart young man."

A tough one, too. During a game in Nashville, Tenn., last season, Titans defensive end Albert Haynesworth twice kicked him in the head, stomping on Gurode's forehead after his helmet had come off. Though he needed several stitches to fix multiple cuts on his forehead and below his left eye, Gurode quickly began preparing for the next game.

As a boy in Houston, Gurode was playing on the defensive line in a Pop Warner game when he gingerly pushed his cousin out of bounds. His mother, Mary, harshly criticized him for being too soft.

"When you're off the field, you're cousins," she said. "When you're on the field, you're opponents."

At CU, Gurode expressed outrage after hearing a rumor the Buffalo decals might be removed from helmets, a sacrilege to CU offensive lines past and present.

"The Buffalo stands for power. It's a mystique, a mentality - a mentality you like, especially in offensive linemen," West said. "Let's face it, the majority of offensive linemen would like to just line up and just pound away - 4 yards and a cloud of dust. Ralphie wouldn't be a pulling guard. He'd be a smash-mouth offensive tackle."

Not holding back

Naeole might be the quintessential Buffalo. Growing up on a Hawaiian ranch, he wrestled a 600-pound bull to the ground, according to local legend, a reflection of his strength and zealotry.

During halftime of his first game as CU coach, Neuheisel grew irate about the team's performance. He approached the front row, pointing a finger, where Naeole was sitting. Naeole stood up, picked up the rookie coach and threw him against a chalkboard, stunning teammates.

"Naeole was a mean, nasty football player," Lepsis said.

Added Berti: "Practices would get heated every now and then, and if Chris happened to get on somebody, it took seven or eight guys to pull him off. He had a little craziness to him. That's part of the reason you last long in the NFL; you have to have a little of that. And he had the perfect anatomy: just tall enough, just wide enough and strong as an ox."

Naeole missed only one game during his final four seasons in New Orleans, and he has started every game but two the past nine seasons. He ended a streak of 101 consecutive starts with a healthy deactivation in the 2005 regular-season finale.

It's a mind-set he forged on those CU blocking sleds in the mid-1990s, when he and Lepsis and the others would be left with barely enough strength to pull their soaked jerseys over their heads.

"You've got to suck it up," Naeole said. "You can't let the guys next to you down. You push yourself every day."

Pipeline to the pros: CU offensive linemen in the NFL since the 1990s

- **Tom Ashworth,**

2002 to 2004: New England.

- **Brad Bedell, 2000 to current:** Cleveland, Green Bay, Houston.

- **Tony Berti, 1995 to 1997:** San Diego.

- **Joe Garten,**

1991, 1992: Green Bay.

- **Andre Gurode,**

2002 to current: Dallas.

- **Heath Irwin, 1997 to 2002:** New England, Miami, St. Louis.

- **Ryan Johanning-meier, 2000:** Atlanta.

- **Jay Leeuwenburg,**

1992 to 2000: Chicago, Indianapolis, Cincinnati, Washington.

- **Matt Lepsis, 1998 to current:** Broncos.

- **Wayne Lucier,**

2003, 2004: New York Giants.

- **Chris Naeole,**

1997 to current: New Orleans, Jacksonville.

- **Ben Nichols,**

1999: Atlanta.

- **Erik Norgard, 1990 to 1998:** Houston, Tennessee.

- **Victor Rogers, 2004:** Detroit.

- **Ariel Solomon, 1991 to 1996:** Pittsburgh, Minnesota.

- **Bryan Stoltenberg,**

1996 to 2000: San Diego, New York Giants, Carolina.

- **Melvin Thomas,**

1998: Philadelphia.

- **Mark Vander Poel,**

1991, 1992: Indianapolis.

- **Derek West, 1995 to 1997:** Indianapolis.

- **Sam Wilder, 2005:** San Francisco.*Cu Sports Information*

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Bufs still on shaky ground

Buffaloes seeking to revive dormant rushing offense

By **B.G. Brooks, Rocky Mountain News**
September 21, 2007

BOULDER - After consecutive losses to a pair of "name" schools from Bowl Championship Series conferences, conventional wisdom suggests the Colorado Buffaloes should catch a break Saturday against Miami (Ohio).

Conventional wisdom? CU coach Dan Hawkins is as far from trusting conventional wisdom as Mozart is from 50 Cent. Hawkins abhors it, particularly as it pertains to the Bufs being double-figure favorites to close their nonconference schedule at .500.

"I was talking to our team about this and I go, 'How can you be 1-2 and think you're the prohibitive favorite?' " Hawkins said. "I don't think our guys will (be complacent). I know I certainly won't. I don't think there's any reason for us to go, 'Hey, we'll just show up.' "

Although the RedHawks have yielded an average of 44 points and 507 yards in losing their past two games, Hawkins could see a trap week waiting if the Bufs don't shake a leg and pull themselves free of their run-game funk.

"I don't think there's any question, if we don't play a lot better than we've been playing, we'll get beat again," Hawkins said. "We've got a lot of work to do. . . . For any team that's 1-2 and has to clean up the things we have to clean up, we can't sit back.

"There's no question we have to play a cleaner level of football, but we're capable of doing that."

CU's offensive focus this week has been on rediscovering its running attack, which dramatically slipped after Week 1 and bottomed out in a 16-6 loss against Florida State.

The Bufs' minus-27 rushing yards (after sacks and lost team yardage) set a dubious school record.

It's about a 140-yard difference in what CU had in its 31-28 overtime win against Colorado State. The ground game dropped to its knees (32 yards) the next week at Arizona State, then went prone against Florida State.

The Bufs, averaging 44.6 yards a game, are 116th among 119 Division I-A teams.

"We thought we were going to be able to keep running the ball well and continue to get better each week," junior center Daniel Sanders said. "As you've seen, we've taken a step backward."

Sanders and others, including Hawkins and run-game coordinator/offensive line coach Jeff Grimes, contend the cohesion required for successful line play has been missing and also magnified by individual errors.

"We've taken turns making mistakes on each one of the plays," Sanders said of he and his linemates. "Whether it's taking a bad step, blocking the wrong guy, blowing an assignment or just not finishing a guy and blocking him the whole play . . . we need to get going downhill so we can get this run game going."

Hawkins' remedy: "Tweak a few things . . . cut a few things or look at your formations. You might practice in a different way. . . . You really just have to keep banging it."

To that end, the Bufs went "live" in all their groundwork this week. Also, personnel changes are possible in the line and at tailback. Freshmen Ryan Miller (right tackle) and Kai Maiava (guard, center) have pushed for playing time, and freshman

tailback Brian Lockridge shed his redshirt last week.

The RedHawks' visit might come at an opportune time: They're yielding 195.7 yards a game on the ground and have given up five rushing touchdowns.

Conventional wisdom says the Buffs should be able to take advantage, but you know what Hawkins thinks about that.

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colorado football

Buffaloes backfield seeking bell cow

By Tom Kensler
Denver Post Staff Writer

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Boulder - Darian Hagan stopped short of grabbing a megaphone and putting out an all-points bulletin this week. But the Colorado running backs coach did alert his players that the "running back by committee" experiment is over.

He wants somebody to step up and become the primary ballcarrier.

"The guy who practices the hardest, who is running the hardest, who is blocking in the passing game, he is going to be the guy," Hagan said. "We've been 'player friendly' and giving a lot of guys reps. But I know if I was a tailback, I'd want the ball all the time to get into a rhythm."

The team's offensive coaches met this week and determined that the team needs to ride the back of a featured runner.

"Sometimes it's like a good band; when you get a good bass player, everybody plays better," head coach Dan Hawkins said.

Colorado (1-2) has one more opportunity to develop some confidence in the running game before the Big 12 Conference schedule begins next week with Oklahoma. Look for the Buffaloes to run early and often Saturday afternoon against Miami (Ohio) at Folsom Field.

Hagan, an all-conference quarterback in CU's 1990 national championship season, said he is "embarrassed" by the team's rushing statistics. Among the 119 major-college teams, CU ranks 116th in rushing with 44.7 yards per game.

"I told the guys that they need to take pride in wearing the CU helmet," Hagan said. "It's all about having the right attitude. In 1990, the buffalo ran out and then we swaggered out. We didn't care who we were playing. We knew we were going to win the game."

Through three games, the Buffs are averaging 1.7 yards per carry. The Big 12's next-worst rushing team, Baylor, averages 2.5 yards. Against Arizona State and Florida State in its past two games, CU combined for a net 5 yards rushing on 51 attempts. Yes, 5 yards.

NCAA team-rushing statistics include quarterback sacks and yards lost after fumble recoveries. But a closer inspection of CU's individual tailbacks confirms the struggles.

For the past two games, redshirt freshman Demetrius Sumler has netted 48 yards on 24 carries (2.0 average). Seniors Hugh Charles and Byron Ellis and true freshman Brian Lockridge combined for 11 net yards on 10 carries against

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Arizona State and Florida State.

With Charles fighting a hamstring injury and Lockridge trying to keep his redshirt, Sumler has taken the bulk of the carries.

"We've got to do better. We can do better," said Lockridge, a 5-foot-7, 180-pound Californian who made his debut last week against Florida State.

There appears to be enough blame to be spread around.

"We've had a few (bad) plays where it was the offensive line's mistakes, a few plays where it was the tailback, a few plays where the receiver didn't make a block," offensive coordinator Mark Helfrich said.

Players and coaches say recent practices have been encouraging. Hagan told the tailbacks they can't allow one tackler to stop them. Offensive line coach Jeff Grimes wants his blockers to start knocking people off the line of scrimmage.

"We've been obviously really emphasizing the running game this week," senior offensive tackle Tyler Polumbus said. "We've got to get 4 yards a pop, every time. We have to surge off the ball. This game is important to show we can do that."

CU's top tailbacks

Demetrius Sumler, 5-feet-10, 215 pounds, redshirt freshman, 133 yards on 40 carries

Has the most carries, but not yet considered a featured back by CU coaches. Possesses a nice blend of strength and open-field instincts, but coaches say he ran tentatively against Arizona State and Florida State after making an impressive debut with 85 yards against CSU.

Hugh Charles, 5-8, 190, senior, 9 yards on four carries

Got his first carries last week against Florida State after getting hurt in first series of opener against CSU. Experienced (1,670 career yards) with a 400-pound bench press and sprinter's speed, but was chewed out by coaches after running out of bounds on a play against FSU.

Brian Lockridge, 5-7, 180, true freshman, 2 yards on four carries

Discarded the redshirt and made his debut against FSU. Called an "Energizer Bunny" by the team for his perpetual intensity. Although not a sprinter like Charles, Lockridge "plays the fastest to the hole," coaches say. Whether he could take the pounding associated with a featured back remains to be seen.

The lowdown

COLORADO (1-2)

Player to watch | WR Josh Smith

The 6-foot, 180-pound freshman speedster made his debut last week against Florida State and beat a Seminoles track star down the

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sideline for a 38-yard catch. Smith could be in for a huge game Saturday.

Key for the Buffaloes | Run, already

Get the ground game going to take some pressure off quarterback Cody Hawkins. He passed for 306 yards against a Florida State defense that didn't concern itself with the run. That won't work every week.

MIAMI (OHIO) (1-2)

Player to watch | QB Daniel Raudabaugh

A 6-4, 214-pound Texan, he has been promoted to the starting lineup after throwing for 240 yards last week in a 47-10 loss to Cincinnati. RedHawks coaches hope the sophomore displays the same magic of a former Miami quarterback with a long last name starting with the letter R: Ben Roethlisberger.

Key for the RedHawks | Pass protection

The RedHawks already have yielded eight sacks, and CU has middle linebacker Michael Sipili and defensive lineman Chris Perri back after serving three-game suspensions.

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Despite missed FGs, Eberhart still kicking

By Ryan Thorburn
Friday, September 21, 2007

The snaps were good. The holds were good.

The field goals were not good.

Colorado place-kicker Kevin Eberhart is putting all of the blame for his two missed kicks against Florida State — field goal attempts of 37 and 46 yards — on his own shoulder pads.

Two weeks after being carried off Invesco Field by his teammates after his 35-yard field goal beat Colorado State in overtime, Eberhart walked off Folsom Field cloaked in disappointment following the Buffs' 16-6 loss to the Seminoles.

"It comes with the territory; that's how the position is," Eberhart said of the wide range of emotions he has already experienced three games into the season. "I think I had a lot better week practicing this week. I was disappointed in myself, obviously, with the way I performed in the game. And that's on me and no one else."

Eberhart's first field goal missed by only "four or five inches," according to CU special teams coach Kent Riddle. And he simply tried to put a little too much extra distance on the second attempt.

"I think I just lost a little bit of focus and didn't home in on my technique quite like I needed to when those kicks mattered," Eberhart said. "Hopefully that's corrected now, and it should be a good week."

The Buffs, who wrap up the nonconference portion of the schedule against Miami (Ohio) on Saturday at Folsom Field (1:30 p.m., no television), plan on being in a lot of tight Big 12 games this fall.

Which means the other players are probably going to need Eberhart to deliver in the clutch a few more times to pull out some wins.

"Everybody was really supportive," Eberhart said. "This is a real close-knit bunch. The closest since I've been up here in the five years. Everyone said, 'Just keep your head up.'"

"Everybody's ready for good things, and hopefully I can do it for them."

Eberhart, a fifth-year senior who already has a degree in aerospace engineering, waited patiently behind two-time All-American and current Green Bay Packer Mason Crosby for this opportunity.

The coaching staff doesn't believe this place-kicker will allow a couple of missed opportunities linger.

"I'm not going to worry about his emotions or the performance in general," Riddle said. "If you're

worrying about it you're not doing anything about it. ... We corrected a little thing that kind of developed in the game, and I expect him to be fine."

The missed field goals against Florida State came in the first and third quarters. The game might have been more interesting in the fourth quarter with those points on the board for the Buffs.

Eberhart takes responsibility for the mistakes that created the what-if scenarios for Sunday-morning quarterbacks. And now he's ready to turn the page.

"Anytime you're out there taking a kick and the snap is good, the hold is good, then it's up to you," Eberhart said. "You have to do what you know how to do and you have to do it right. I just didn't take care of business."



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