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cu football

New players fresh for polishing

CU's many first-year players make season high-risk, high-gain enterprise

By Tom Kensler
The Denver Post

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RB Demetrius Sumler (Getty | Doug Pensinger)

BOULDER — It wasn't an exactly an epiphany, but the revelation sure did make Colorado's Josh Smith smile.

While stretching before the Buffaloes' Sept.

29 home game against Oklahoma, the freshman wide receiver realized his stomach wasn't queasy. No butterflies.

"That was the first game where I wasn't nervous," Smith recalled. "I felt like it was just another football game, the same game I've been playing all my life. I felt more relaxed, more focused."

Smith cleared the emotional hurdle that confronts most, if not all, freshman players. More of his young teammates are doing the same. Colorado coach Dan Hawkins said his relatively youthful squad grows a bit more every week. That includes redshirt

Colorado Football

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freshman quarterback Cody Hawkins, two true freshmen starting on the offensive line, other freshmen contributing at running back and wide receiver and several new starters on defense.

Colorado (5-4, 3-2 Big 12) appeared to take another step last weekend with a win at Texas Tech and faces another big test Saturday against No. 9 Missouri (7-1, 3-1) at 4:30 p.m. (FSN) at Folsom Field.

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"Guys are maturing, particularly on offense where there are so many young players," Dan Hawkins said. "It's just a cornucopia of things for them, moving from one spectrum to the other. They're definitely doing a better job of handling all the material and the routine and all that."

"But we've got so many young guys out there, every game and every series can be an adventure."

Never mind butterflies. Some first-year players feel a bee's nest in their gut. As high school blue-chippers, they had been king of the hill. In Division I, they often struggle to hold their own against the guy across the line of scrimmage.

"You find out that all the other team's defensive linemen are as strong as you are," said Kai Maiava, a true-freshman starter at offensive guard. "It took me awhile to adjust to that." New players typically struggle finding consistency in a sport where one busted play can turn a game around.

"The key in football is, can you sustain what you're supposed to do for 12 drives?" junior defensive tackle George Hypolite said. "You may get tired. You may have hurt something. But can you refocus and continue to do your job? That's tough for a freshman."

Maintaining focus becomes especially challenging while the mind is swirling. Classes. Football meetings. Football practice. Studying. Social life. Time management is a challenge.

"You feel like you're always trying to catch up," said tailback Brian Lockridge, a true freshman from Orange County in California.



Wide receiver Kendrick Celestine has hauled in eight passes for a 14.6-yard average. (AP | David Zalubowski)

"You're trying to balance things. You can't let a grade in a class affect how you play. You can't let a relationship outside of football affect what you do in a game. When you figure out how to do that, you start playing better."

New players must even learn how to watch game film.

"When a young guy gets thrown in there, he's just trying to survive," offensive coordinator Mark Helfrich said. "He just tries to live in a box and doesn't worry about what others are doing."

"The key for young players is learning how to

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communicate on the field, learning how a team functions. You can see that really taking place."



Colorado strong safety Daniel Dykes intercepted this key pass during the Oklahoma game and ranks second on the Buffs with 66 tackles. (AP | Jack Demme)

With three regular-season games remaining, Colorado needs another victory to become bowl eligible. The dramatic improvement over last season's 2-10 mark suggests Dan Hawkins' first two recruiting classes have some keepers.

In addition to young players who are contributing, the staff is high on several freshman redshirts playing on the scout teams. Some who have caught the coaches' eyes include defensive backs Anthony Perkins and Anthony Wright, wide receiver Markques Simas, offensive lineman Mike Iltis and defensive

linemen Eugene Goree and Conrad Obi.

"I don't want to look ahead, but there is no denying that this program is going to be good," Lockridge said.

Tom Kensler: 303-954-1280 or tkensler@denverpost.com

New Faces

In Dan Hawkins' second year as coach, CU has enjoyed a wealth of contribution from newcomers. A look at some of the help:

WR Scotty McKnight. Redshirt freshman is a former walk-on who runs precise routes and leads the team with 34 receptions.

WR Kendrick Celestine. Freshman speedster from Louisiana has averaged 14.6 yards on eight receptions.

G Wes Palazzi. Former Dallas area star and redshirt freshman, he started first four games at guard before being replaced by Kai Maiava.

OT Ryan Miller. The consensus prep All-American and true freshman from Columbine moved into the starting lineup in the Kansas State game after learning how to pass block.

RB Demetrius Sumler. Perhaps the most versatile of the running backs, the San Diego native and redshirt freshman ranks second on the team with 329 rushing yards.

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FB Jake Behrens. A punishing sophomore blocker from Omaha, he caught a touchdown pass against Kansas State.

TE Nate Solder. Redshirt freshman and enormous receiver from Buena Vista, he has played in all nine games and has averaged 16.7 yards on three catches.

MLB Jeff Smart. Forced into starting job with losses of Michael Sipili (suspension) and R.J. Brown (concussion), the former Boulder High walk-on, a sophomore, ranks third in tackles (60).

MLB Jake Duren. Sophomore transfer from Northern Colorado, the Mullen graduate has 11 tackles and a pass breakup in a reserve role.

DE Marquez Herrod. An athletic redshirt freshman from California, he backs up junior Maurice Lucas on the left side.

DE Chris Perri. A junior college transfer with nonstop motor, he sat out first three games (suspension) but already has made an impact with two tackles for losses as a junior.

SS Daniel Dykes. The junior transfer from Idaho earned starting job in spring drills, dislodging 2006 regular Lionel Harris. His 66 tackles rank second on the team.

FS Jalil Brown. The Phoenix native and redshirt freshman is tied with Gardner McKay for the lead in the Buffs' special-teams points rating system.

PK Tyler Cope. A walk-on true freshman from Portland, Ore., he handles kickoff duties.

By Tom Kensler, The Denver Post

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November 1, 2007

CU

Late ticket sales

As of Monday, roughly 8,000 tickets remained for the University of Colorado's game Saturday against No. 9 Missouri. By early Thursday, that number had been whittled to fewer than 3,000.

That's why CU athletic director **Mike Bohn** isn't worried several thousand tickets remain for the Buffaloes' home game against Nebraska on Nov. 23, which usually is sold out in early fall. Bohn believes several factors, most prominently the World Series, are responsible for the late ticket sales.

But he doesn't expect to see many empty seats this weekend or on the day after Thanksgiving, when Nebraska visits.

"I think both these games will be sold out or very close to being sold out," Bohn said.

Bohn does not believe Nebraska's substandard play this season - the Cornhuskers are 4-5 overall, 1-4 in the Big 12 - is a factor in the slower- than-usual sales.

"It's a timing issue more than anything else," Bohn said.

Unguided missile? Nah

Forget the speculation about **Tyler Cope** being a natural-born headhunter.

Turns out those seven solo tackles by CU's freshman kickoff specialist are products of his being in the right place at the right time.

Or perhaps his special-teams comrades not being in the right place at the right time, said special teams coach **Kent Riddle**, adding, "We'd rather not have our kickers trying to tackle somebody's best athlete with nobody else around. . . . that's not a winning scenario for us."



Chad Spangler © AP

University of Northern Colorado tight end Clint Wright reaches over the goal line for a touchdown Saturday against Montana State.

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Cope, though, said he "loves it, to be honest. But I'd like to be getting my kickoffs a little deeper," so there won't be any runbacks.

To put Cope's seven kickoff stops in perspective, former CU kicker **Mason Crosby** made two during his four-year career, though a high percentage of Crosby's kicks resulted in touchbacks.

'Pig' will fly

Missouri coach **Gary Pinkel** said safety **Cornelius "Pig" Brown**, one of the Tigers' emotional leaders, will travel with the team to Boulder today. Brown suffered a season-ending ruptured Achilles' tendon Saturday and underwent surgery Sunday.

Pinkel said Brown's absence will cause Missouri "to look at some things. . . . He's very involved in run support and coverage. He's made a lot of great plays."

Junior **Justin Garrett** is scheduled to start in Brown's place.

CU coach **Dan Hawkins** said Brown could "sack you, tackle you, cover you. . . . I'm sure (his loss) will have an emotional impact on the team, but there's always guys that step up."

Scott visiting

Darrell Scott, Rivals.com's choice as the nation's top high school running back, will visit CU this weekend, with Buffaloes freshman receiver **Josh Smith** - Scott's uncle - serving as his player host.

Scott, of St. Bonaventure High School in Ventura, Calif., is scheduled to arrive in Boulder on Saturday morning and attend that afternoon's game.

He originally was expected to make his official CU visit during Thanksgiving weekend, attending the CU-Nebraska game Nov. 23.

The Buffs already have a commitment from **Ray Polk**, of Brophy Prep in Phoenix. He is rated the nation's No. 11 running back by Rivals.com.

Etc.

- As he did before CU faced Kansas quarterback **Todd Reesing**, Air Force transfer **Kyle Black**, a former quarterback now playing safety, has emulated **Chase Daniel** on the scout team.
- With 682 rushing yards, CU tailback **Hugh Charles** needs to average 106 during the final three games to reach 1,000 for the first time in his career.

CSU

Unga on a roll

Harvey Unga, a redshirt freshman who grew up near Brigham Young's campus in Provo, Utah, surprisingly has posted four 100-yard rushing games as the Cougars have their run/pass mix decidedly toward the run.

A 6-foot, 225-pound bruiser, Unga is drawing big-time praise from BYU coach **Bronco Mendenhall**, who has seen his share of fine college running backs.