

2015 Air Force Football Clips

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Why Air Force's Troy Calhoun is the nation's most overlooked coach

Fox Sports, July 27

By Bruce Feldman

The best coaching job in college football that no one talked about much in 2014? Look at what Troy Calhoun did.

The 48-year-old Air Force coach led the Falcons to a 10-3 record that included wins over Boise State (which won 12 games last year) and Colorado State (which won 10), as well as Navy and Army to win the Commander-in-Chief's Trophy. Plus, Air Force defeated a Western Michigan squad that came into the Famous Idaho Potato Bowl 8-4. The 10 wins were the Falcons' most in 16 seasons, and it marked the seventh time in Calhoun's eight years as the team's head coach where AFA has made a bowl game.

That's even more impressive when you consider that Air Force is allowed only 15 hours a week to work on football (only 75 percent of the time other college football programs are mandated), and since they have guys in Kuwait, Germany, Florida and all over the country, they aren't able to do all of the "voluntary mandatory" stuff in June and July, so there's no continuity to carry things over from spring football. Oh, and they can't redshirt players.

Beyond dealing with the limitations at one of the academies, I also wondered how a coach with a system that is something of a curveball is able to still keep his conference opponents so off-balance even though you'd think by now they'd be so well-versed in what's coming. The answer is Calhoun's offense at Air Force is actually quite a bit different than what you've probably heard.

"They're actually a multiple-formation, multiple-concept offense," said New Mexico head coach Bob Davie, a long-time college defensive coordinator. "They're not Navy or Georgia Tech, where they're in double-slot (formation) a majority of the time. The thing that they do great is that it's too elementary to say they're just a triple option team. You have to spend a majority of your week preparing for triple option and they may not run any triple option against you. They'll be in the I-(formation). They'll run spread, no-huddle, up-tempo. They have a bank of offenses. In some ways it reminds me of Nebraska when Tom Osborne was winning all those championships. It's depending on the quarterback and their personnel, and they can get in and out of so many different things.

"I played against Nebraska when I was at Texas A&M and Notre Dame, and no one did more than Nebraska. And you had to prepare for it all. They could dust off different packages even between series."

The former Notre Dame head coach, who then spent a decade studying college football programs as a TV analyst for ESPN, said he was paying Calhoun and Air Force the "ultimate compliment since we've modeled ourselves after them."

Davie said a key reason why Air Force is so difficult to deal with is because Calhoun's NFL background, coaching as an assistant with the Broncos and then as the Houston Texans offensive coordinator.

"We lean an awful lot with what we did in Denver and with the Texans," Calhoun said. Unlike the other triple option systems that rely so much on the quarterback and fullbacks running the ball, Calhoun said Air Force is more tailback dominated in the running game. He likes to take some of that load off his QB. He also points out that in six of his last eight seasons he's had a tailback run for 1,000 yards.

The passing game has been a bigger weapon in his system than it is for the other service academies. In two of the past four seasons, Air Force has ranked in the nation's top 15 in passing efficiency, which is impressive when you consider working from a straight drop-back game isn't an option for the Falcons -- not when you're as small as the Air Force O-line is. "We don't even have a 280-pound guy that plays for us," Calhoun said. (Every lineman must complete a 1.5-mile run at 7,200-foot altitude in under 11:15.)

Because of those size limitations, Calhoun, a former Air Force QB himself, mixes in play-action passes and some bootlegs, because "you'd get eaten up if you rely on drop-back," he said. "I tried the first half of the first year. It was a mistake. You gotta adapt. But that's the way you have to coach anywhere.

"You have to have an adjustment and a counter-adjustment. Whether it's a double-move off an underneath throw or a bootleg off a stretch play or whatever it is, you have to be creative."

Air Force is in the shotgun about 30 percent of the time, he said. Sometimes they'll go four-wide. Other times he'll line up in I-formation. "You gotta have that flexibility week to week," said Calhoun, who praises his staff for being so organized and able to implement it all on such tight schedules.

Calhoun and his staff visit three other college staffs every offseason. The three they met with this offseason are all pretty different in the types of offenses they run.

Davie also credits how much the Falcons defense has changed as well. He said they used to play a lot of zone coverage, dropping eight men on passing downs. Last season, he noticed how they became much more of a pressure team and said they changed "dramatically."

"Against Colorado State, they blitzed almost every snap to disrupt their running game and they really got them off balance early," Davie observed. AFA beat then-No. 21 CSU, 27-24, despite the Falcons being without their starting QB and leading rusher.

The changes on both sides of the ball produced units that ranked in the top three of the Mountain West in scoring and scoring defense -- up from 12th and 11th, respectively, a year earlier.

This year, the Falcons have to replace more starters than every other team in the Mountain West other than Wyoming, but they do return Nate Romine, the QB who led the Falcons to the win over CSU; 1,000-yard tailback Jacobi Owens; 6-foot-3 wideout Jalen Robinette (806 receiving yards in 2014); four starters on the O-line; and standout safety, and wonderfully named, Weston Steelhammer (six INTs, three sacks). Reaching double-digit wins figures to be even harder this year considering the Falcons have road trips to Michigan State, Navy, CSU and Boise. If Air Force does it, though, it might be Calhoun's best work yet.

10 ways Air Force has changed from its 10-loss days of 2013

Gazette, July 31

By Brent Briggeman

1. Age and experience

Because of injuries, attrition and discipline, Air Force was historically young in the 2013 season.

David Harris, Jalen Robinette, Nate Romine and Ryan Watson started games that year. Hayes Linn and Weston Steelhammer combined to make 15 tackles. D.J. Johnson scored a touchdown.

All of those players were freshmen.

Freshmen on the 2014 team made a total of two tackles and made no appearances on offense.

Every Air Force athletic program understands the importance of playing upperclassmen, cadets who have had time to learn the unique schemes, adjust to the grueling schedule of academy life and give their bodies time away from things like basic training and survival training to recuperate.

That wasn't a luxury the 2013 football team could afford, and it showed.

Despite claims from coach Troy Calhoun that this year's team has suffered heavy losses - "I don't think it's necessarily rebuilding, it's just we're beginning from the ground in terms of putting a foundation in place," Calhoun said - the amount of returning experience is overwhelming.

No freshmen and just two sophomores were included in the first two-deep depth chart released for the 2015 season. Ten of the 11 offensive starters have started in the past. Only on defense is there legitimate inexperience, but four full-time starters return in addition to two - Harris and Watson - with two years of experience and five "newcomers" who have been in the program for at least three years, and that has shown up in ...

2. Bulkied up size

It was after a lopsided loss to Rice in the 2012 Armed Forces Bowl that Calhoun declared his team had a "mass problem." That team featured a depth chart for that game in Fort Worth, Texas, that averaged 251 pounds on the offensive line and 248 pounds on the defensive front.

By the opening of the 2013 season, the two-deep depth chart had grown to an average of 258 on the o-line and 251 on the d-line.

The initial listings for the 2015 o-line have bulkied up to 267 pounds and the d-line is at 262.

"I remember walking out there on the field, looking at them saying, 'Geese, these guys look pretty good,'" Wyoming coach Craig Bohl said of seeing Air Force in person last year.

This doesn't put the Falcons anywhere near the NCAA or Mountain West average in size.

"We have a lot more size even than we did last year," defensive end Alex Hansen said "Troy Timmerman started last year at nose guard at 245 pounds. We have a lot more size than that already."

The offensive line isn't built to regularly drop into pass protection, as most of the passing plays are masked through play-action, but they can do it on occasion, which is a change from the past and important as the Falcons continue to show a ...

3. Diversified offense

New Mexico coach Bob Davie has spent decades in football as a head coach at, among other places, Notre Dame, as a defensive assistant and as an ESPN commentator traveling the country.

He's not sure he's seen an offense more adaptable than the one orchestrated by Calhoun and offensive coordinator Mike Thiessen.

"They take advantage of their personnel the very best of anybody, to me," Davie said.

Davie watched a Falcons team decimated by injuries in 2013 travel to Albuquerque near the end of the season and throw on eight of the first 15 offensive plays and nearly pull out a victory in a shootout by staying in the air, completing 15 of 23 passes in a 45-37 loss.

Last year the Falcons passed just nine times while beating New Mexico 35-31.

"They take advantage of their talent, and they have enough talent now, there's no doubt about that," Davie said.

The 2013 Falcons team passed for just eight touchdowns against four interceptions. The 2014 squad threw 15 touchdowns, four interceptions while giving up nothing in the running game. In fact, the rushing yards per game actually increased from 263 yards per game to 273 from '13 to '14.

A big part of that ground attack was ...

4. The emergence of the fullbacks

Sophomores Shayne Davern and D.J. Johnson combined for 116 rushing yards and three touchdowns in that Week 7 victory over New Mexico.

That was the first week they were both healthy, and it marked the turning point of the season. From that point on the Falcons finished 6-1. In three Mountain West games prior, the Falcons averaged 364 yards of total offense. In the five games fafter they averaged 429.

Teams had to account for the two bruising runners, which opened the edges for quarterback Kale Pearson and tailback Jacobi Owens and cleared the passing game for targets Robinette, Garrett Brown and Garrett Griffin.

This was something the 2013 team never established.

Broom Hart carried the bulk of the fullback load in that season, rushing for 469 yards and two touchdowns. But his style was not the lower-your-shoulder type that Davern and Johnson showed while combining for 869 yards and 11 touchdowns.

Hart was still on the team last year, but the two sophomores relegated the senior to a backup role.

It was part of the team's overall attempt to display ...

5. Increased toughness

It's difficult to quantify toughness, but Hansen knows it when he saw it in linebacker Jordan Pierce.

Pierce led Air Force with 117 tackles, including 19.5 for loss, but also changed the attitude.

He's kind of a nut," Hansen said. "He went into weapons maintenance, which is a job nobody would ever take. That's what he chose, that was his No. 1. He played like that, too."

Pierce is gone, but Hansen, linebacker Connor Healy, and a host of others seem to have learned from his example.

Air Force gave up 40 points per game in 2013 while it lacked a defensive leader. With Pierce in charge, opponents managed 24.2 per game in 2014.

With Steelhammer leading the way with seven interceptions, the unit forced twice as many turnovers as it had in 2013 - a jump from nine to 18.

"A lot of that is due to how (defensive coordinator) Steve (Russ) coaches," said Fresno State coach Tim DeRuyter, himself a former Falcons defensive coordinator. "He coaches with an enthusiasm and confidence that makes those guys think they can make plays."

"He did a terrific job last year of getting that defense to play with a swagger again."

The swagger was part of an overall ...

6. Increase in confidence

Air Force had lost 15 of 20 games as it entered the Boise State game last September. Two of those five wins were against FCS teams. Another was against a Georgia State squad that has never defeated an FBS team.

Then came seven takeaways and a 28-14 dismantling of the Broncos at Falcon Stadium.

Confidence grew from there.

"You could see as the season went on that that was a team that believed in what it was doing," Utah State coach Matt Wells said.

Players said the confidence spread to practice, allowing them to get more out of each session, and with the ongoing success of a season that included a Commander-in-Chief's Trophy and a bowl appearance everyone's attention was kept in full.

"Looking back, we didn't practice as hard as we do now," Hansen said of the days before the 2014 season. "It was just a complete change in everyone's attitude as far as, 'We're never doing that again.'"

Of course, it helped that Air Force made the move to bring in ...

7. Outside perspectives on the coaching staff

The 2013 varsity assistant coaching staff included seven Air Force grads and three coaches with experience at other FBS programs in a full-time role.

The 2015 staff has since added four coaches - defensive line coach Tim Cross, wide receivers coach Derek Lewis, tight ends coach Steed Lobotzke and linebackers coach Ron Vanderlinden - with 72 years of FBS experience at stops that include Florida, Penn State and Texas.

"We want perspectives," Calhoun said. "I think that's healthy."

Vanderlinden and Cross were there for the 2014 season, and their units showed perhaps the greatest improvement on the team. Lobotzki and Lewis were hired during this offseason.

"It's really nice to have a lot of diversity in coaches," Hansen said. "The academy coaches know really well about what goes on at the academy, but sometimes it's nice to have a coach that doesn't understand it and all it is is football. You don't have to talk about school, just football. That's kind of a cool thing."

The differences in the staff go beyond personnel, but also in a ...

8. Restructuring of the staff

In 2013, Air Force featured two co-defensive coordinators and three who shared the offensive coordinator title.

Last year that was streamlined with Thiessen taking reins of the offense and Russ seizing the defense.

It was still a collaborative effort, but there was a clear leader in each room. Russ and Thiessen were each academy grads and longtime assistants.

The defense improved from giving up 490 yards per game in 2013 to 395 in 2013. The offense gained 377 yards per game in 2013 and jumped to 419 in 2014.

This model of one coordinator on each side is in keeping with the norm in most of college and professional football, and was a sign of decisiveness among his staff previously not seen in Calhoun - a further sign of his own progression.

Of course, all of this might have been negated were it not for ...

9. Health

That 2013 team limped to those 10 losses.

On defense alone, 21 players started games, mostly because of injuries.

In 2014, just 15 players notched starts on defense.

"You can look at those lineups, each week it was just cut and paste, cut and paste," said Calhoun, who cites the health as the biggest factor in Air Force's improvement.

It's hard to predict how that might be different in 2015, but the Falcons training staff credits an innovative system of tailoring workout movements to specific body types and styles to the decrease in lost games last year.

Also, even if injuries do strike again, the Falcons depth will be better prepared to withstand it. The depth chart is full of those juniors and seniors, so behind them are sophomores who are not new to the system like the freshmen who had to fill those roles in 2013.

At quarterback, Romine and Karson Roberts both have starting experience. Pate Davis is a system veteran at No. 3 and incoming freshman Ryan Brand is as touted as any recruit at that position to report for basic training in recent memory for the team.

The Falcons seem built to win on offense, with depth, and, with the right players emerging, on defense. There remain key questions on special teams, but the overall result is ...

10 High expectations

The Falcons went 6-7 in 2012, losing four of the final five games by an average of 23 points, so little was expected in 2013.

And, of course, little was delivered.

After the 10-win showing in 2014, the spotlight is starting to shine on the program.

The USA Today coaches poll was released Thursday, with Air Force receiving five votes (tied for 41st).

No other service academy received a vote and only Utah State, with four, appeared further down the list from the Mountain West.

Air Force therefore figures to take on the role of favorite in many of its games, a position it rarely held even last year.

"I don't think that year before was indicative of the academy or the program," said Wells, whose Utah State team joined just San Diego State and Wyoming in defeating Air Force in 2013 and '14. "This past year was a whole lot closer to what I'm used to from Air Force. That's a tough, disciplined bunch that plays to the end and to the end of the year."

Three reasons to believe in Air Force's football team

Gazette, July 31

By David Ramsey

Steve Russ runs the defense for Air Force football. He understands the required mindset for a successful academy team.

"They love being the underdog," he said near the end of the 2014 season. "They love being told that they're not very good. They love to hear that the time to win here is past. They love hearing they aren't good enough."

The 2014 Falcons walked into their season armed with an immense blessing:

They constantly heard the voice of doubters. Virtually everyone believed the Falcons would once again be lousy.

The luxury of being surrounded by doubters is gone as the Falcons begin preparation Friday for the 2015 season.

The Falcons should be good.

The Falcons could even become powerful.

Here are three reasons to believe in the Falcons, followed by three reasons to doubt:

No. 1: The fullbacks

D.J. Johnson and Shayne Davern are big, rugged and surprisingly elusive. They will spend this season delivering pain to defenders unlucky enough to try to tackle them.

The fullbacks are so close in skill that they will virtually split time, which will keep them fresh and hungry. After Johnson rips off a 12-yard gain and levels three tacklers, Davern will seek to gain 15 yards while trampling four tacklers.

The duo should allow the Falcons to control the clock, always an important asset for an Air Force team.

No. 2: The receivers

When watching Jalen Robinette overpower a hapless defensive back before he seizes a pass, I often wonder:

Why did this ultra-gifted receiver choose to attend Run University?

Robinette leads a group of surprisingly talented pass catchers. Garrett Brown is fast, dangerous and specializes in big plays. He sizzled CSU in the late minutes of Air Force's "upset" win, setting up the game-winning field goal. Tight end Garrett Griffin is the go-man in the middle of the field.

When defensive coordinators prepare for the 2015 Falcons, they will be tempted to clog the middle in an attempt to silence Johnson and Davern. Thinking about Robinette, Brown and Griffin will force those coordinators to search for a different strategy.

No. 3: The offensive line

Line coach Clay Hendrix is a quiet man, even while he teaches cadets the science of run blocking. During August, he'll be standing on the grass on the northwest edge of the academy, staring at his linemen. He's been known to offer a calm rebuke to a player standing three or four inches out of position.

Hendrix is one of the nation's top assistants, a craftsman who demands the most out of himself and his linemen. The Falcons line was depleted by graduation, but Hendrix has a knack for replacing lost parts.

The questions about the team:

No. 1: The tailbacks

Junior Jacobi Owens is attempting a comeback with a surgically repaired right foot. He rushed for 1,054 yards last season before suffering the injury, but his foot is not his lone challenge.

He needs to become more imaginative. Last season, Owens showed an unfortunate knack for turning 10-yard gains into 6-yard gains. For the offense to become mighty, Owens - or someone else - must emerge as a dangerous tailback.

No. 2: The tough guy

In 2013, a season that will live forever in Air Force infamy, the Falcons surrendered 40 points a game while ball carriers wandered without a care through the Air Force defense.

The happy wandering ended last season when Jordan Pierce led an often menacing group of defenders. Pierce is the prime reason the Falcons cut opponents scoring to 24.2 points per game.

Pierce graduated after one of the most dominating Air Force defensive performances of the 21st century. The Falcons need another tough guy to police the middle.

And I don't see one on the roster.

No. 3: The kicking game

Last season, you could count on Will Conant making field goals. Unfortunately for the Falcons, Conant is gone.

In spring practice, field goals were an adventure, and not in a good way.

In Air Force's biggest win of 2014 - and the biggest win of this decade - Conant coolly dropped CSU with his foot. His replacement has not yet emerged.

Air Force's experience shows on offense as fall practice begins

Gazette, Aug. 1

By Brent Briggeman

Air Force hit the ground running on Friday, particularly on offense.

The first day of practice brought back together a collection of skill players who carried the load for the Falcons last year, and they already looked ready to do it again.

"Oh man, the offense looked crazy today," running back Jacobi Owens said. "The offense was ridiculous today and it was the first day of practice. The first team defense couldn't handle us on those first couple plays today."

To be fair, the team practiced in no pads except helmets, so the defense wasn't exactly competing on equal footing. But still, spring ball wrapped nearly five months ago, so it had been a while since the team had stepped on the field together and that offense in particular was excited to work together again.

"You could feel the energy and everyone just going haywire, as you should," said quarterback Nate Romine, whose leadership skills have been sharpened over the summer as an element leader during basic training.

Romine figures to replace Kale Pearson at quarterback, and he's got plenty of experienced targets as receivers Jalen Robinette and Garrett Brown as well as tight end Garrett Griffin were each back at practice Friday. Those three combined for 1,648 of the team's 1,893 receiving yards last year and 14 of its 15 receiving touchdowns as the Falcons went 10-3.

Nobody seemed happier about being out there with that group than Owens, whose season ended last year with a foot injury in the 10th game. He ran for 1,054 yards in a breakout sophomore campaign, but then had to sit and watch through spring practice and only within the past month has been able to run at a full sprint.

But Owens said he poured himself into the rehab, working out in pools, on bikes and on the elliptical. He is up to about 205 pounds after playing last year around 190, and his doctor has said the foot injury that required six temporary screws that have since been removed shouldn't be an issue again.

"My lungs are there now, my foot, I'll give it a week or so before they turn me loose," Owens said. "But it can be a positive. They said Adrian Peterson's not playing last year added three years onto his career. I can't play college ball for three more years, but I think it can be a positive. I definitely feel fresh."

The team in general looked fresh on its first day, as more than 100 players ran around the practice field. Even the freshmen who marched back from Jacks Valley on Thursday morning participated.

"I couldn't be more fired up about a group going forward," coach Troy Calhoun said about the freshman class.

The Falcons practice again Saturday, take Sunday off, then go into a full week. They started before most programs because their practice time will be limited after class begins Thursday. Other schools start classes much later in August or even in September.

Star QB Kale Pearson returns to help Air Force in a new role

Gazette, Aug. 2

By Brent Briggeman

Kale Pearson's recent history as Air Force's quarterback would seemingly make him the ideal graduate assistant to help the offensive coaching staff.

But the Falcons' confidence in him in his new role dates from a time a bit earlier in his personal history.

"He's been around it ever since his mom was changing his diaper," coach Troy Calhoun said. "I think he can be a real big bonus for us."

Pearson, whose father, Preston, is a high school football coach in Oklahoma, graduated in May and his first assignment is to serve as an assistant coach with the football team he guided to 10 wins this past season. In the spring of 2016 he will move on to become a logistics officer.

But he's soaking up the time he has to again be around the football program. And the program is doing the same with him.

"It's a lot longer hours, obviously, but I've had a lot of fun and I enjoy being with the guys, so it's awesome," said Pearson, who is overseeing the freshmen quarterbacks. "These guys, they listen to what I say and take it in. They ask me questions all the time."

The GA position is routinely filled by two recent graduates. Former free safety Christian Spears is helping this year on the defensive side. Linebacker Alex Means and running back Cody Getz returned in recent years. The last starting quarterback to turn around and coach the Falcons the next year was Shea Smith in 2009.

Pearson comes with a slew of ready-made credentials. He was named the MVP of last year's team, capturing Air Force's Athletic Achievement Award for his comeback after a knee injury that occurred during the first half of the season opener his junior year and sidelined him for the rest of the season. Pearson's 1,590 passing yards last year were fifth most in a season in program history, his 14 touchdowns tied for third, and his career completion percentage of .567 is third all-time for the Falcons.

"There's certainly an instant respect because of who he is," offensive coordinator and quarterbacks coach Mike Thiessen said. "Ears perk up. When I got here, my quarterbacks coach as a freshman was Dee Dowis. Boy, you were intent on what was going on because of how good he was."

Pearson and Thiessen, Air Force's Male Athlete of the Year in 2000-01, authored two of the team's top three passing seasons since 1972. This year they will sit next to each other in the press box, Thiessen calling plays and Pearson helping decipher coverage schemes.

Of course, possessing knowledge is one thing. Being able to relay it to someone else is another. Pearson's background with his family, his career at high school power Tulsa Union and his time at the academy helps in that area.

"You can see it already, just in the interaction with our freshmen," Calhoun said. "You can see he's real and he's candid with them. He will not coddle them, but he will care and he will be able to provide great, great guidance and leadership and do a great job."

Pearson has been somewhat surprised to see what kind of coach he has become.

"I'm a lot more vocal than I thought," he said. "I'm trying to be as meticulous as possible with these guys and teach them everything I learned from my dad in high school, here, and just give them everything I can and not overwhelm them too much because they're just freshmen."

Pearson doesn't know if he would like to follow in the coaching footsteps of his father, who in March became the coach at Putnam City High School in Oklahoma. But he knows the experience he'll gain this year could open that door should he choose it when his military commitment is complete.

"I definitely want to see if I like it as much as he does," Pearson said. "He loves it, he's obsessed with it; so I wanted to give it a shot. Plus, I can't be away from football. I can't just go do a real job yet.

"If I can keep relationships with all these other coaches out here, I think I would definitely have a chance if I want to do this in the future."

Air Force defense carries over toughness, attitude

Gazette, Aug. 4

By Brent Briggeman

For all the questions facing the Air Force defense that lost seven starters, there's one that doesn't concern defensive coordinator Steve Russ.

The toughness, he said, will still be there.

"We've got tough kids," Russ said. "There's no doubt about that. We've got some boys who like to play and are tough guys.

"So, the toughness? No. Did we lose really good players? Yes."

There's no doubt Air Force will be without some key players. Christian Spears was a three-year starter at safety and noted for his leadership. Nick Fitzgerald and Spencer Proctor started multiple seasons. Jordan Pierce was the breakout star of last season, leading the team in tackles, tackles for loss and big hits.

This is the cycle of college sports. Nobody stays forever.

What makes this year different is the attitude that Pierce, in particular, brought to a unit that had been lacking it for a few seasons.

"He's a nut," defensive end Alex Hansen said of Pierce in a wholly complimentary way.

But even Pierce didn't emerge until his senior year, which happened to be the first year Russ took over solo reins as defensive coordinator. One Air Force assistant said that attitude could have been credited to Russ' personality spilling over to the defense.

Well, Russ is back. And so, too, are established defenders like Hansen, Weston Steelhammer, Dexter Walker and Connor Healy, along with a slew of others who have been part of the rotation - if not the starting lineup - for two years, and a bunch of others who haven't played much but bring size Air Force has rarely featured.

So nobody seems concerned about that tough-guy factor.

"I really think this team has a little edge, a little attitude," said Healy, a middle linebacker who was second on the team in tackles last year. "These first three days we were banging pretty hard in helmets. Getting out here in pads, you just sense that attitude and physical edge and I think it's something the whole team is going to bring."

The role of defensive assistants Tim Cross on the line and Ron Vanderlinden at middle linebacker can't be overstated, as the veteran, outside voices they brought last year resonated with the team. Longtime assistants Matt Weikert (outside linebackers) and John Rudzinski (secondary) also return.

So, the staff remains intact to provide the continuity even as the personnel on the field changes.

Russ' fire has been evident throughout the first three days of practice, as he is easily the loudest coach on the field and his visor has been tossed to the ground more than once.

He said the intensity stems from a philosophy he picked up from Bob Knight, who said you can't coach and be tolerant.

"We have to have high expectations for guys," said Russ, an Air Force grad and Super Bowl champion as a linebacker with the Denver Broncos.

"What we don't have now is a ton of time for guys to feel their way through. We have to get them battle ready as soon as possible."

Sophomore tailback Benton Washington could challenge incumbents on Air Force's depth chart

Gazette, Aug. 5

By Brent Briggeman

Benton Washington understands real hunger, enduring 36 hours without food this summer during survival training.

So, the sophomore tailback wasn't about to launch into hyperbole when talking about his desire to emerge in Air Force's offense. Sure, he'd like to play, but he'll save the "hunger" talk for a truly empty stomach, not a desire for carries.

"I definitely want to be a part of it and contribute, but my focus is getting better every day along with the team," Washington said.

From spring ball through early fall camp, no Air Force running back has received more first- and second-team work than Washington. The foot injury that kept Jacobi Owens out for the final three games last year and through the spring left Washington a mainstay with the Falcons' top units. Not that he needed it to make a name.

Though Washington received no varsity playing time last year, he made perhaps the biggest splash in early August as a freshman. In team scrimmages he showed an enticing mix of speed and power, prompting offensive coordinator Mike Thiessen to say he was "someone you can be excited about."

The hardest hits in practice from last spring and early this season have usually come against him because he's providing a big portion of the contact and it's not his style to shy away from a collision.

So, what will become of the 5-foot-11, 205-pound Washington this year, assuming Owens and last year's backup tailback, Devin Rushing, are healthy? That will be a big question in fall camp.

"That position is as wide open as it gets," coach Troy Calhoun said.

Air Force has shown a recent willingness to go with a younger running back over an established returning player. Last year, fullback Broam Hart entered his senior season as the team's returning leading rusher. By the opener he was replaced by Shayne Davern, with D.J. Johnson also climbing past him when he returned from an injury. By the end of the season Hart took just 14 percent of the 223 carries that went to the top three fullbacks. This wasn't a reflection on his play, durability or character, but just a product of internal competition.

That's not to say the same will happen this year. Owens ran for 1,054 yards in 10 games as a sophomore last season. He's a proven commodity and he has two years remaining. It's obviously his position to lose.

Still, with the injury history that follows Owens and Rushing, and Calhoun's emphasis on the tailback position - which has seen an individual run for 1,000 yards in four of the past five seasons - don't count Washington out of this competition.

"The great thing about this team is everyone's always competing," said Washington, who entered the academy directly last year out of Northgate High School in Newnan, Ga., where he was a member of the National Honor Society and the senior class president. "I know Jacobi and Devin are working hard to get healthy and get back on the field. We're all looking forward to them getting back. Right now everybody who's playing, we're just trying to do our best. We all encourage each other, but that doesn't stop us from competing."

Deep class of Air Force juniors seal commitment with the start of classes

Gazette, Aug. 6

By Brent Briggeman

Classes at Air Force begin around 7 a.m. Thursday morning. That is when it all becomes official.

Once juniors begin classes in the fall term at the academy, they are locked in for good. Until then, they can leave without penalty. After that point, they are committed to graduate and serve five years on active duty.

For Jalen Robinette, there was never any decision to be made.

"People always ask me, 'What's your plan?'" the standout receiver said. "It hasn't changed. I'm committed. It's eyes on the prize - graduation, butter bars, all that."

Air Force leaned heavily on this class last year, when they were sophomores. And the group responded. The class of 2017 accounted for 56 percent of the Falcons' rushing yards, 53 percent of its offensive touchdowns and grabbed six of its 10 interceptions on defense - all from Weston Steelhammer.

The class produced last year's leading rusher (Jacobi Owens), the co-leaders in touchdowns (Shayne Davern and D.J. Johnson), the leading receiver (Robinette) and a first-team all-Mountain West defender in Steelhammer.

Plus, quarterback Nate Romine - a starter for much of his freshman year - guided the team to a victory over then-No. 21 Colorado State in his lone start of the season.

David Harris and Ryan Watson have been part of the defensive rotation for two years and Colin Sandor has earned starts on the offensive line.

They're all sticking with it.

"I feel like all of us have talked about it at some time or another," Steelhammer said. "We're all committed. We're ready to see what we can do these next two years."

It may seem like a non-issue. This group talks like they've been committed from the start and nothing has changed. Where's the story? But it's never that simple. Air Force routinely wins recruiting battles for players with limited Division I options. Many fitting that profile hadn't considered a military option until the Falcons showed up on the radar.

Owens, for example, said he knew nothing about the academy when he committed. He didn't take an official visit. He didn't know what to expect on the football side. He just took a leap of faith.

Robinette wasn't highly recruited out of high school as he primarily played wildcat quarterback on a mediocre team. Air Force projected his skills as a receiver and took a shot. He did the same with the Falcons.

These weren't necessarily players with a lifelong desire to serve their country, but rather athletes who have found this option through sports and have since taken on that monstrous responsibility.

Often, that doesn't work. A coach could win some Mountain West basketball games with a core of Tre' Coggins, Matt Mooney, Cameron Michael and Darrius Parker - players over the past three seasons who have spent at least one year at Air Force before deciding it wasn't a fit and leaving. The hockey team has also dealt with key players exiting.

Football isn't immune to this, but because the Falcons have rarely played freshmen and sophomores as much as they have with this class, there has rarely been so much talent laid out on tape for other coaches to evaluate and potentially target on the transfer market.

"I think Jalen Robinette could play for anybody," Fresno State coach Tim DeRuyter said.

That's not to say DeRuyter, an Air Force grad, was looking to grab Robinette, but his praise is more evidence the receiver's reputation has spread to the point where he would have had options before this year that he wouldn't have had in high school.

But, when Thursday morning rolls around, none of these juniors have said there will be a moment of hesitation before stepping into a lecture.

"I've been committed since I stepped on here for basic training," Romine said. "I want to graduate from here. I want to play football here. There's no doubt in my mind.

"And I already took my loan out and bought a car."

As good as this class has been, they should be better this year. Experience will help, of course, but so, too, will the rhythm of academy life. For the first time they'll enter a season fresh, rather than recovering from basic training as freshmen and survival training as sophomores. The classes aren't any easier, but upperclassmen routinely talk about having a better understanding of time management.

Plus, this group knows each other on and off the field. Several of them entered through the prep school, so this will be their fourth year together.

It's that camaraderie that made defensive coordinator Steve Russ sure the group would remain intact. An Air Force graduate himself, Russ understands what this group has invested. He never considered the idea that any of them might leave.

"When you're done with your sophomore year, you know the value of what you've done and what you have here," Russ said. "You also know that your toughest two years, you've put behind you. Now you start to reap the benefits of the blood, sweat and tears that you've gone through, because they really know afterwards what they have in life. And not only that, these guys really love each other. It's tough to up and say, 'Guys, I'm out of here.' I don't think it crossed anybody's mind. I know as coach, I never had any discussions about that."

Even if there were discussions, it all become moot Thursday morning. This group is here for the long haul.

Sophomore receiver thriving on a path he never envisioned taking

Gazette, Aug. 7

By Brent Briggeman

Tyler Williams has stood out through Air Force's fall practice, stretching out for catches, showing sure hands and playing with the confidence of someone secure in his situation.

For Williams, a sophomore receiver poised to contribute this season, this confidence is the product of choosing every step of his current path - even though some of those choices weren't easy.

It was one year ago this week, just a few practices into his freshman season, that Williams was approached by Falcons offensive coordinator Mike Thiessen with an idea.

"He told me there would be an opportunity to get on the field a lot sooner if I moved to Z (a slot receiver position)," Williams said. "He left it up to me, actually, and I chose to move over.

"It was tough. I came through the prep school and obviously I worked there and the whole summer at quarterback, and then to make the switch so soon was tough. You put in all these hours at one thing just to kind of throw it away."

The decision was more than just switching offensive positions. Playing quarterback was important enough to Williams that he turned down opportunities at Colorado and San Diego State, who had seen him as a cornerback. Giving up that spot was like sacrificing a dream. Again.

The first dream Williams held was to play in the NFL. To those who understand the long odds of reaching that level, that may seem silly. But when Williams was a passing for 1,354 yards, rushing for 1,145 yards and scoring 32 touchdowns as a senior for a state championship team in Tucson, Ariz., that's what he envisioned for his future.

But during the recruiting process, Williams listened to those he trusted most. His father and his high school coach, Matt Johnson, sat him down and asked, "What do you want to do in your life besides football?"

"That's really when my decision became clear," Williams said. "Hence, this institution would help me accomplish some of those goals and aspirations in my life.

"It was tough to swallow at first. Growing up you have those aspirations that, 'I'm going to go here,' or, 'I'm going to go here. I'm going to play football and I'm going to the NFL and do this and this.' But, you know, you've got to face that realization head on and realize what's going to make me a better person in life, move me along the furthest."

Williams said he hasn't given up on the NFL entirely, saying he would be selling himself short if he did. But he also understands the military commitment that comes with playing at Air Force.

Instead, his focus is on improving at receiver, something that has been evident through the first week of fall camp.

"He's a stud," quarterback Nate Romine said. "I have full faith he's going to be a big part of the offense at some point while he's playing here.

"He definitely has a lot of ball skills. If you would have told me he played quarterback, I would have believed it. If you would have told me he played receiver, I would have believed it. The dude's just an all-around athlete. I definitely have a lot of faith in putting the rock his way."

Williams said he has learned a lot from seniors Garrett Brown, a returning starter at the position, and Matt Galland. New receivers coach Derek Lewis, who played in the NFL, has taught Williams that "there's an art to catching the football."

Even defenders are lending a hand.

"In a 1-on-1 drill I went against Weston (Steelhammer) and he was telling me, 'I could tell what you were going to do by the way you were looking,'" Williams said. "To get that kind of help from a defensive guy who has seen slots for who knows how long, it's really been helping me along. It's a great thing."

So, no, Williams isn't where he envisioned, but he arrived at this place through his own decisions by following the advice of others who were looking out for him. He's leaning on those same types of people to make the most of it.

Air Force's Troy Calhoun believes awareness, prevention will allow football to overcome its dangers

Gazette, Aug. 10
By Brent Briggeman

Troy Calhoun's analytical mind breaks the dangers of football into a simple equation. Force equals mass times acceleration.

Air Force's coach understands that as players utilize modern training and nutrition to grow larger and run faster through more advanced speed training, the impact of the collisions is becoming exponentially more violent.

"Crashes are a lot louder," Calhoun said.

But there are other variables in play, and those keep Calhoun so steadfastly dedicated to his game that he works to recruit athletes to the academy and has given his eighth-grade son, Tyler, his full blessing to play.

Calhoun just made sure when his son first put on the pads two years ago that he was in the hands of coaches who knew how to teach proper technique. He reminded him over and over to keep his eyes up. He made sure to check that his helmet fit snugly, was inflated the right amount, had a working chin strap. He also emphasized that must wear his mouthpiece on each play.

"Those are all things you've got to reiterate to your guys, and certainly your son, too," Calhoun said.

That may be a boiled-down version of it, but essentially what Calhoun believes is that the dangers of football can be offset in an acceptable manner through diligent adherence to the available safeguards.

Calhoun has implemented changes to his program to limit full-pad practice days and allow proper recovery on various levels (physically and emotionally).

For the past two years, Calhoun has chaired the NCAA rules committee, the group that has instituted targeting rules to prevent dangerous plays that typically involve leading with the helmet against a defenseless player.

Rules changes in the past have marked major milestones in terms of player safety.

The National Center for Catastrophic Sports Injury Research at the University of North Carolina has tracked serious injuries across multiple sports for decades. The study found that 1968 was the deadliest year on record in football, with 36 deaths resulting directly from the sport. By 1984 that number had dropped to zero.

The conclusion the center reached was that a 1976 rule prohibiting initial contact with the head in blocking as the turning point.

Football remains the most dangerous sport for men, with a rate of 5.48 serious injuries per 100,000 participants at the college level.

Calhoun expects future rules will aim to change the nature of kickoffs, as numbers suggest that is the play that leads to the most concussions. Air Force's 50 percent touchback percentage ranked 30th in college football last year, while its 30.67 percent ranked 11th in 2008 - so it's a play that appears to be phasing itself out of the game.

But though head injuries are the growing concern around the sport - and no doubt a chief consideration for parents of kids approaching football-playing age - recent NCAA injury data indicates that only 7.4 percent of injuries were concussions at the college level. Lower limbs, ankles, etc., accounted for 50.4 percent.

Who didn't have an uncle or grandfather limping from an old football injury? Well, modern medicine is limiting the impact of those injuries, and Air Force's training staff is helping blaze new ways to tailor specific exercises to ward off injuries.

Also, the Falcons tested helmets in the spring equipped with devices to track and catalogue every impact. Special alerts would be sent for particularly worrisome hits, and season-long data would then be available to track contact in practice and games. That technology hasn't been adopted by the team yet, but it's another tool waiting on the horizon.

"I do think the amount of education that's out there now compared to even 10 years ago is so much better when it comes to the health and the safety of the players in all ways," Calhoun said.

Utilizing this education, there have been times when Calhoun and the Falcons medical staff have been forced to tell a player his career was finished.

"You've got to make sure the support elements are in place to get them to look at the bigger scope of, 'Hey, let's be wise enough that we don't lose out on some other opportunities that will come about in life and, first and foremost, for your long-term health,'" Calhoun said. "That's part of coaching, especially in this day and age. Especially at the Air Force Academy."

Calhoun said player safety was the reason the team did not try to schedule a 13th game for the 2015 season, though a rule provision would have allowed them to do so because a trip to Hawaii is on the schedule.

He feels administrators need to grant coaches the autonomy to make those kinds of decisions, just as coaches need to cede all control over injury decisions to the medical and training staff. Players also need to operate free of repercussions for reporting injuries, though a mix of hubris and the competitive nature of players and coaches keep this aspect slow to change.

But Calhoun feels, overall, changes in the way of thinking about injuries has allowed the game's preventative and recovery efforts to keep pace with its growing dangers. And because there is so much at stake, he doesn't feel it will ever be any other way.

"You want to make sure somebody is able to extract the full benefits of the sport, because I think they are immeasurable," Calhoun said. "When it comes to the work ethic, the discipline, the grit, the sense of spirit, teamwork, and yet, if that's ever compromised - or if the medical or safety part of it is compromised - then we've failed.

"And we aren't going to fail. We just won't."

Local product Brodie Hicks sees first-team reps in battle for spot in Air Force defensive secondary

Gazette, Aug. 11
By Brent Briggeman

Brodie Hicks finally heard the news he'd been waiting for when Air Force coaches told him before practice Monday that he would be rotating in with the No. 1 defense.

The Falcons' free safety job remains Hayes Linn's to lose, but this marked the first clear evidence that the local junior had made some headway.

"It was like, 'Yes, this is my chance,'" Hicks said. "Coach gave me the chance, I've got to go out and perform it."

Keeping with a recurring theme for this squad, Hicks brings size to his position that Air Force doesn't typically have. A graduate of Falcon High School, located about 25 minutes east of the academy, he was recruited as a 6-foot-2, 200-pound wide receiver but drew only moderate attention in part because his school was primarily a running team and he touched the ball just 17 times as a senior (turning those opportunities into six touchdowns and 328 yards of total offense). He was also a solid basketball player and a sprinter in track, but nothing that jumped off the recruiting charts.

Air Force was his only Division-I offer aside from preferred walk-on status at a few spots, but if there had to just be one, this would have likely been his choice. His father, Barry, is a longtime chemistry professor at the academy and Hicks had spent time here since his childhood.

In him, the Falcons found an athlete who fit the academic profile (he's a civil engineering major) who also brought physical gifts that could be used somewhere, even if not his natural position. This is how they landed Jalen Robinette, the star wide receiver who was found as a wildcat quarterback, and Shayne Davern, a high school linebacker who has since switched to fullback.

Hicks played receiver for his first season before converting to safety 18 months ago.

"From a recruiting standpoint, you want to bring in guys with a lot of length," Air Force secondary coach Jon Rudzinski said. "That's the ideal - the combination of speed and length. That's what we're seeing with Brodie, he's got a combination of length and speed that allow him to compete in the Mountain West Conference.

"Anytime that you're a longer safety it's going to give you the ability to make tackles in space. You see that with Weston (Steelhammer) when he has opportunities to get ball carriers down. When you've got those big-ol' long arms it allows you go gator up some ball carriers, and that's what Brodie has is that length to really make plays in space."

Hicks is used to fighting his way up the ladder. His older sister, Kiah, earned All-America status in discus and weight throw at Colorado State and was a multisport star at Falcon. Brodie said it took him until at least eighth grade until he could hold his own against her and, as he put it, no longer be the low man on the totem pole.

The battle for time with Linn has been a bit more friendly.

"We're sharpening each other," Hicks said. "Iron sharpens iron. So in the meeting rooms we're sitting across from each other and making sure we understand stuff, so we can get out here and it's just boom-boom-boom. We're both playing fast and we're just trying to get that spot."

Coach Troy Calhoun said the position is "wide open," and noted that junior Tyler Weaver could push Hicks and Linn as well.

He said much has been thrown at the players over the past two weeks in terms of learning the position, which is counted on for much of the pre-snap reads in the secondary. And though determining a starter soon would help that learning process, Calhoun said this battle will be allowed to play itself out.

"We want to make sure we've got it right," Calhoun said, "rather than hurrying into a decision."

New Air Force Football Uniforms for 2015

Nike Blog, Aug. 11
By Sir Lucas Leftfoot



Another day, another reminder that the college football season is tantalizingly close. Today, that reminder comes in the form of new Air Force football uniforms for the coming season, an eye-catching set befitting the team that coach Troy Calhoun has in position to catch some eyes with its play this year. (10-3 record at a service academy last season!)

When Air Force takes the field this season, the Falcons will be wearing the Nike Mach Speed uniform, the lightest, fastest, most advanced football uniform the Swoosh has ever created. But while the technology is as innovative as it comes, the aesthetics are a clean blend of traditional style and tradition-inspired updates.

As usual, Air Force will have solid-white and -blue jerseys and pants, and they'll be infused with a new round of military-inspired style. The jersey's "AIR FORCE" wordmark and numbers are a brand new custom font, inspired by the one used on US Air Force aircrafts, while the shoulder patches are a reminder of why each player is in uniform — to serve their country and become an officer in the US Air Force.

On the helmet, Air Force's iconic lightning bolt mark is once again proudly displayed, as it has been for the last sixty years, celebrating the "bolt brotherhood" that ties together each and every generation. Likewise, the bold blue stripe down the center of the helmet — and the corresponding blue stripe down each pant leg — represents the "long blue line" of every person who has served in the Air Force.

Take a closer look at the new Air Force football uniforms for the 2015 season below, and look for the Falcons to give them their on-field debut September 5 against Morgan State.

Air Force fullback excited to see what he can do at full strength

Gazette, Aug. 13
By Brent Briggeman

Because D.J. Johnson's strength as a football player is his strength, he was never himself last season. That's no longer the case for the fullback, who on the football field looks like a 5-foot-9 bowling ball with arms, legs and an Air Force helmet.

"Now I feel like I can make one cut. I feel like I can break a tackle," the junior said. "Last season I was happy I could play, but I wasn't absolutely ready to play. Now I'm 100 percent ready to go."

Johnson suffered a delayed start to his sophomore season when non-invasive attempts to mend the muscles connecting his lower quads to his knees didn't take and a minor operation was required. The lingering injury kept Johnson limited to light conditioning and only upper body work in the weight room.

This year he feels his conditioning is well beyond where he was last season and he has again been able to lift with his lower body. He did three squat reps at 500 pounds recently and was unhappy that the training staff cut him off at that point. His power clean is around 320 pounds. "Nothing too impressive," he said.

Defenses might disagree.

Even at less than full strength, Johnson appeared in 11 games, rushing for 330 yards on 81 carries. His eight touchdowns tied classmate Shayne Davern for the team lead. Johnson's 6-yard touchdown run against New Mexico - the second of his three scores that day in a 35-31 victory - was one of the highlights of Air Force's season. Johnson ran over Lobos defensive backs Markel Byrd and Ryan Santos on his romp into the end zone.

Stronger and leaner, having dropped from about 240 pounds to 235, Johnson has even Air Force's generally reserved coach Troy Calhoun excited.

"He's quick, he's sturdy, he's explosive," Calhoun said. "What's really been enjoyable to see with him has just been his emergence as a leader on the football team as a junior. Sometimes juniors even are still wondering a little bit, 'Is it supposed to be only the seniors who are up-front guys?' But he's one of those guys, he loves being hip to hip and shoulder to shoulder with everybody else. It's in the weight room, it's on the field, he loves the blocking part, he's a solid ball carrier. I could go for a while."

Johnson has taken all the first-team work through fall camp as Davern remains out with a shoulder injury, but the two figure to again split time when the season begins. They combined for 843 yards on 192 carries last year with 16 touchdowns. Both have the skill set to handle the position primarily on their own, but having the two is similar to taking a starting pitcher and allowing him to let loose as a reliever.

"As much as I'd love to, you can't block power every single play," Johnson said. "So, I would like to, but it's fun playing with him. When I come out, it's like someone same or better at something else when he goes in, too. It's a little more fun having someone at the same level as you. You're not trying to outdo each other. You're friends. But when he hits somebody, you try to hit somebody harder."

Time running out for senior Air Force receiver Myles Barnes to unlock potential

Gazette, Aug. 14
By Brent Briggeman

Myles Barnes' story at Air Force figured to be one of frustration. Surely the Falcons were wondering why all that talent hadn't translated into more production. And certainly Barnes had to be asking why his number hasn't been called more often.

But that wasn't the case.

Coaches seem content with the contributions Barnes has made, and Barnes had no complaints.

"I'm very happy," said Barnes, a 6-foot-5, 225-pound senior wide receiver from Minneapolis. "Now, seeing that graduation is so close you can see it's all going to pay off. That that light at the end of the tunnel is getting bigger and bigger. Hopefully this football season can be even better than last year and I can just do whatever I can to help the team.

"It's not about me."

Barnes has appeared in 22 of Air Force's 25 games over the past two years, but has made just six catches for 57 yards over that span. It's not because of a lack of physical tools, to be sure, but for whatever reason things just haven't clicked.

Coaches, and even Barnes, point to issues with consistency and energy as what has prevented Barnes from turning into the standout he occasionally is on the practice field.

With one more year, it's not too late for that to develop.

"I'd like to see him take jumps," first-year wide receivers coach Derek Lewis said. "I really would love it, but nothing is given, everything is earned. He has to earn his way on the football field. I'd love for him to do it, but I can't just give it to him. We won't ever give him anything out here on the football field. He has to earn it."

Lewis is convinced that eyesight issues are limiting Barnes' ability to pick up the ball on deep routes. Barnes isn't sure that's the case, but he has agreed to schedule an eye exam just to be sure.

The bigger issue, Lewis knows, is getting Barnes fully engaged. It's not like Barnes is difficult to coach. He's entering his fifth year at the academy - counting his year at the prep school - so he fully understands how to take direction. It's just that extra bit of fire still needs to be lit, and Lewis, who played in the NFL and coached at Texas and Florida, might be the right one to ignite it.

"I love coach Lewis," Barnes said. "He brings energy and reminds me of my AAU basketball coach. I mean, he's an energetic guy. He'll really get on you for a lot of things and he knows what he's talking about."

Barnes, the first member of his family since at least World War II to join the military, said nothing that happens in his final football season will make him regret his decision to attend the Air Force Academy. A management major, he hopes to serve on active duty as an acquisitions officer.

But first, Air Force is hopeful it can find other ways to utilize him - particularly in goal-line situations on the opposite side of 6-foot-3 Jalen Robinette.

"Hopefully we can get both of them on both sides so we can get the best advantage on fade balls," Lewis said. "I would love to do that in the red zone. I mean, I would love to. But again, he's got to earn it."

Robinette Soars to Rare Altitudes in Air Force Passing Game

Today's U, Aug. 14

By Tom Shanahan

A time-honored test for high school football coaches to find linemen is to watch for nimble feet on big kids playing basketball in gym class.

Well, in the era of the spread passing game offense, Air Force's football coaches took that method to another dimension while they recruited Jalen Robinette out Bexley High in suburban Columbus, Ohio. He was high school quarterback the Falcons projected as a Division I college wide receiver.

"Air Force didn't offer me until they came to a basketball game," said Robinette, a three-sport athlete in football, basketball and track. "They told me, 'We want to see if you can catch the ball.'"

That might have been the easiest test Robinette has aced. He grew up pounding the rock while preferring the basketball to football.

Three years later Air Force's triple-option offense features a 6-foot-4, 215-pound wide receiver that would fit in playing a spread offense style. He enters his junior year on a path to rank among Air Force's leading receivers for a season and a career.

Robinette earned honorable mention All-Mountain West Conference last season as a sophomore with 43 catches for 806 yards and four touchdowns. The total ranks seventh best on Air Force's single-season chart.

Honorable mention may not sound like much on the surface, but remember Robinette plays in a triple-option offense and in a conference known for other schools flinging the ball around to generate inflated statistics. Those receivers have an edge on all-conference team voting.

The most recent Air Force receiver to earn all-conference honors was Matt Farmer in 1998 and before Farmer it was Ken Carpenter in 1985. That puts a different perspective on Robinette's honors.

He caught voters' attention with production that included 18.7 yards per reception. He had two 100-yard games and a long touchdown of 58 yards. His breakout season followed his freshman year with 16 catches for 291 yards and three touchdowns. Respectable numbers but not enough to satisfy Robinette.

"I came at my sophomore year with the mentality I wasn't a freshman anymore," Robinette said. "I had to extend my game. I showed some flashes my freshman year, but I wanted to be more consistent with my techniques. I wanted to play like a junior or a senior."

Robinette's production and the play of quarterback Kale Pearson sparked an Air Force turnaround from 2-10 in 2013 to 10-3 with a win in the Famous Idaho Potato Bowl over Western Michigan. Pearson has graduated, but Robinette is confident in his classmate, Nate Romine, taking over behind center.

Romine started five games as a true freshman when the Falcons struggled in 2013 at quarterback. Returning starter Jaleel Awini was kicked off the team and the backups suffered injuries. Thrust into the role, Romine, a 5-11, 195-pounder from Upland, Calif., was 44 of 81 passing for 603 yards with five touchdowns and one interception. He ran 75 times for 205 yards and three TDs.

As a sophomore Romine was Pearson's backup, and then he established himself No. 1 on the depth chart in spring ball. His 2014 stats were 14 of 30 passes for 208 yards without a touchdown and one pick. He ran 35 times for 97 yards and a TD.

“Nate isn’t really a new quarterback for us,” Robinette said. “He got a shot his freshman year, and we’re comfortable with him. We’ve been friends since Day 1. It’s just a matter of him getting in his reps. He’s great at what he does, and we’re confident in him.”

Robinette will draw increased coverage following last year’s success, so he worked on his role to be a reliable target for Romine.

“My thing right now is to play faster,” he said. “The first year it was grasping the playbook and holding my own. Then it was mentality. Now it’s playing fast with techniques. There were plays (last year) I was counting my steps. I wasn’t playing fast enough. Speed is my focus this year.”

Robinette believes he can top last year’s numbers, although he benefitted from Falcons’ game plans that highlighted Pearson’s passing ability. He also might top contribute to the other end of passing stats. Air Force coach Troy Calhoun hasn’t forgotten Robinette was a high school quarterback. He threw two passes on options plays last year, completing one for a 54-yard touchdown.

But Robinette gave up quarterback dreams in high school. As a receiver recruit, he received a scholarship offer from Bowling Green State of the Mid-American Conference. He also has the size and athleticism to suggest a kid from the heart of the Big Ten could have walked on at Big Ten school.

In fact, he’ll test his talent this year against a Big Ten power in addition to the usual MWC opponents and the rivalry games with Army and Navy. The Falcons face Michigan State on Sept. 19 at Spartan Stadium.

“I thought about that (walking-on),” Robinette said. “But as a high school kid, I wasn’t thinking about just the college lifestyle. I wanted something with a bigger picture. It didn’t take much convincing for Air Force to recruit me. Once I made my visit to the campus, I was sold.”

And once Air Forces coaches saw him handle a basketball and go up for balls, they were sold on him as a college wide receiver.

Air Force fullback excited to see what he can do at full strength

Gazette, Aug. 17
By Brent Briggeman

Because D.J. Johnson's strength as a football player is his strength, he was never himself last season. That's no longer the case for the fullback, who on the football field looks like a 5-foot-9 bowling ball with arms, legs and an Air Force helmet.

"Now I feel like I can make one cut. I feel like I can break a tackle," the junior said. "Last season I was happy I could play, but I wasn't absolutely ready to play. Now I'm 100 percent ready to go."

Johnson suffered a delayed start to his sophomore season when non-invasive attempts to mend the muscles connecting his lower quads to his knees didn't take and a minor operation was required. The lingering injury kept Johnson limited to light conditioning and only upper body work in the weight room.

This year he feels his conditioning is well beyond where he was last season and he has again been able to lift with his lower body. He did three squat reps at 500 pounds recently and was unhappy that the training staff cut him off at that point. His power clean is around 320 pounds. "Nothing too impressive," he said.

Defenses might disagree.

Even at less than full strength, Johnson appeared in 11 games, rushing for 330 yards on 81 carries. His eight touchdowns tied classmate Shayne Davern for the team lead. Johnson's 6-yard touchdown run against New Mexico - the second of his three scores that day in a 35-31 victory - was one of the highlights of Air Force's season. Johnson ran over Lobos defensive backs Markel Byrd and Ryan Santos on his romp into the end zone.

Stronger and leaner, having dropped from about 240 pounds to 235, Johnson has even Air Force's generally reserved coach Troy Calhoun excited.

"He's quick, he's sturdy, he's explosive," Calhoun said. "What's really been enjoyable to see with him has just been his emergence as a leader on the football team as a junior. Sometimes juniors even are still wondering a little bit, 'Is it supposed to be only the seniors who are up-front guys?' But he's one of those guys, he loves being hip to hip and shoulder to shoulder with everybody else. It's in the weight room, it's on the field, he loves the blocking part, he's a solid ball carrier. I could go for a while."

Johnson has taken all the first-team work through fall camp as Davern remains out with a shoulder injury, but the two figure to again split time when the season begins. They combined for 843 yards on 192 carries last year with 16 touchdowns. Both have the skill set to handle the position primarily on their own, but having the two is similar to taking a starting pitcher and allowing him to let loose as a reliever.

"As much as I'd love to, you can't block power every single play," Johnson said. "So, I would like to, but it's fun playing with him. When I come out, it's like someone same or better at something else when he goes in, too. It's a little more fun having someone at the same level as you. You're not trying to outdo each other. You're friends. But when he hits somebody, you try to hit somebody harder."

Air Force's Ryan Watson has finally had time to adjust to new position on defense

Gazette, Aug. 17
By Brent Briggeman

Ryan Watson had spent his football life playing on the defensive line, so a midseason switch to outside linebacker last year was met with trepidation.

"At first I was cautious and a little afraid," the Air Force junior said. "Dropping to cover receivers and stuff like that was a hard task to adjust to, but once you realize you're fast enough to keep up with these guys it's really just a confidence thing. The more you rep it out, the better you feel."

Defense is about playing aggressively, but because Watson was learning on the fly, he often found himself thinking instead of reacting last year.

The Falcons certainly hope that learning process is now at an advanced state, as Watson plays a spot that can be critically important to the defense. Playing there last year, Spencer Proctor made 10.5 tackles for loss - second on the team.

Watson is among the most experienced players on Air Force's defense. He played in 11 games as a freshman, making 22 tackles, then appeared in 12 games last year. He owns 5.5 career tackles for loss, including 3.5 sacks.

Despite his experience, Watson finds himself with little in his career to fall back on for guidance because of the position change. He also adjusted his training regimen. No longer concerned with adding bulk as a lineman, the 6-foot-3, 230-pound defender from Conyers, Ga., could focus on conditioning and strength.

"There's still some things that pop up every once in a while where he's got a question about something because it's new to him," said outside linebackers coach Matt Weikert, who cited Watson's speed and ability to change direction as a reason the staff decided to move him away from the defensive line. "But once you explain it once to him he's the type of individual who is not going to ask that question again."

Watson, who spent a year at the prep school, has appeared on the dean's list for academic work and split this past summer between Edwards Air Force Base in California and the academy, where he served as a cadet cadre during survival training.

"I try to set an example," said Watson, who had intended to go into acquisitions but is considering pilot training after spending time this summer in a T-38. "They always say lead by example, so I try to show that you can excel on the hill as well as on the football field.

"It's just about buying into the program and the brotherhood, I would say. Everything the coaches do, even though you don't understand it, is for a reason. When they first moved me to outside linebacker, I didn't understand it, but it was for a reason. When you just buy into it and give everything your all, you reap the benefits, I believe."

Offensive coordinator Mike Thiessen has converted into Mr. Run

Gazette, Aug. 19

By David Ramsey

Mike Thiessen admits he once believed more in the pass than the run. This ranks as a dangerous confession for the offensive coordinator at the Air Force Academy, which operates a rush-rush-rush offense straight out of 1927.

As a high school quarterback, Thiessen filled warm California nights with passes. When he led Air Force's offense as quarterback in 2000, he wanted to follow the same pattern.

Former Air Force coach Fisher DeBerry is relaxing at his home in South Carolina as he talks about Thiessen. He remembers Thiessen, who wore No. 3, constantly approaching him with suggestions for a play.

The suggestion always was the same.

"He would have liked to have thrown the ball 65 times a game," DeBerry says, laughing at the memory.

The Falcons will not throw 65 times a game this season under Thiessen's direction. He's reformed. Mr. Pass has seen the light and converted to Mr. Run.

"Absolutely," Thiessen says.

"Don't get me wrong. I love to throw the football, but I don't think there's anything more demoralizing than when you can absolutely line up and play a man's game, which is a physical smash-mouth kind of deal and just punish your opponent."

Thiessen oversees what could become one of the most powerful attacks in Air Force history. Last season, the Falcons averaged 31.5 points. This season, the average could leap above 35.

He smiles as he talks about D.J. Johnson and Shayne Davern. A "two-headed fullback monster," he says.

He's impressed by a receiving corps led by junior Jalen Robinette. He's hopeful about quarterback Nate Romine, who led the Falcons to last season's "upset" win over Colorado State.

"Do we have the ability and the potential?" Thiessen asks.

He answers quickly.

"Yes, but I hate that word potential because it talks about what you could do instead of what you do, do. But we could be really good, if we want to be. If we grind every day. If we do all the little things."

Last season, Air Force did all the little things. The Falcons attacked everything in sight, largely because they were angry and disgusted after losing 10 of 12 games in a 2013 season that was even more hideous than the record indicates.

Thiessen directs one of the lightest offenses in the country, but declines to make excuses. He enjoys the challenge of placing a relatively lean 255-pound lineman against a flat-out obese 355-pound lineman.

"I think everybody here likes to walk a different path than anybody else in the country," he says. "The guys who came to school here were choosing something different. They were choosing to be part of something a little different. ... You feel like you're a one-of-a-kind of person."

Thiessen doesn't just talk about being distinctive. He lives it, too.

DeBerry remembers an obedient if offbeat quarterback. The coach oversaw several swashbuckling types during his 27 seasons at the academy, and Thiessen ranks near the top.

"He was a little bit of a riverboat gambler," DeBerry says. "He thought that every time he threw a pass, it was going to be right on the money for a touchdown and he thought every time he ran the ball he was going to score.

"He was a lot of fun to coach."

The confidence wasn't empty. In 2000, Thiessen was named the Mountain West's Offensive Player of the Year. In his final game with the Falcons, he led Air Force to a 37-34 win over Fresno State while rolling to 99 yards rushing and 204 yards passing.

As the Falcons and their offensive coordinator prepare for the season, keep that 37-34 score in mind.

I have a feeling we'll see several of those everyone-scores-a-lot games in 2015.

Air Force's Troy Calhoun channels Humphrey Bogart in ad touting new-look website

Gazette, Aug. 20
By Brent Briggeman

The only error in the rollout of a surprising campaign to support a redesigned website for Air Force athletics came in the form of an incorrect fact.

Sending a link that showed Troy Calhoun shedding his generally stoic public persona by diving into character for a "Casablanca" spoof, athletic director Jim Knowlton invited everyone to check out the acting debut of the Falcons football coach.

This was not, however, the debut.

Back in sixth grade, Calhoun donned a leather jacket and joined the cast of "Grease" for a school play. He can't recall the exact character he played, remembering only that he wasn't in the lead role of Danny that John Travolta immortalized in the 1976 film.

"I guess there is a little bit of acting in the background," Calhoun said.

Wherever the acting chops were developed, they are certainly on display in this black-and-white video titled "Casa Azul" - which roughly translates to The Blue House - and shared via YouTube. Calhoun, sporting a white tuxedo in a darkly lit room as he channels Humphrey Bogart, laments between dramatic pauses, "Of all the game joints. In all the towns. In all the world. They walk into ours."

He instructs co-star, assistant athletic director for equipment support Dan Siermine to, "Just play it, Sam. Play it."

Calhoun readily admitted he threw himself into the role.

"It's hard not to when you have Siermine there with you," Calhoun said. "I thought Sam was exceptional, and I'd be shocked if Siermine didn't end up winning a Tony or something like that - one of those awards. He certainly deserved it."

The website's new look made its debut Tuesday, the day before Calhoun's video was shared. The Falcon Vision spot was written and directed by Brian Jerman, with assistance provided from video producer Adam Parker.

"We wanted to do something a little different that you don't see all the time," Jerman said. "I think our fans will like seeing our coaches doing something they don't ever see them do. The series is designed for our website and to generate awareness of the new website, ticket sales and other events."

So, will the video go viral? Hard to say, but it's a safe bet every player in the Air Force locker room will give it a look to see a different side of their coach. Asked if Calhoun generally shows a different side of himself to his players than he does to the media, senior defensive end Alex Hansen said that was rarely the case.

"When we have team meetings, it's mostly about school," Hansen said. "We talk very little about football in a full team meeting. It's about being good people, stuff like that."

This 52-second clip will surely catch them off guard. Enough that many will, in all likelihood, play it again.

Junior Roland Ladipo emerging from the crowd of Air Force cornerbacks

Gazette, Aug. 21
By Brent Briggeman

Roland Ladipo hasn't had the chance to make his name known to opponents and most Air Force fans, but those on the inside know what he can do.

Turn the digital recorder off, drop the notepad and ask about who the team's best cover corner will be this year and Ladipo's name is mentioned more often than not.

"Out of the group he definitely stands out," receiver Jalen Robinette said. "Physically he gives us some trouble getting off the line with the press and everything. He's pretty good up there. And also, out in the open field breaking down on go-balls he's right there in your face."

Ladipo played in all 25 games over the past two years, primarily on special teams. He's a 5-foot-10, 185-pound junior from Pinkerton, Ohio, who earned accolades as a sprinter in high school track - running the third leg of a state-championship 800-meter relay team. He played both ways in football, lining up as a slot receiver as well as defensive back.

He was also a member of the National Honor Society and would like to go into pilot training after graduating from the academy.

It's an overall package that understandably has Air Force intrigued, but as defensive backs coach John Rudzinski pointed out, "we don't have a guy in the program right now who has faced live bullets."

"Consistency-wise, there's another step that he's got to take," coach Troy Calhoun added.

"I will say this, he's got better focus, he has good length, he likes to play, he is very, very competitive, and he's had some moments where he's played pretty well."

In a perfect world, Air Force would have two primary corners who line up for the vast majority of the defensive snaps, with the team's depth there to provide only the occasional breather.

This is how Jordan Mays was used last year, while Justin DeCoud and Gavin McHenry split time on the other side. With Mays and DeCoud gone to graduation and McHenry out for an undetermined time as he awaits word on his status, the Falcons are trying to fill those spots.

Ladipo seems a safe bet to take the majority of snaps at one corner, while Kalon Baker, Jesse Washington and Marquis Griffin figure prominently in the conversation.

"He does have that speed where he can accelerate and run with any of the receivers in the Mountain West," Rudzinski said of Ladipo. "But at the same time he knows he's got to be a technician, and he's just working a lot of the technique stuff to make sure he can utilize that speed. Our speed is only as good as the technique that we use at that corner position."

Ladipo, who is one of six siblings and therefore accustomed to needing to work to gain recognition in the pack, is happy with where he's at on the depth chart.

"It's just a blessing that I'm in this position right now," Ladipo said. "Hopefully it will be able to stay this way the rest of the season."

"We're going to be strong this year, to be honest. The defense as a whole is going to be able to do something."

Improved talent at receiver helps Air Force's defense to develop

Gazette, Aug. 21

By Brent Briggeman

Though Air Force will enter the season with new faces at cornerback, it doesn't mean they'll be untested. With a star receiver in Jalen Robinette, plus others like the 6-foot-5 Myles Barnes who bring unusual length to the position, the corners are getting a live look every day in practice.

"Guys like Jalen, they challenge the heck out of our corners," defensive backs coach John Rudzinski said. "It's fun for us to go against these receivers. It elevates the level."

Robinette, the 6-4, 215-pound standout who made 43 catches last year for 806 yards, said he is happy to help his teammates' development.

"It's just about going hard every day," Robinette said. "In my freshman and sophomore year it was kind of the other way, with (Justin) DeCoud and (Jordan) Mays. Going against them every day helped me and pushed me forward. Now I can kind of return the favor to the younger guys coming in."

The only problem with this scenario is the danger of damaging the psyche of the corners. No position on defense requires more swagger and confidence, and it's got to be difficult to maintain that with Robinette in particular leaping over them for a deep catch seemingly every day.

But the corners know there's value in it, even when they are on the losing side in practice.

"It helps a lot," junior cornerback Roland Ladipo said. "In the Mountain West we have a lot of big receivers out there that we're going to have to compete against, so I feel like being able to go against him every day in practice is a bunch of help and is definitely critical for us."

And when that doesn't exactly work out?

"You have to have a quick memory and just move on to the next play," Ladipo said. "It's going to happen sometimes, but you have to try to reduce it and move on to the next play. Make the next big play."

'We're Ready to 'Roll': A.J. Ruechell, Air Force OL are a Step Ahead

Today'su.com, Aug. 21

By Tom Shanahan

Anytime Air Force enters a season with an inexperienced offensive line, it adds to the size disadvantage the Falcons already face in the trenches. Those obstacles confronted Air Force last year following a 2-10 record in 2013.

It didn't matter – the Falcons finished 10-3 with a Famous Idaho Potato Bowl win over Western Michigan. Now imagine four offensive line starters returning in 2015.

"We're ready to roll," said senior right guard A.J. Ruechell. "We're bringing back most of our starters on offense. We've been working hard. Our defense has been kicking butt. I think we're going to have a good season."

Players with intangibles such as Ruechell, a 6-foot-1, 265-pounder, are among the reasons Air Force linemen can overcome their lack of experience and size. Throughout two years of awaiting his opportunity, he got in his mental reps, if not physical reps. He played on the JV team as a freshman and a limited role as a sophomore.

"I came into my junior year knowing all the plays backward and forward at both guard and tackle," Ruechell said. "My freshman year I played on the JV team, but I practiced against the varsity. I got a lot of mental reps my freshman and sophomore year. By my junior year, I knew the plays well enough to let me focus on preparing for the season."

Ruechell earned the starting nod at right guard in spring ball and held down the role for the first three games. But when right tackle Sevrin Remmo (6-3, 255) went down with a season-ending injury, Ruechell shifted to starting at right tackle for the remainder of the season.

Remmo, now a senior, is No. 1 on the depth chart against this year, allowing Ruechell to return to the position he favors.

"I like both positions," said Ruechell, "but guard is a little more physical, so I like it."

He said his high school experience when he had a physical advantage over most kids compared to his freshman year at Air Force on the JV team taught him the value of play knowledge.

"I was used to starting three years in high school, and when I came here I didn't know the plays and was playing slower than high school," he said. "That showed me I had to get the mental reps down. Once you know the plays you're reacting to what you see on the field. You don't have to think too much. You can play a lot faster."

With graduation losses in the offensive line from the 2013 season, Ruechell entered 2104 fall camp and the season opener confidence he was ready for the step up in play.

"After the first couple days of practice, I knew I could hang and excel," he said.

Joining Ruechell and Remmo as returning starters this season are left tackle senior Matt Rochell (6-3, 270), who has started every game the past two years, and junior left guard Colin Sander (6-2, 280), who started six games last season.

The newcomer is junior center Dylan Vail (6-2, 280), but the o-linemen also gain continuity from offensive line Clay Hendrix beginning his ninth year in the role.

Last year was Air Force's sixth 10-win season, seventh bowl game in eight years under head coach Troy Calhoun and 19th year winning the Commander-in-Chief's Trophy, the round-robin series with Navy and Army.

Air Force's offense was sixth in the nation rushing with 273.1 yards per game. The Falcons also were sixth in the nation in sacks allowed with 12, which is a more significant statistic than most years. You have to understand Air Force threw the ball more than usual under senior quarterback Kale Pearson and averaged 145.7 yards a game.

Air Force, which often schedules a Football Championship Subdivision opponent for a home opener, rolled over Nicholls State 44-16 behind hits maturing line. This year the veteran linemen open the season against Morgan State on Sept. 5 at Falcon Stadium.

"Two years ago we worked hard in the offseason after a tough season," Ruechell said. "We had some fire in our team and were ready to get back out there. I think we've got that fire this year, too."

Air Force Falcons' best linebackers this year include Healy brothers

Denver Post, Aug. 23

By Brent Briggeman

With four linebackers essentially competing for one starting job, the Air Force football team should be deep at that position.

"You want to do your best all the time," said junior Trey Alexander, one of those four fighting for major playing time. "That's how it should be. Every day you come out here to get better. This competition kind of forces you to do that."

At this point, though, it looks like it might be the Healy show at linebacker.

Connor Healy, a senior, will start at one inside linebacker position as he comes off a 2014 season in which he made 90 tackles. Healy's brother, Patrick, a junior, has handled most of the first-team reps in preseason camp this month and has the inside track on the other starting job. Alexander has seen more and more time with the top unit recently, though, and right behind those two are sophomores Jack Flor and Grant Ross.

"Connor has been rock steady," said defensive coordinator Steve Russ. "He's been really good. The other four guys are competing their butts off, and we're going to play the next best one. We really feel like we have some good depth there. We're excited about it."

Patrick Healy, a former Mullen High School star, is probably the best communicator among the group. Alexander, 6-foot-1 and 225 pounds, has the best size. Ross, who had an offer to play at Big 12 power TCU, has the best speed. Flor is more of a throwback-type player who simply makes plays.

"Pat has good quickness, really savvy," said coach Troy Calhoun. "He plays like a very experienced player, which really he is when you look at the number of reps he's banked here over the last year and a half."

"Trey is a really big body. Smart, tough, very physical. Grant Ross and Jack Flor are really athletic. They're guys with great instincts and who chase the ball extremely well but could be very adept especially maybe in long-yardage situations, and yet still have enough pride and grit to play the run well too."

This group hasn't let the competition drive a wedge in its feelings for each other.

"We spend so much time together, we love hanging around with each other," Patrick Healy said. "We always have fun during meetings, out of meetings, out of football. We love to joke around. It's been fun."

Air Force's season opener is Sept. 5 against Morgan State at Falcon Stadium.

Air Force still unsettled on a few defensive positions with opener approaching

Gazette, Aug. 28
By Brent Briggeman

Air Force's season opener is slightly more than a week away, and some starters at certain positions seem no closer to a resolution than they did when camp opened in July.

Two linebacker spots in particular - one of the inside spots and the "spur" position that is a hybrid linebacker/defensive back spot - are seeing multiple players rotate in during practice even as the preparation turns to the Sept. 5 game against Morgan State.

Defensive coordinator Steve Russ said it would be ideal to have an obvious starting unit by this point in camp, but not enough difference has been seen by the contenders at those positions to give up the benefits of the competition in favor of continuity.

"It will resolve itself after this weekend," Russ said. "But nothing is set in stone."

At inside linebacker, first-team reps Thursday were split between Patrick Healy, Trey Alexander and Grant Ross. Based on the way practice has played out over recent weeks, it would seem a safe assumption that Healy will start next to his brother, Connor, who has locked down the other linebacker spot. But he will start only in the way that an appetizer arrives at your table first. The Falcons will surely have a taste of the other options through the course of this first game.

The same seems to be true at spur, where Jacob Onyechi hasn't ceded his spot to returning starter Dexter Walker, who has fought minor injuries but appears healthy now. Both figure to play against Morgan State.

"Usually if you have competition that goes up to the first game, it means you're probably going to roll some guys," Russ said. "It's not a bad thing, because you know you're going to have some depth."

Neither Russ or coach Troy Calhoun gave a timeline to establish the final depth chart for the opener other than to say that players hadn't been told anything as of Thursday night.

"It's all season long," Calhoun said. "You are forever evaluating personnel. It's always changing. That's the way it's just always going to be. We don't have a set 11 and that's it. What's fortunate about football is you don't have to go out with a full shift change. It's not a case where four guys skate on so four guys have to skate off."

Studying Led Air Force Linebacker Dexter Walker onto Field

Today's U, Aug. 28
By Tom Shanahan

Air Force senior linebacker Dexter Walker is from Lawrenceville, Ga., one of the most fruitful areas in a football-rich southern state for producing college prospects.

But the water he drank in Lawrenceville or the competition he faced playing for Dacula High aren't the only reasons the 6-foot, 210-pounder has developed into a third-year starter as he prepares for the Falcon's 2015 season.

"I had great high school coaches that taught me how to watch film," said Walker, referring to former Dacula assistants John Poitevint and Todd Reeves. "They sat me down and taught me how to look for tendencies, how to look for keys that dictate plays."

Most college athletes are confronted with the moment in practice when their eyes pop open and they realize they can no longer rely only on superior athletic ability against a roster of talent. But Walker adjusted quicker than most with respect for Xs and Os.

His freshman year in 2012, after a year at the Air Force prep school, he played in all 13 games in a backup role. The highlights were three tackles against Hawaii and a forced fumble against Nevada.

His sophomore year he broke into the starting lineup for eight games while playing in all 12. He was second in tackles with 91, including 4.5 for a loss and 2 sacks in a hybrid safety/linebacker role.

"I was hoping to play – that's everybody's wish to play early," Walker said. "You don't want to sit on the bench and not contribute until late in junior year or your senior year. I think what helped me get on the field was knowing the plays and executing what the coaches want you to do."

"Once you get on the field, you have to have a mentality of belonging on the field. You have to be a good student of the game and have a mindset you can't be beat."

Walker's junior year he shifted to outside linebacker, where he is again ticketed to start in 2015. He finished 2014 with 46 tackles for eighth on the team. But if plays ran away from him, he made the most of other plays. He had nine tackles and two for a loss against Nevada. In the Famous Idaho Potato Bowl win over Western Michigan, he returned a touchdown 60 yards for a touchdown for a two TD lead in the fourth quarter of a 38-24 victory.

Although Walker contributed more statistically as a sophomore, like any Air Force player he considers his junior year his successful season. The reason is simple: Air Force slipped to 2-10 in 2013 — the only year head coach Troy Calhoun hasn't guided the Falcons to a bowl game in his eight seasons — and rebounded with a 10-3 record in 2014 that included winning the Commander-in-Chief's Trophy with wins over Army and Navy.

The Falcons, who open the season Sept. 5 against Morgan State of the Football Championship Subdivision, will be relying more on Walker's ability and experience this year. He is one of only four returning starters on defense, although two of them earned All-Mountain West Conference honors. Junior strong safety Weston Steelhammer was a first-team pick and senior defensive lineman Alex Hansen a second-teamer.

"I've worked on being more physical my senior year," Walker said. "I want to be there for my teammates more often so we can get our offense on the field and in position."

Walker's focus on preparation in high school is the type of recruit Air Force seeks out. It wasn't hard for the Falcons to get a commitment out of him.

"I think it all came down knowing what I want for my future the opportunity Air Force presented to me," Walker said. "I want to serve and give back to the people in this nation. Football has been part of it, but football only lasts so long. I want to do something bigger than football."

Kicker ready to fill big shoes for Air Force

Gazette, Aug. 29
By Brent Briggeman

The player likely to have the most influence whether Air Force wins or loses some games this year was once dragged into the sport of football kicking and screaming.

Drew Oehrle has since dropped the screaming and is quite comfortable with the kicking.

"My dad kind of forced me out my eighth grade year," Oehrle said. "I didn't want to do it. I was scared to death."

The nerves have since quelled for the kicker who went on to set the Indiana high school record for field goals in a season (18), field goals in a game (five) and once booted 52- and 51-yard field goals in the same game, one going each direction. He came a foot short on a 50-yard attempt in a game at Lucas Oil Stadium in his hometown of Indianapolis that would have set the record at the time for longest kick in the venue that is home to the NFL's Colts.

Handling the kickoffs for Air Force last year, Oehrle put 39 of his 78 attempts into the end zone for touchbacks.

Now, the senior will take over the place-kicking responsibilities that were vacated by Will Conant's graduation.

Conant was last year's Mountain West Special Teams Player of the Year, making 19-of-21 field goal attempts. One of those misses was a 61-yard desperation attempt in the cold at the end of regulation in a tied game against Nevada. Aside from that, Conant didn't miss an attempt over Air Force's final 10 games. During that run, three Falcons' victories were clinched with points in the final minute or overtime. Change a few kicks along the way and Air Force's 10-3 record could have looked a lot more like 7-6.

"If they put me out there, they've got confidence I can make it," Oehrle said. "So I have confidence in myself to do it, too."

He has clearly been the most accurate Falcons kicker through fall camp. He made a 53-yard attempt on Aug. 22 in a scrimmage at Falcon Stadium.

"He's kicked really well, especially the last week and a half," coach Troy Calhoun said. "You can tell he's got a strong leg. He proved that last year on his kickoffs. It's not exactly the same, but you can still see he's got to have some power to put that many balls in the end zone.

"He gets super, super elevation right off his foot. I think his approach time has improved. We like it to be less than 1.3 (seconds), and I think he's done a good job of that without feeling rushed in terms of the rhythm you want when you approach the ball."

Of course, the physical side of things is only a fraction of what is required of a kicker who must perform under pressure. Oehrle's last true pressure kick came in a high school game against a rival that put his team up by two scores in the final minute.

Calhoun didn't sound too concerned about this aspect of Oehrle's game.

"You go to school here, I imagine there's a little bit going on with you most of the time," Calhoun said.

Oehrle, once brought into this sport against his will, is excited for one final season in pads.

"If I can put my stamp on it and finish a game, that would be great," he said. "But I'd also be OK if the offense scored about 45 points. Whatever gets the job done."

Air Force receiver Garrett Brown flying high under the radar

Gazette, Aug. 30
By Brent Briggeman

Garrett Brown doesn't really fly under the radar, he just zigs and zags around it or gets lost on the screen next to much larger targets.

The Air Force senior has thrived in this manner. He caught six touchdowns last year - most for a Falcons player since 1972 - and on five of those there wasn't a defender within 5 yards of him.

It's easy to understand. Opposing defenses have a checklist of issues that they must consider against Air Force, and chief among them are big fullbacks, the option and Jalen Robinette as a vertical threat on the edge. If safeties aren't already cheating up to help with the run, they're probably eyeing the tight end across the middle.

Often lost in the shuffle is the 5-foot-9, 190-pound Brown, who may seem more of a supporting character than leading man but keeps on stealing scenes.

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"I like it like this," Brown said. "I hope I stay under the radar the whole season. Jalen's earned everything he's getting. I'm not too worried about who's getting the press."

Robinette led Air Force with 43 catches for 806 yards last season, scoring four touchdowns. Brown had 36 receptions, 535 yards and those six touchdowns, which marked the fifth-most in program history for a season.

If he catches six more touchdowns this year he would catch Frank Murphy at second place on the Air Force career list.

If Brown accomplishes the goal he has set for him this year, he can forget about maintaining his status as a secondary threat.

"Me and (backfield) coach (Jake) Campbell have talked about it, 1,500 all-purpose yards," Brown said.

"That's the goal. He put the challenge out there, I told him I'd get it. That's what I'm shooting for."

Brown gained 780 all-purpose yards last year (195 rushing, 50 on punt returns), so 1,500 would mean double the production.

No one around him seems to doubt his capability to maybe not reach that exact number, but certainly achieve some impressive feats.

"He's an extremely coachable kid, just trying to polish up some technique," first-year receivers coach Derek Lewis said. "He is very well-schooled in the offense. I'm just trying to keep him crisp and sharp. The biggest thing is just keeping him healthy - the kids get worn down by what they do up the hill - just trying to fine-tune some fundamentals and techniques. He's a really, really talented kid and extremely shifty."

Quarterback Nate Romine, who threw Brown his first touchdown reception at New Mexico in 2013, said a receiver like Brown who can find soft spots in a zone or speed past a man-to-man defender is invaluable.

Brown's impact as a teammate, Romine said, carries equal weight.

"He bounces both extremes of being reserved and then out there," Romine said. "He knows how to get a fire lit under people's butts and get them going. As a football player he's got fire in him, as a leader you can tell he loves this game."

Life is good for Air Force QB Nate Romine, and he knows it

Gazette, Aug. 31

By Brent Briggeman

Nate Romine has always been comfortable being Nate Romine. The Air Force quarterback's confidence was clear to see from the day he took over the starting job as a freshman, less than three months removed from the beginning of basic training. If he was nervous, he hid it with a cocksure, California grin that never left his face. That grin didn't go away through a sophomore campaign that saw him return to an understudy role. And now, as he is completing a fall camp that saw him run essentially unopposed back into the leading spot, the junior's comfort in his own skin has morphed into something closer to unabashed joy. "Life is good for Nate Romine right now," Romine said. Now, he's not generally the type to refer to himself in the third person, but he made an exception in this case after listing all that he has going for him. "Classes are awesome," he said. "You're taking what you want to take because they're in your major, most of your buddies are in the same major as you. It's almost like being in high school all over again." And then there's the freedom that comes at this stage in his progression as a cadet. "As a junior, things are great. If I feel like leaving for the day, go see the girlfriend or go eat with the boys, it's easy."

And to get to out, Romine hops in his 1970 Ford Bronco, a purchase he made this past summer in Castle Rock after being inspired by the image of Vincent Chase driving one in "Entourage."

"The stars are aligned," said Romine, reflecting on all that is right in his world.

Air Force knew it had a talent in Romine, who was recruited out of Upland, Calif., where he averaged 210 passing yards and 80 rushing yards per game in two seasons as the starter. But it was the personality, the eagerness to lead, that the team discovered when Romine was called upon when three quarterbacks ahead of him went down during the 2013 season.

"There's something about him," coach Troy Calhoun said at the time.

Romine, whose first start came against Notre Dame, wasn't sensational as a freshman, but he was a bright spot in an otherwise dismal season. He led the Falcons to a win over Army in a game in which he posted a 204.0 quarterback rating. He completed 28 of 41 passes with three touchdowns and no interceptions in his first three starts while rushing for 128 yards and a pair of scores.

He then returned to the bench when Kale Pearson regained his health last year. Romine's lone start came in a victory over No. 21 Colorado State.

He's started six games in his career and hasn't thrown in interception in any of them.

"He's got good savvy," Calhoun said last week. "I think he has good intangibles, it's been neat to see."

Romine will serve as triggerman for offense loaded with as much skill-position talent as Air Force had featured in years. Maybe ever. Receivers Jalen Robinette and Garrett Brown, tight end Garrett Griffin, tailback Jacobi Owens and fullbacks Shayne Davern and D.J. Johnson are established standouts.

"You want to get the ball in those people's hands," Romine said. "They're doing the job for me, they're getting open. I've just got to get them the ball. Sometimes no one is around them within 15 yards."

Karson Roberts will be the backup, but there hasn't been a sense that competition was ever truly open at the spot.

The pressure of filling Pearson's shoes has been all the motivation Romine has needed in fall camp.

"I'm just trying to be as intrinsically motivated as possible," he said. "I don't feel like you have to have someone chomping at your heels to try to be better."

While Romine knows how good he has it right now, he is also wary that all could come crashing down. So, when it comes to personal goals, the quarterback who went 24-2 in high school has just one thing on his mind.

"Just win," he said. "Win the Mountain West. Beat Army. Beat Navy. Go to a bowl game and win that, too."

Air Force fullback Shayne Davern returns to practice for Air Force after shoulder surgery

Gazette, Sept. 1
By Brent Briggeman

Shayne Davern took a gamble, but it was one he felt he had to take.

By opting for shoulder surgery one week before the start of fall camp, Air Force's standout junior fullback knew he would be giving up his preparation time for the season and risked cutting into the season if everything didn't go as planned.

Well, based on the fact that Davern finally shed his red jersey - reserved for injured players - for a blue one Monday it seems everything went smoothly.

"It was my choice, either I could play with it or not play with it," Davern said. "For me, personally, I felt like I couldn't contribute all that I can with it, so I had to have the surgery. Now I feel great."

Davern believes it was the San Diego State game last year where he first injured his left shoulder. After that he essentially sprained it anew each game, with the impact growing worse each time. The injury was supposed to heal itself, but when it hadn't over the summer he finally opted for a surgery that shaved back some bone and tightened ligaments.

"It impacted me blocking, lifting my arm, moving it, everything," Davern said. "It was not cool."

Davern obviously played effectively through the pain last year. He said the shoulder was bothering him in the Famous Idaho Potato Bowl, yet he ran for 101 yards, scored two touchdowns and earned game MVP honors.

Now, he's hoping to be free of pain and even more effective. And that was worth giving up fall camp.

"I would have liked to have been out here working all fall just because, No. 1, That's how you build a team together," he said. "And No. 2, you need the reps and the practice. That part is unfortunate, but I'm just glad my shoulder feels good and I'm ready to contribute in any way I can."

Earning the right to return wasn't a simple process. Davern had to show he was at 90 percent of his capabilities in the weight room, and he was subjected to an on-field test that included smashing into dummies, jumping and turning somersaults. The goal of the drills is to simulate a nine-play drive, and the 6-foot-1, 240-pound native of Carlsbad, Calif., had to complete three of them with little rest.

He passed the inspections and is ready to play, though he's not sure exactly how much he'll be used initially, particularly with Air Force playing down in division to take on Football Championship Subdivision Morgan State in Saturday's opener.

He feels ready to go and that he hasn't lost anything from last year, when he ran for 462 yards and six touchdowns over the final seven games.

"I've just been working hard like everyone else," he said. "I just want to contribute to the team. I don't feel like I've taken a step back. I'm just trying to grow as a player, and as a person, too."

Air Force football coach Troy Calhoun allows Gazette's Paul Klee exclusive access for one day

Gazette, Sept. 2
By Paul Klee

If Troy Calhoun had his way, the NCAA would implement a salary cap for coaches, the Air Force football schedule would never include a bye week, Peyton Manning would be declared the greatest to ever play, and ESPN would broadcast '80s college basketball games on a never-ending loop.

Oh, one more thing: These steaks would cook faster. It's 8:12 p.m. on a Thursday, and Calhoun last ate when he spoke at a booster club gathering in Denver around noon. Now he's here, in khaki pants and a blue-striped golf shirt with the Air Force emblem, sizzling seven slabs of beef over the barbecue grill on the back patio of his family's home in northeast Colorado Springs. It's 66 degrees and smells like tailgating.

"Check this out," he says. Directly below the wooden deck is a weatherproof, rubberized basketball court, complete with a 3-point line and opposing hoops, where Calhoun challenges his son to games of H-O-R-S-E. "For basketball guys like us, it's pretty cool to have your own court," Calhoun says. It is cool, all right, just not as cool as the postcard view from their subdivision: In the distance is the Air Force Cadet Chapel, pointy and illuminated like a shrunken DIA; farther south is Falcon Stadium, Calhoun's office for the past eight football seasons; climbing above both are the dark, imposing shadows of Pikes Peak and the Rampart range of the Rocky Mountains.

"Ready whenever you are," says his wife, Amanda. They met at Ohio University — Amanda as a grad student, Troy on the football staff. The first date was supposed to be dinner and a movie but evolved into a late movie — "The Postman" with Kevin Costner — when Calhoun got delayed on a recruiting trip. Four months later, Amanda got a letter from Vanderbilt saying she had been accepted to its doctorate program and had the opportunity to defer for one year.

"I've been deferring for 18 years," she says with a laugh, carrying plates of baked potatoes and zucchini into the dining room. They've been married 15 years, through five coaching jobs. On football Saturdays at Falcon Stadium, the coach's wife waits until kickoff to arrive.

"But I'm really calm during the game," Amanda says.

Amelia, their daughter, rolling her eyes: "Suuure, Mom."

Troy: "She's really hard on the coaches."

Amelia is 11. "We had her with the Broncos," Amanda says.

Tyler is 13. "We had him at Wake (Forest)," Troy says.

Amanda is originally from Texas, which is why the Little League World Series, featuring a team from Texas, hums in the background on a flat-screen TV. She graduated high school in Laramie, however, a fact that should make Wyoming coach Dave Christensen feel even worse. And she knows the game. A Texas thing, she says.

Calhoun is a basketball guy. His father, at 74, still coaches high school hoops in Oregon. He's also a baseball guy, taking his family on ballpark tours every July. (Tyler loved Yankees Stadium; Amelia's partial to Fenway.) One full day spent with Calhoun last Thursday, and his scary-accurate memory, suggests he's also the smartest guy.

"I call him 'Rainman,'" defensive coordinator Steve Russ says.

The steaks are cooked, medium rare, and Calhoun shuts the grill.

"Do you eat red meat?"

The mission

1:52 p.m.: There are questions that shouldn't need to be asked, but they are. Such as this one, often posed by the Air Force head coach in the living room of a recruit: Will you be OK without a cell phone for 39 of 40 days during basic cadet training? Or, can you run 1.5 miles in 11 minutes at 7,000 feet? Or, do you have a 3.5 GPA with a 25 on the ACT, minimum requirements to even be considered for admission in the academy?

"We get killed with negative recruiting," Calhoun says. "Other (schools) point out every detail. It's brutal."

Eight years ago when the Calhouns moved into their only home in Colorado Springs, the Air Force coaching staff avoided asking those questions when recruiting a prospective cadet. Why scare them away, their reasoning went. That recruiting approach lasted for the first three of his eight seasons, a run that includes 59 regular-season wins — 11 shy of Colorado and Colorado State combined — and continues Saturday against Morgan State at Falcon Stadium.

Now the coaching staff is "blunt" in recruiting, Calhoun says. It reveals early that players are required to carry 18 credits per semester (wide receiver Garrett Brown carried 22 last fall) and must wake up at 4:30 a.m. during basic training.

"Life at the academy will not be easy," Gen. Stephen Williams, the commandant of cadets, tells the Air Force football team. "But life is not meant to be easy."

Calhoun is standing in front of his players, alongside Gen. Williams and Gen. Andrew Armacost, the dean of faculty. The cadets are fixated on the commandant, who graduated from the academy in 1989 — the same class as Calhoun.

"I want to talk to you about leadership. Good leadership changes the outcome," the commandant says. "I watched a team lose to Wyoming in a game it shouldn't have lost. They did not lose the next game. And that Colorado State game? The greatest display of leadership I've ever seen on a field. I was happy about the victory, but I was more proud of the leadership you displayed that day."

This is a common theme throughout Calhoun's Thursday: The means carry more weight than the end result.

"We are a little different here," Calhoun tells the players. "You must embrace that."

So, too, is the objective of the Air Force football coach. Asked to define the mission of this unusual major-college coaching job, he finally comes to "winning games" on the fifth or sixth rung. "I think it's very clear what our job is," he says, then lists education, character development, leadership and career placement ("You can coach the San Antonio Spurs from the Air Force Academy," he says) ahead of football wins. "The athletic part is somewhere down the line," he says.

OK, it's a noble philosophy. But if you go 1-11, 2-10, 1-11 the next three seasons, you're getting fired — despite a 93-percent graduation success rate, which Air Force claims is the highest mark in the Mountain West.

"Our job is to make sure those who do graduate from the academy are exceptionally well-educated and dependable people," Calhoun says. "Isn't that what college sports is supposed to be about?"

The Study

2:31 p.m.: "What is the most important thing we can do?"

Calhoun enters a cramped room barely wide enough to fit the eight linebackers listening to position coach Ron Vanderlinden. Two years ago, two of the five leading tacklers in the NFL were Vanderlinden's at Penn State — NaVorro Bowman and Paul Posluszny. His give-and-take with these linebackers works like an interactive Q&A. "Communicate," the players respond in unison.

Positional meetings go for 30 minutes. Practice seldom runs over 90 minutes, so players can make dining hall. Then, mandatory study hall from 7:30-10.

"The short practice is the toughest part," Calhoun says later. "A lot of the stuff we'd like to put in, we don't have time to put in."

The Q&A continues, Vanderlinden sliding a transparent sheet onto an overhead projector.

Vanderlinden: "Jack, who do you have here?"

Jack Flor, sophomore linebacker: "The running back, coach."

Vanderlinden: "They've got 3 seconds and 50 yards to go. What's our goal?"

Players: "Don't give them time to let their receivers get downfield."

Formation after formation appears on the projector: Storm, Blaze, Fire, Tilt Pig. Calhoun often chooses the linebackers meeting. "They're the center of everything we do on defense," he says. Players snack on Starkist-To-Go and Clif bars.

A horn blares through the hallway, and players shuffle to the locker room, their collective lack of size standing out. Practice begins around 4 p.m.

"We got bigger this year," Calhoun jokes later. "We went from tiny to miniature."

A crack of thunder shakes the air. Today the Falcons will practice indoors.

The memory

3:25 p.m.: Nathan Troy Calhoun was 19 when his beloved Cardinals lost the 1985 World Series. He turns 49 on Sept. 26 and is listing the eight position players in that St. Louis lineup, before he names the four Duke basketball players selected in the first round of the 1999 NBA draft, before he lists the regional sites for the 2016 NCAA Tournament. "Spokane's got one," he says, and why does he know that?

Why and how Calhoun remembers every fact that has crossed his mind is a topic of discussion in the Falcons' locker room.

"He'll remember what happened on a certain day, like, 10 years ago," says Connor Healy, a senior linebacker from Castle Rock. "It's seriously crazy."

Calhoun is smart. How smart? That's a guess. He won't divulge his ACT score and has never taken an IQ test. "It wouldn't be very high," he jokes, though his colleagues, players and elephant's memory suggest otherwise.

"Sharpest coach I've ever been around as a coach," says Russ, the defensive coordinator. "Sharpest memory of any person I've ever been around."

Air Force hosts Morgan State on Saturday. The number of plays Morgan State ran with an empty backfield in 2014? Eleven. College basketball's player of the year in 1994? "Glenn Robinson, wasn't it?" he says. His first sports love is college hoops, and he's known to study Bo Ryan's swing offense and Bob Knight's defensive principles — handy knowledge when Calhoun organizes their annual auction draft for March Madness. On the Tuesday after Selection Sunday, Calhoun brings the entire staff into the film room. They order hot wings and spend fantasy money. Last March, Jahlil Okafor went for \$36, Frank Kaminsky for \$34 or \$35, and so on.

"There's no (real) money involved. Don't alert the NCAA," he says. "But we have a blast."

If the box is here, Calhoun is thinking over there. With a widening gap between the haves and have-nots in college football, how would he even the playing field?

"Every school gets the same salary cap to hire their coaches," Calhoun says.

Why would he ban bye weeks in college football?

"If you're a competitor, don't you want to play every week?"

The future

8:46 p.m.: Once Air Force concludes spring ball, the coaches break camp and visit three other programs, drawing tidbits they can apply at the academy. Calhoun spent time around Nick Saban at Alabama, for one.

"You watch Alabama in a practice and they're not that different, physically, from the Broncos," Calhoun says. He's seen the highest level of college ball and "loved" the NFL, having served on Mike Shanahan's staff in Denver and as Gary Kubiak's offensive coordinator in Houston, all of which begs the question:

Given the inherent challenges of coaching at a service academy, where last year's 10-win season was its first in 16 years; that even his daughter asks when Falcon Stadium will get new bathrooms, among a long list of necessary upgrades; that the inequalities in college athletics clearly bother him; Would he pursue another job?

"Never say never," Calhoun says. "I just know that there's no crystal sphere that predicts the future. I haven't seen a Ouija board in 20 years."

Calhoun dances when asked if he was offered the Broncos head coaching job in 2011, or the Tennessee job at the same time, or any job outside the academy.

"I'll just say this: Each day that we've been here, the only thing we've focused on is the Air Force Academy," Calhoun says. "This isn't about us."

Perhaps that approach is why his office is barren of personal achievements, aside from family photos taped to the wall; or why "he runs a player-centered program, not a player-driven program," as an assistant coach says; or in the message he delivers to his players inside the indoor practice facility:

"Your shirts will not have slogans on them. You don't work for an auto parts store. You represent the United States Air Force Academy at all times."

Calhoun carves a final slice of steak from his dinner plate, his son recalling the time they saw Clayton Kershaw throw a perfect game through six. It's the final week before Air Force opens his ninth season, and the head coach pulls up a chair to help his daughter with her algebra homework.

Air Force football in no rush to settle position battles

Gazette, Sept. 7
By Brent Briggeman

Air Force coaches still aren't sure when the competition will be settled at several defensive positions. And frankly, they don't seem to want it to happen.

The Falcons rotated some positions, including middle linebacker, by quarter yesterday. Patrick Healy played the first 15 minutes, Grant Ross had the second.

The same was true at free safety, where Brodie Hicks started and played the first quarter before giving way to Hayes Linn.

At outside linebacker, D.J. Dunn and Ryan Watson shared time. At the other outside linebacker spot, Jacob Onyechi earned the start over Dexter Walker but the snaps were distributed about 50/50 until the Falcons emptied the bench in a 63-7 blowout of Morgan State.

Coach Troy Calhoun said that as long as no notable difference emerges at some positions, two players may continue to play like they did in the opener.

"We aren't superstar driven," Calhoun said. "If you've got two guys who are pretty close - the season's long enough, it's not 162 games - but you've got to develop some depth as you go. If you've got two guys who can contribute, it's a boost for morale if you can do it."

In its second game, Air Force will play a San Jose State team that also utilized a by-quarter substitution pattern, only the Spartans used it at quarterback. Coach Ron Caragher played senior incumbent Joe Gray in the first and third quarters, while junior college transfer Kenny Potter played the second and fourth quarters of a 43-15 victory over New Hampshire on Thursday.

Gray was 16-of-20 for 253 yards and a touchdown, while Potter was 13-of-14 for 167 yards.

Like Calhoun, Caragher did not expect the competition to end any time soon.

"I think it'll be like this for a little bit," Caragher told the San Jose Mercury News. "They both played very well."

Air Force has opened as anywhere from a 6.5- to 7.5-point favorite over the Spartans.

Air Force Assistant Sets Targets for Falcons WR Garrett Brown

Today's U, Sept. 8
By Tom Shanahan

Air Force senior Garrett Brown plays wide receiver. runs the ball a handful of times and returns punts. Air Force assistant Jake Campbell coaches the Falcons' running backs.

They work largely in different position groups, but that hasn't prevented Campbell from motivating Brown. He sees something in common with Brown's all-purpose yardage role and his own career as an Air Force running back/receiver/kick returner. He helped the Falcons to a share of the 1995 Western Athletic Conference (the defunct league that preceded the Mountain West).

"He likes to challenge me to break his records, and I like that," Brown said. "Last year it was touchdown catches and I beat him with six. This year he came up to me and he said, 'How about 1,500 all-purpose yards? He said I bet you can't get to 1,500.' We joke about those things. I guess this is the biggest one."

Brown is off to a good start.

In Air Force's season-opening 63-7 win Saturday over Morgan State, the 5-foot-9, 170-pounder from Marietta (Ga.) Pope finished with 180 all-purpose yards. He needs to average only 125 to hit the 1,500 mark in 12 regular-season games.

His 180 total:

- Three rushes for 39 yards with a long of 20.
- Two receptions for 58 with a long of 36.
- Two punt returns for 83 with a long of 75 for a touchdown.

His second quarter score for a 28-0 lead marked the first time since 2009 Air Force returned a punt for a TD. It also topped his punt return yardage total for last season when he finished 10 for 50 and a long of 13. Brown admitted in a Twitter post released by @AFFootball that, "I almost fair caught it. Then it was like, 'Alright, here we go.' "

But that's not to suggest he's overly cautious back there.

"I like returning punts," Brown said. "It's like being in a high-speed vehicle. It's really exciting. The keys are seeing the ball off the foot and understanding all aspects of the game. Everything is happening at a high speed and you've got to make quick decisions. It's exciting, especially if you do it right."

As for doing it right, Brown critiqued all three areas of his game.

On punt returns, he said he danced on a couple of them too much before accelerating.

"That was my problem," he said. "I tried to shake everybody."

In the running game, he said, "I have to get my timing down better on the pitch backs and not get too far ahead on the blocking."

On the receiving, he said, "I need to fine tune my fundamentals. I think I had some drops and I'd like to have none."

Brown, whose three receptions extended his streak to 19 straight games to rank third active in the MWC, and junior Jalen Robinette (6-4, 215) provide Air Force with potent threats at wide receiver. Robinette scored Air Force's first touchdown against Morgan State with a 26-yarder for a 7-0 lead.

Last year Robinette led the team with 43 catches for 806 yards and four touchdowns to earn All-MWC honorable mention. His long catch was 59 yards. Brown was second with 36 balls for 535 yards and six TDs with a long of 63. Air Force's coaches would seem to be tempted to take advantage of two experienced wideouts, but Brown says he and Robinette don't call for the ball.

"I think we'll still do what Air Force normally does and that's run the ball," Brown said. "But it helps to have him on the other side and I try to do that for him. That's not something we talk about (more passing), but we do push each other to perform."

Another reason they've become a good fit at Air Force is they thought alike in high school. They fancied themselves as college basketball prospects in high school until they realized they had a better future in football.

"We have some pretty good basketball games in the off-season," Brown said.

But former basketball players aren't all that makes roll and Air Force's with seven returning starters. Veteran play is why Brown says Saturday's rout of Morgan State was different from the Falcons' other one-sided season-opening wins. Air Force has typically scheduled a Football Championship Subdivision school as an opener, including the 2-20 season in 2013 that began with a 38-13 victory over Colgate.

"The offense got done what we wanted to get done," Brown said. "We were functioning smoothly, but we did have some hiccups we know that we have to improve on. This is the most experienced we've been (on offense) since I've been here. Everybody contributed in some way."

But Brown contributed in a third way in addition to his normal two.

Air Force's passing game could be looking at another quiet week

Gazette, Sept. 10
By Brent Briggeman

Jalen Robinette calls it "leaving the airport before you get your luggage."
That is what the Air Force receiver did on a ball that went in and out of his hands Saturday.

"I was thinking about what I was going to do before I even had the ball," he said. "That was just a mental lapse and something I can't let happen again. Those are the easy ones."

The drop meant nothing in the outcome a 63-7 blowout of Morgan State, but it did mean Robinette had to settle for one catch on a day when Air Force completed just four passes. His catch went for 26 yards to provide the Falcons' first touchdown of the season. After that, the Biletnikoff Award candidate was silent.

That could well be the case again this week.

San Jose State, which travels to Air Force on Saturday night, ranked No. 1 in least passing yardage allowed last season and returns cornerbacks Cleveland Wallace III and Jimmy Pruitt, who were second-team and honorable mention all-Mountain West last season. But the Spartans allowed the 116th most rushing yards in the country.

Certainly this would appear to play into Air Force's strength.

"We'd love to go into every game and throw it seven times," said Air Force offensive coordinator Mike Thiessen, referring to the number of passing attempts the Falcons made last week. "That means we're probably doing pretty good in the run game. Times where we throw it more is probably because we have to, and not the other way around. We are who we are and we're going to play to our strengths."

San Jose State gave up just 126 rushing yards on 26 carries in its opener against New Hampshire, part of a stifling defensive effort that saw the Spartans allow just 186 total yards in a 48-13 victory. But no one is confusing New Hampshire, a Football Championship Subdivision team that averaged 169.5 rushing yards last year, with Air Force and its rush offense that is perennially ranked in the nation's top 10.

A better comparison would be Navy, which went 2-0 against San Jose State over the past two years as it ran for 911 yards and scored 12 rushing touchdowns - 10 from quarterback Keenan Reynolds.

"The triple option has been a challenge for us, particularly against Navy," said San Jose State coach Ron Caragher, whose program will face Air Force for the first time since 1997. "It's a different team, a little different system (than Navy), and there's different personnel from us. But there's still a stinging feel from those games, so we definitely need to right the ship."

Air Force coach Troy Calhoun believes teams will struggle to run against San Jose State because the play from the corners will allow defensive coordinator Greg Robinson to crowd the line of scrimmage. And there's always the chance that the Spartans will load up so much to stop the run that this will turn into a game you would never expect based on the stats.

But if Air Force passes just seven times again, Robinette and quarterback Nate Romine are fine with that.

"We just have to play Air Force football," Romine said. "It goes all the way back to high school, my coach would say if you're running 50 or 60 times a game it's probably a good thing."

Air Force quarterback Nate Romine out with ACL, MCL tear according to his social media post

Gazette, Sept. 15
By Brent Briggeman

Nate Romine spent a recent August evening recapping all that was good in his life as an Air Force cadet, as a football player and in general as a young man.

"Let's hope this doesn't mean there's (a storm) coming," Romine said, spicing it up with language he quickly apologized for using.

Well, the storm - or maybe something a bit worse - arrived.

Romine tore the ACL and MCL in his right knee midway through the fourth quarter of Air Force's 37-16 victory over San Jose State late Saturday night. The Falcons haven't officially revealed this information, but Air Force radio broadcaster Jim Arthur reported via Twitter that Romine posted it on his Facebook page early Monday.

Romine's Facebook page is not public, so this information cannot be seen by those who are not his Facebook friends.

"We'll see what he has going forward," said coach Troy Calhoun, dismissing Romine's own words.

While nobody from Air Force had to come out and say the words ACL or MCL, there was no doubt that the rest of this season will not include Romine under center.

"I saw him today," receiver Jalen Robinette said. "He had a great attitude, high spirit; it was kind of just like seeing him before a normal day of practice except that he was on crutches. He's doing well. He's holding up pretty well. It's just like a couple years ago with Kale, when he went down. The next guy just has to step up.

"Prayers out to Nate, but we've got to keep moving on. Karson's our guy right now."

The Karson that Robinette is referring to is Karson Roberts, a senior who started three games in 2013 before a concussion opened the door for Romine to take over. Roberts, who was not made available to media Monday, took reps with the first team and seems to have full confidence of his coaches and teammates.

Offensive coordinator Mike Thiessen said the offense will be run the same under Roberts, who has a reputation as a better runner than passer.

"Instead of identifying who he is now, we'll let his production over the next 10 weeks prove who he is at the end of the year," Thiessen said. "We'll find out."

Air Force will also find out as the week progresses what the status will be of receiver Garrett Brown, who dressed out for practice Monday but did not participate because of an unknown injury.

If Brown can't play, there's the added complication that his backup, Tyler Williams, will have to sit out the first half because of a second-half ejection for targeting. That likely leaves Alex Ludwig in the z-receiver position.

The Falcons also continue to be without tight end Garrett Griffin. The depth chart released Monday finally removed Griffin, who hasn't played this year because of a left knee injury.

With the injuries beginning to pile up, this may not be the ideal time for the Falcons to travel to face No. 4 Michigan State. But that's what's next on the schedule.

"We'll operate the same," Thiessen insisted.

At this point, even a slightly depleted Air Force squad seems ready to take on that storm.

Karson Roberts is ready to run Air Force's offense

Gazette, Sept. 15
By David Ramsey

Karson Roberts will expertly run Air Force's offense, with a heavy emphasis on the word run.

He ranks among the brightest students at the academy, and he's been studying Troy Calhoun's deceptively complicated offense since 2012. He's ready for the unfortunate and immense challenge awaiting him as Air Force's starting quarterback.

Offensive coordinator Mike Thiessen was shaking his head Monday evening in the fading sunshine. Yes, he's confident in the backup who is now the starter.

"He's proven that he can execute what we do and we don't have to be anybody a whole LOT? different," Thiessen said of Roberts. "We just have to trust him, and here we go."

Here we go is right, and the first trip is doozy. Roberts and the Falcons travel Saturday to No. 4 Michigan State.

Nate Romine is done for this season after suffering a severe knee injury in Saturday's win over San Jose State.

His injury follows a depressing trend of the Calhoun era, which dates to 2007. Shaun Carney, Kale Pearson and, now, Romine have been left with big scars on their knees.

The latest sad mishap hands the job to Roberts, a 6-foot-1, 195-pound senior.

Don't worry.

He's ready.

Two years ago, on Sept. 28, 2013, Roberts rampaged for 161 yards, including a 60-yard run, against Nevada while directing the Falcons' offense to 42 points. Air Force somehow found a way to lose, but Roberts made a huge splash in his debut as starter.

After the splash, Roberts got lost in a crowd of Air Force quarterbacks. The man who ran for 161 yards found himself as a third-string quarterback in 2014 and never seriously threatened Romine for the starting job this season.

Roberts is a superb runner. He makes quick decisions on the option, and he's fast and determined and rugged. He enjoys calling his own number, and he's a superior runner to Romine.

Passing is what has kept Roberts down on the depth chart. Pearson, last season's starter, and Romine both throw at the level you would expect from a Mountain West starter.

Roberts is a run-first, run-second quarterback. His arm never will be confused with Tom Brady's.

But that's fine, especially when it comes to this weekend's journey to East Lansing. A stripped-down, primitive offensive attack is what Air Force need for an upset. The Falcons must dominate the clock if they want to shock the Spartans, and everyone else.

Let's travel back to Air Force's last journey to the state OF Michigan. In 2012, the Falcons invaded The Big House in Ann Arbor with Connor Dietz, another run-first, run-second quarterback.

The Falcons came achingly close to silencing Michigan's 112,522 fans. They scored or drove inside Michigan's 5-yard line on five of eight drives. They lost, 31-25, but they should have won. Air Force will be seeking a repeat of this offensive might Saturday.

Air Force receiver Alex Ludowig has spent four seasons laboring beside Roberts, a fellow Texan.

"We have full confidence in Karson," Ludowig said. "We're looking forward to this game against Michigan state, and he's going to put everything he's got on the table."

Roberts brings plenty to the table. He's one of those diligent, focused types. During his exile as backup, he prepared with the fervor of a starter. He gives full effort at practice. He's totally zoned in at meetings.

"I just take each day preparing like I'm going to be a starter," Roberts told me last summer. "Whatever string they put me at ... I'll do the best I can."

He's back, after a long wait, to first string.

Here we go. It's going to be a fun ride.

Air Force quarterback Roberts prepared to step into spotlight

Gazette, Sept. 16

By Brent Briggeman

Every backup quarterback on every team claims to prepare each week as if he's the starter. With Karson Roberts, it's easy to actually believe that's the case.

"He's a pretty straightforward, get-to-business guy," fullback D.J. Johnson said, repeating almost verbatim what others were saying about Roberts in a different room.

"He's a guy who comes to work every day," linebacker Connor Healy said. "He definitely loves football, loves to play and he's a great guy up on the hill - smart guy. I'm really excited to see how he handles everything.

"That doesn't say he won't mess around now and then or he doesn't have a personality, but he definitely is a guy you know is going to come to work."

It's that work ethic that has had Roberts preparing to be the starter since the beginning of his sophomore year, when an opening-game injury to Kale Pearson elevated him to the backup spot.

His promotion came two weeks later when Jaleel Awini lost his eligibility. Roberts, looking quite prepared, ran for 161 yards in his first start, a 45-42 loss at Nevada.

He was soon hurt, lost his starting spot and was again buried on the depth chart until Nate Romine's injury midway through the fourth quarter on Saturday pushed him back into the No. 1 role.

He firmly believes he's ready. Mostly because that's how he's been preparing all along.

"It's really unfortunate that it happened to Nate. You never want to see it happen to one of your guys," Roberts said.

"But it didn't take me off guard because I've gone each week acting and preparing like I'm going to be the guy out there."

Roberts is a mechanical engineering major who has earned academic accolades from the Mountain West. He has also earned a spot on the superintendent's list for academic, athletic and military performance. His favorite player is Tim Tebow.

Air Force may have problems, particularly with a trip to No. 4 Michigan State approaching Saturday, but the character of its quarterback does not seem to be among them. And his teammates say Roberts' arm isn't an issue either.

"I wouldn't really agree with what people say," receiver Jalen Robinette said.

"I came in my freshman year and he threw a couple touchdowns to me. I don't think really the throwing thing is the trouble for him."

Roberts has completed 21-of-41 career attempts for 273 yards, three touchdowns and one interception. He's also averaged 5.1 yards per carry and has three rushing touchdowns.

"I'll go out there and execute whatever plays are that are called to the best of my ability," he said Tuesday, making his first appearance at a press conference in two years. "I can throw it, run it. Whatever I'm asked to do I can be able to do it."

Roberts said he learned of Romine's status on Saturday night. He immediately called home.

"I talked to my parents a little bit," he said. "They just said 'Good luck, you're ready for it, we believe in you.' I'm ready for this. I'm excited for what's ahead."

Air Force football players deal with hectic schedule

State News, Sept. 17

By Ryan Kryska

The MSU football team will not be playing typical student-athletes when they line up against the Air Force Falcons on Saturday.

The Spartans will face a team of servicemen; cadet-athletes who first immerse themselves into the military culture, studying their craft, and secondly play football.

“When you look at them offensively and defensively, really what you see is highly motivated people that are quick-bodied, that are playing the game extremely hard, tough,” MSU coach Mark Dantonio said of the Air Force players. The Falcons’ motivation and quickness, however, does not dissipate as they walk off the gridiron. In fact, it comes from off the gridiron. The schedule of an Air Force player consists of strict regimens which allow for little down time.

“We definitely face some unique challenges here. Really just time wise, we have so much other stuff that is expected of us that we have to get done that you really just have to make use of all your time,” senior Air Force linebacker Connor Healy said. “I think if you want to be a good football player and have a good football team, you’re going to do what it takes to use your time efficiently and get that done.”

Healy plans to be a pilot for the Air Force after his time in the Academy.

“I came here and didn’t have that many aspirations to fly, but the culture and everything about it, it’s a pretty neat job and it’s something I definitely look forward to doing and am fortunate to be able to do,” Healy said. Healy said his decision of committing to the Air Force was based on the level of education and opportunities a military academy provides.

“Some of the things you get to do when you’re in and after you graduate is just something that you really can’t get anywhere else, so that was really the deciding factor for me,” Healy said.

Healy was quick to point out, though, that the schedule of a cadet-athlete compared to a student-athlete is more alike than different.

“I definitely think time is the biggest factor. As far as other things, I think there are a lot of similarities to football programs across the country,” Healy said. “I think a program as good as [MSU] holds their players to just as high of standards as our coaches hold us. So I really think the only difference is the time.”

Riley Bullough, senior linebacker for the Spartans, said he sees the Falcons as an in sync unit and acknowledged their unique talent.

“They are going to play 60 minutes of football no matter if they are up by 50 points or down by 50 points and I think we need to understand that because you don’t face guys like this every week,” Bullough said.

When the MSU student-athletes play the Air Force cadet-athletes on Saturday it will be the first time a service academy has come to Spartan Stadium.

Air Force players frustrated, but supporters encouraged after loss at No. 4 Michigan State

Gazette, Sept. 20
By Brent Briggeman

Air Force players left No. 4 Michigan State frustrated and in no mood for reflection. And even if they were pleased with aspects of their effort against the Spartans, they likely would have declined to mention it, lest it be conceived as looking for the dreaded "moral victory" that no team wants to accept.

"We just have to execute better," senior defensive end Alex Hansen said, several times.

Air Force supporters took more expansive - and positive - impressions out of this game that paid the Falcons \$1.2 million, the largest payout given to an opponent by Michigan State.

"Frustrated by penalties," one former player wrote on Twitter. "Encouraged by RUN defense."

When asked by The Gazette on social media for reactions, those were the two themes that were mentioned each time. The seven personal foul calls left many frustrated, as did the three turnovers, but the penalties in particular have never been an issue for this program and seem to be something they can clean up on their own. In the bigger picture the ability to limit Michigan State's rushing attack to 1.8 yards per carry might be telling about what kind of season the Falcons might be capable of having.

Air Force accomplished this with a game plan that had it loading the box to stop the run and try to force pressure on quarterback Connor Cook. Doing this meant exposing itself to Cook's passing game, but the Falcons clearly hoped it might catch him on an off day or that a few errant passes might turn into interceptions.

That didn't happen. Cook threw four touchdowns and moved the ball efficiently when he needed to. In the second half the Spartans kept it on the ground more often to chew clock and limited Cook's chances, but he clearly proved he could beat Air Force through the air when necessary in this defensive scheme.

Suffice to say, Air Force will not be seeing another Connor Cook.

The remaining schedule gives the Falcons two service academy quarterbacks - including the sensational Keenan Reynolds of Navy, up next Oct. 3 - and a slew of Mountain West signal callers in a year in which the league is largely in transition at that position.

The most prolific quarterback Air Force will see the rest of the way in terms of current passing yards is Colorado State's Nick Stevens, and he has completed less than 50 percent of his attempts with four interceptions over the past two weeks.

The strategy of daring the quarterback to beat them might prove far more effective over the next nine games for the Falcons, particularly if the two first-year starters at cornerback and the run defense can continue to improve.

Just two years ago, Air Force ranked 119th out of 123 FBS teams in rushing defense. After Saturday, they were at No. 16 this season.

It's a small sample size, but it's a sign that the Falcons have made important strides in an area that will be critical with rushing teams like Navy, Army and New Mexico awaiting.

Quarterback Karson Roberts and receiver Jalen Robinette were asked to reflect on the program's growth from the squad two years ago that went 2-10 (and was outscored by an average of 22.3 points in the losses) to now, where a 14-point loss at the No. 4 team in the nation would leave them disappointed.

They didn't see the point in the exercise.

"This is a new year, we're a different team now," Roberts said.

And by the looks of things, it's a much, much better team.

No complaints from Air Force regarding chop block calls, and no concerns moving forward

Gazette, Sept. 22
By Brent Briggeman

Air Force offensive line coach Clay Hendrix had no issues with the three chop block calls against his team Saturday and doesn't believe it will be a concern moving forward.

The Falcons, who routinely utilize legal cut blocks, were flagged just once all last season for the infraction, which occurs when one player blocks low while another is engaged with the defender up high. The three Saturday mark five chop block calls in Air Force's past four games.

"It's correctable stuff," said Hendrix, a nine-year veteran of the Falcons' staff who is also the team's associate head coach. "Some of it is kids were playing hard but were at the wrong place at the wrong time."

Hendrix said he agreed with all three calls at now-No. 2 Michigan State and said each had a valid explanation. The first occurred when center Alex Norton slipped into a player already being blocked by a guard. The second took place when guard A.J. Ruechel said he miscommunicated with Norton, causing Ruechel to go in low when he otherwise wouldn't have. The third was a fluke incident that happened when Ruechel and fellow guard Colin Sandor both arrived at the same time to block a safety 12 yards down field. Typically only one of them would get to that spot and they were unaware the other had made it. One went high, one went low, and the flag was thrown.

"The only thing I can tell them is if we're ever down there, go low on everybody," Hendrix said. "I see why they called them. But I guarantee the guys that were blocked didn't get hurt."

The officiating crew at the game in East Lansing, Mich., was from the Mountain West and had worked Air Force games in the past.

Norton, who was involved in two of the plays, suffered an unspecified injury early in the game that will keep him out for at least the next game; he will be replaced at center by Dylan Vail.

The first two chop block calls didn't adversely impact Air Force. The first one occurred on a play that resulted in a fumble recovery for a Spartans touchdown, so the yardage was tacked on at the kickoff and led to a touchback. On that following drive the second one was called, but Air Force picked up the first down anyway and drove for a touchdown.

The third halted a drive, resulting in a punt.

The Falcons had other issues in the game, with four additional personal foul calls, three turnovers and problems guarding Michigan State's talented receiving corps, but on the particular topic of chop blocks they won't spend any time worrying about it.

"It was a little bad luck and miscommunication," Ruechel said. "But I don't think it will be a problem going forward."

Air Force's Garrett Brown ready to again make an impact against Navy

Gazette, Sept. 28

By Brent Briggeman

Garrett Brown had fetched a drink of water during a timeout when he heard his Air Force teammates looking for him.

"Everybody was like, 'Garrett, where's Garrett?'" Brown recalled of last year's game against Navy. "Then someone told me the play, and I was like, 'What?'"

The call with 38 seconds remaining and Air Force clinging to a three-point lead was a play-action pass to Brown on fourth and 2 from the Navy 13-yard line.

The Midshipmen, predictably, crowded the line to stop the run. Brown was completely alone to haul in the pass from Kale Pearson.

"I just remember kind of being surprised when we called the play, then being really excited because I knew it was going to work," Brown said. "Everybody was expecting the run."

Brown's catch was the fourth touchdown reception of the day for the Falcons in a 30-21 victory. As preparation for Navy week officially kicks off again, a game plan like that would suddenly seem out of character for Air Force.

Against the Midshipmen last year, Air Force completed 12 passes for 166 yards and those four touchdowns. Through three games this year the team has just 13 completions for three touchdowns. It has run the ball 87 percent of the time - and with good reason, as it is averaging 6 yards per carry.

Perhaps Brown sensed this change coming, because his preseason goal was not to improve upon his receiving stats - which included six touchdown receptions last year, the most for an Air Force player since 1972 - but to up his all-purpose yardage.

Brown's goal was 1,500 all-purpose yards, and he's on pace for 1,419 (in a 12-game season) so far.

"One of my big goals was I wanted to improve in the punt return game," Brown said. "I felt I could have done better than last year.

"I just had to shift my thinking. I was trying to shake everybody instead of using my blocks and just trying to get upfield."

Brown ranks fourth in the nation with 25.3 yards per punt return so far this season. Special teams coordinator Ben Miller recently said Brown's ball skills may be the best the program has ever seen, high praise for the former standout point guard from Marietta, Ga., who figured his future was in basketball before Air Force entered the picture and altered his plans.

Brown doesn't know how he might impact this year's game against Navy. Maybe Air Force finally unleashes a passing attack that figured to factor prominently in its success this year. Maybe he'll help in the return game. Maybe in the running game. Maybe it will happen on a block or as a decoy or some other way without the ball in his hands.

He says he doesn't care. As a senior, he's learned the importance of winning the Commander-in-Chief's Trophy - a piece of hardware he had never seen before Air Force captured it last year.

"It's really big," he said. "I remember last year seeing the seniors in the White House and saying, 'I can't wait for that to be us.' This is the first step."

Air Force athletic director Jim Knowlton reveals 'strategic vision' for Falcon Stadium renovation

Gazette, Sept. 30
By Brent Briggeman

Jim Knowlton doesn't know exactly how big the new scoreboard at Falcon Stadium will be, but he knows the measurements he'd prefer.

"Our goal is to certainly have it be the biggest in the Mountain West," the Air Force athletic director said. "And we'd also like it to be at least 1 inch bigger than Army and Navy."

A large, high-definition scoreboard is one of many items Knowlton intends to bring to the football stadium in a massive wave of renovations that he detailed Tuesday. The list includes remodeled locker rooms, gutting the aluminum bleachers that form the upper bowl on the east side and replacing them with enclosed suites, updating restrooms and concessions, meeting the guidelines set forth by the Americans With Disabilities Act and paving the parking lot. The academy will also use this chance to tell its story, adding a Memorial Garden and a fence where each post includes looks at Air Force history.

This was all part of what Knowlton called his "strategic vision" for the stadium. This project hasn't been handed over to architects or engineers yet, so there are no official drawings or renderings to illustrate Knowlton's ideas. But unlike past "false starts" when it came to talk of stadium renovation in recent years, Knowlton said he has the full support of Superintendent Lt. Gen. Michelle Johnson as well as a jump-start on funding thanks to a \$5 million anonymous donation.

Verbal commitments have also been made for more "transformational" donations, Knowlton said.

Falcon Stadium was built in 1962 and hasn't undergone expansive renovations in its history. As far as Knowlton can tell, the most comprehensive work done to the venue was this past offseason's revamping of the Blue and Silver Club, which was fully funded with private money.

The rest of the work on the stadium will come from a mix of private and government funds. Knowlton expects to use government money for aspects like updating the handicap-accessible parts of the stadium, but understands it will take private - or potentially borrowed money - to put in some of the potentially revenue-generating pieces such as the suites and lounge that will comprise the upper side of the east bowl.

The stadium's capacity will drop from around 47,000 to closer to 40,000.

"We'll give up a little bit of seating, which, for us, is probably a good thing," Knowlton said. "We're probably a football team that can support a 40,000-seat stadium."

Knowlton's intention will be to keep the stadium functional for the football team throughout the process. He pointed to work at places like Kansas State, where stadium construction was done in the window from January to August without interfering with the ability to host home football games. He believes it's possible that some of the smaller bits of the project can be completed by the start of the 2016 season, though the major portions will require far more time to plan, fund and build.

Feedback from season-ticket holders was compiled into a 40-page report and was considered when formulating this initial phase of the vision.

"They love the games," Knowlton said of the fans. "They love the flyovers. They love the cadets marching on. They love the Wings of Blue jumping the ball in. They love the atmosphere - it's wholesome, it's family, it's everything you would want to take your family to."

"It is a phenomenal stadium, but it needs a little bit of upkeep. I think that's the biggest thing we're looking to do right now is, how do we take this stadium from good to great."

Passing production has plummeted for Air Force, but not all by design

Gazette, Oct. 7

By Brent Briggeman

Karson Roberts dropped back to pass on the first play of the game against Navy.

The Air Force quarterback looked first at Jalen Robinette, but didn't like what he saw. As he began the process of checking down, his internal clock told him it was time to move.

He scrambled forward for a 2-yard gain, placing it in the books as a rushing attempt. It was the first of 17 consecutive running plays for the Falcons. The first completed pass didn't occur until the 38th play of the game.

This obviously wasn't the way the coaches drew it up Saturday, as Air Force did, after all, attempt a pass on that first play. But this is the way things have gone for Air Force, which threw for a combined 4 first-half yards in dropping two straight on the road and has seen its passing production plummet from what it was a year ago.

"It's part of us. It needs to be part of us," offensive coordinator Mike Thiessen said of the passing game. "We've got to get into the flow of what we're doing for it to be effective.

"It's hard to get the throws going when you can't get a drive going."

Getting into the flow on offense has been a major issue, particularly early in games. All of the Falcons' four turnovers against Navy came in the first half, three coming in the span of five plays.

That's not much time to establish a run and let the play-action game work off of that.

"The second half you saw us get to play No. 4 or 5 of drives and then you saw some of the throws come out, which obviously we're a much better offense when we're balanced," Thiessen said.

Thiessen will never apologize for calling a disproportionate amount of running plays when the Falcons are having success on the ground. With Air Force averaging 5.5 yards per rush, it's easy to understand a desire to keep grinding in that area.

"I think you look at our squad as of today, you look at some of our strengths, I think our fullbacks are a strength," coach Troy Calhoun said. "That's a part of it. I think that's probably a pretty integral part of it. The other part is just in terms of what throws you do want to make. I have always felt that when you throw it well, you're going to run it even better."

Last year Air Force threw on 21 percent of its offensive plays and averaged 145 yards through the air. This year those numbers have dropped to 14 percent and 60 yards. And while some of this has been predicated on flow of the game, no one is suggesting it's going to change anytime soon.

"We're a triple-option team," Roberts said. "That's our bread and butter. That's what we are."

Air Force must turn to depth at inside linebacker

Gazette, Oct. 8

By Brent Briggeman

Air Force has said all along that a strength of this year's team might be the depth at inside linebacker.

Now, it has to be.

Connor Healy injured his left knee at Navy, and while the severity has not been made public, he will not play this week and will likely miss at least a handful of games.

But that position is hardly barren. Against the Midshipmen Grant Ross made eight tackles, including one for a loss, Trey Alexander added five stops and Jack Flor made four tackles.

The other starter, Connor's brother Patrick Healy, made four tackles, including two behind the line of scrimmage that pushed Navy back 26 yards.

"What's good is at least they got into a contest like this and they were initiated," coach Troy Calhoun said.

The issues Air Force had on Saturday were numerous, but play on the defensive interior was not among them. Navy's star fullback Chris Swain ran for just 54 yards on 18 carries and the Midshipmen as a whole averaged under 2 yards on running plays that didn't get to the edge.

"Obviously losing Connor is a big blow, not only to the defense but to the entire team, being a captain," Patrick Healy said. "So it was hard to see him go down like that."

But the Falcons don't feel like this blow has to be a fatal one for the defense. Throughout the preseason, the inside linebacker spot next to Connor Healy was among the most hotly contested on the team. Patrick Healy never gave up the starting spot, but there were plenty of days where it looked like Ross, Alexander or Flor might have played their way to a promotion. Now, that competition extends to both spots.

"You can't replace Connor's leadership," defensive coordinator Steve Russ said. "You can't replace Connor's experience. But at the same time we do have some guys who are playing some pretty good football. They've got to be able to be next man up and go help our football team."

The initial replacement, according to this week's depth chart, will be Alexander. But don't be surprised to see others seeing reps at that spot.

And keep in mind, it was an injury to linebacker Joey Nichol last year that opened the door for Jordan Pierce to step in and put together one of the best seasons for a Falcons linebacker in the Calhoun era. It's obviously unlikely that history repeats itself entirely in that area, but this crop of linebackers certainly seems capable.

"I think it does help a lot because we've all been rotating and everything, so we all have a pretty good idea of what's going on," Alexander said. "It sucks that it happened, but it's a good thing we've all been practicing and are ready to go."

AFA coordinator Thiessen adjusting to new role coaching QBs

Gazette, Oct. 15

By Brent Briggeman

Mike Thiessen coaches with his feet as much as his voice.

After a drill concludes on the Air Force practice field, the quarterbacks coach and offensive coordinator usually hustles over to follow up on what just happened.

It's rarely a conversation that happens from a distance. Thiessen generally stands right next to them, as if he not only wants to convey the instruction as closely as possible but also absorb their thoughts on the situation.

"You've got to have the full balance of being able to see the strategic part of it, the big-picture part of it," coach Troy Calhoun said. "And at the same time being able to break things down into parts to make sure the quality and the method of the teaching and instruction is very, very well done, especially at the quarterback position because so many small little details have to be so exact."

It's through these interactions that Thiessen learns more about the players than he can by watching them perform. This informs his opinions when it comes to strengths and weaknesses and even preferences that then go into his play calling.

"It could be situational calls, you're sitting in a position meeting and you can say 'Third and 2, do you like this call? Last play of the game, what's your favorite call here?'" Calhoun said. "It's not just in a given week, I think it's something that accrues and accumulates over time, so I think there are some pluses to it."

This is part of why Thiessen is now in the role he's in. Prior to last year, he coached the receivers while calling the plays. When longtime quarterbacks coach Blane Morgan left for the same position at San Diego State this past winter, the former standout Air Force quarterback moved over.

"Blane had played it and had coached it for a long time, so we were on the same page," Thiessen said. "I don't think there was ever an issue or anything like that. It's just a matter of how you want a staff put together and what works best."

His first season in a new role has provided challenges, as a quarterback with throw-first tendencies in Nate Romine was injured and the offense has transitioned to the run-first skills of Karson Roberts.

"I look at how much improvement Karson Roberts has made, just his awareness and where to go with the ball and knowing poise-wise and audibles and checks we're able to incorporate this year as a whole," Calhoun said. "He's done a great job with those guys."

Roberts said the teacher in Thiessen - who has taught algebra, calculus and chemistry at the prep school - allows him to give context to his instructions.

"He gives us a lot of background as to why a play was called, what we're looking at here, safety tendencies, things like that. It's kind of cool," Roberts said.

It's no secret that Air Force is a rapidly adapting program based on the talent at different positions in any given year. Two years ago the fullbacks combined for 619 yards, this year they're on pace for 1,450. Last year the offense ran virtually no triple option, this year it has been a common call.

Making those adjustments, Thiessen said, is easier when he understands exactly what thoughts are going through the quarterback's mind.

"All the mental side of what we do, I'm the one teaching it," he said. "So I know exactly what he should be doing on every given play so if I call something I know what the reaction should be to get us in the right play and make sure we're running a sound scheme."

Injuries pile up for Air Force, which throws support behind quarterback

Gazette, Oct. 20
By Brent Briggeman

Air Force returned to practice Monday unable to hide its growing number of personnel questions.

But one issue was put to rest - Karson Roberts remains the team's quarterback.

"Yes. Without a doubt," offensive coordinator Mike Thiessen said. "No questions asked, Karson is our guy."

Roberts is 1-3 since taking over as the starter this season and has completed just 53.3 percent of his passes with one touchdown and four interceptions. Still, the job remains securely his.

Outside of that, injuries have left uncertainly seemingly everywhere for the Falcons (3-3, 2-1 Mountain West).

Outside linebacker Dexter Walker and cornerback Kalon Baker are expected to miss Saturday's game against Fresno State (2-5, 1-3). Fullback Shayne Davern wasn't at practice after leaving a loss at Colorado State with an apparent knee injury. The other fullback, D.J. Johnson, suited up for practice as he recovers from an ankle injury but didn't participate.

Others missing were receiver Tyler Williams, cornerback Gavin McHenry and kicker Drew Oehrle. Linebacker Patrick Healy was at practice but wearing a red jersey, indicating he was injured.

Coach Troy Calhoun refused to give an update on any of the injured players, saying only that the team draws its most important conclusions after Tuesday's practice.

With the injured players joining a list that includes quarterback Nate Romine, linebacker Connor Healy, center Alexander Norton and nose guard David Harris on the shelf, Air Force is to the point where it could field a decent squad out of its missing parts.

But the Falcons are preparing for the opposite - forming the available players into a competitive squad.

Offensively, it looks like that might involve some different lineup combinations. The team ran several sets with two tailbacks or two tight ends Monday.

"We're not so much reinventing, we're just trying to give the defense something it has to prepare for," tight end Garrett Griffin said. "That's always a big thing of why we're tough to play is we can run a lot of formations. If they're worrying about getting lined up they can't play as fast, so we try to use that to our advantage and switch it up a little bit every week."

Defensive coordinator Steve Russ said the key on his side of the ball was simply a matter of tone

"We have to play at that fever pitch and that kind of level with our energy and enthusiasm - with that juice, so to speak - for us to be a good defense, especially when you continue to have injuries, when you play young guys," Russ said. "You've got to go out there and play really, really hard. That's what we're going to have to do to try and beat Fresno."

Air Force tight end grateful for second chance after knee injury

Gazette, Oct. 22

By Brent Briggeman

Garrett Griffin wasn't angry.

The tight end had played football most of his life and had escaped major injury. He knew he had been lucky, and for a moment when he thought his senior season might be lost just minutes before Air Force's season opener he reflected on his fortune.

But that didn't mean the swing of emotions wasn't powerful after a teammate rolled into his leg during pregame warmups Sept. 5.

"When I hurt it, it kind of popped," Griffin said. "I thought it might end my season.

"You go from trying to get ready for a game to getting ready to rehab and rooting on your teammates. It's kind of hard."

The injury didn't end his season, but the sprained MCL would cost him 6-8 weeks.

Six weeks later, he was back, making his season debut Saturday in a 38-23 loss at Colorado State.

"It's new having a brace on and I kind of tweaked it in the game, but once you realize you can tweak it and it'll be fine you kind of get it out of your mind," Griffin said of the injury. "You just have to kind of experience everything once. You have to get hit on it once and realize it's OK. I'm good to go now."

Griffin's injury meant the Falcons went from a veteran with 29 career catches, five touchdowns and two years of starting experience at tight end to a sophomore in Ryan Reffitt, who hadn't played varsity football and was an outside linebacker until August.

The two tight ends shared time in Fort Collins on Saturday and that might continue to be the plan as Griffin attempts to catch up on conditioning.

"As he plays in two or three games you're going to see him hitting his stride," coach Troy Calhoun said. "He's going to be better this week than he was last week. He was better at practice (Monday), clearly better than he was last Monday.

"It's timing, it's precision, it's anticipation, it's suddenness, it's twitch in addition to the stamina part. It's part of getting back into that groove."

Griffin has a greater appreciation for his health. And his positive outlook remains unscathed.

"You go through the whole offseason and work for eight months up to that point and it kind of gets taken away from you quick," he said. "It kind of makes you realize how good the game is to you and how you have to appreciate every play you have."

Air Force fullback learning offense on the fly after switch from defense

Gazette, Oct. 23
By Troy Garnhart

Aubrey Duty-Tyson has gone from defensive lineman to contributing fullback in two months. But that's nothing compared to the rapid pace of his overall development in football.

The Air Force sophomore was entering his junior year in high school, just having transferred from North Miami Beach High School to the private Fort Lauderdale University School when a coach spotted him on the basketball floor.

To that point, except for one year of pee-wee football, basketball was the only sport that Duty-Tyson played.

"The coach said, 'You should play football. You've got a body for it,'" Duty-Tyson said. "I just went along with it."

Duty-Tyson immediately made his mark as a linebacker and the following spring received a scholarship offer from Florida A&M. The next season, after playing in the Florida state championship game, then-Air Force defensive coordinator Charlton Warren called and asked if he would be interested in playing at the academy. Eight months later, he reported to the prep school.

This year, he was growing comfortable as a defensive player. Then, in August, defensive line coach Tim Cross told him before a position meeting that he was moving to fullback.

There was only one problem.

"I had never played offense before," Duty-Tyson said.

A few weeks later, Duty-Tyson carried the ball four times for 22 yards during mop-up time in the season opener. Last week he saw his first significant action, again logging four carries in a loss at Colorado State when the team's top two fullbacks, Shayne Davern and D.J. Johnson, were injured.

"Duty's gone from not knowing anything about offense to being pretty well informed," tailback Jacobi Owens said. "His learning curve has gone pretty fast."

With the fullback position so vital in the Air Force offense yet becoming somewhat scarce at the high school level, this kind of switch is likely to become more common for the Falcons. Davern went through the same thing, having played linebacker in high school.

Calhoun said 15 years ago virtually every high school used a fullback. Now he estimates only 1 in 4 use the position.

"It's something we experienced in the NFL, too, with our draft preparation," said Calhoun, who was an offensive assistant with the Denver Broncos and the offensive coordinator for the Houston Texans. "The more you saw colleges using less and less two-back sets and playing with a lot more three receivers, a tight end and one tailback, they were hard to find."

In the NFL, the answer was to find an oversized tailback like the 5-foot-11, 220-pound Ruben Droughns, who ran for 1,240 yards with the Broncos in 2004 while Calhoun was on the staff.

At Air Force, the answer has been finding defenders with the right body type and mentality.

"We're not looking for a 4.3 guy," running backs coach Ben Miller said in August referring to a runner's speed in a 40-yard dash. "We want the tough guy. My theory is if you're willing to block and never carry the ball, you'll make a great fullback. Our fullbacks are going to carry the ball, but those guys are tough, physical guys."

At 6 feet, 240 pounds, Duty-Tyson matches the body type. And Owens said the aggression has been evident in part because Duty-Tyson understands how best to use it.

"He was playing on the defensive side of the ball, so he knows how they're going to play him," Owens said. "He knows when a defensive end is going to try to wrong-arm him and try to fight across his face. So he plays with a little more tenacity and aggression in terms of where he needs to use it. I think that helps him play faster because he already knows what's going to happen. I think it's good that he came from the defensive side of the ball because he sometimes plays even faster than D.J. and Shayne.

"And also sometimes he doesn't know what he's doing."

Duty-Tyson lost a fumble at Colorado State and admits that the adjustment to the offensive playbook is a work in progress.

"A lot of times you're defensive-minded, so it's more of a see-ball, get-ball kind of thing," he said. "But when you switch to offense you've got to actually know where you need to go, who you need to block, things like that."

Duty-Tyson is confident he'll pick it up, and he should be, with his history of taking instruction. His mother, Brenda Duty, is a high school math teacher in Florida and helped guide her son to the academy because of the educational opportunities. He took the hyphenated name to include her, since his father hasn't been a part of his life since he was 9.

"She's been my mother and my father at the same time and guided me through a lot," he told a recruiting service while in high school.

Well, she can't guide him through this position change, so he has instead sought the counsel of Davern and Johnson.

"I'm behind two of the greatest fullbacks in college football - I believe - so they have taught me a lot to this point," Duty-Tyson said. "So I've just got to go out and execute.

"It's been exciting. I didn't think that I would get my opportunity so soon."

Bryan Driskell's bold run keys Air Force's comeback

Gazette, Oct. 26

By Brent Briggeman

Put a player on a big stage for the first time and you never know if he'll react boldly or timidly. When he made his third major cut on a 54-yard run that may have saved Air Force's season, there was no doubt which category Bryan Driskell fell into.

"I just happened to be the one who stepped in and made the play," Driskell said. "It felt good."

Driskell, who had five career carries entering Saturday, was thrust into a larger role this week when injuries to Shayne Davern and D.J. Johnson prompted the coaching staff to move starting tailback Jacobi Owens to fullback. This put Benton Washington into a starting role and Driskell at the No. 2 tailback.

On third and 4 from the Air Force 31 with Air Force trailing 14-0 in the first quarter, Driskell had his first carry of the game. He passed the line of scrimmage and cut hard to the left, running al-most parallel with the line of scrimmage before turning up field and cutting twice more before finally being taken down at the Fresno State 15.

Had he not picked up the first down the Bulldogs could have taken possession with a chance to go up by three scores. A loss here would have put Air Force below .500 and scrambling over the next five games to gain bowl eligibility. Instead, Air Force (4-3, 3-1 Mountain West) had the game tied just six minutes later and stormed to a 42-14 victory.

"When he broke that run it did something for the offense. We just felt something," Owens said. "That's his ability. He has the best feet on the team. On defense it would be (cornerback Roland) Ladipo, but we're talking about offense right now."

Driskell, a 5-foot-8, 190-pound junior from McKinney, Texas, ran 12 times for 144 yards. He was rarely tackled on the first try, bringing an obviously fresh pair of legs into this midseason contest.

"You talk to him, he's never, ever, ever had a bad day in his life," Troy Calhoun said of Driskell. "He's just that kind of person."

Driskell waited a long time for this chance. His previous career highlight was a 22-yard kickoff return in last year's bowl victory over Western Michigan. To run for 144 in Falcon Stadium against a Fresno State team that won Mountain West titles in two of the past four years, well, he boldly established a new one.

"It was so fun being out there with all the energy," Driskell said. "We had a lot of energy today and it was fun to be a part of it."

Air Force creates role to find playing time for talented defensive lineman Jalen Lacy

Gazette, Oct. 29
By Brent Briggeman

Jalen Lacy's ability demanded Air Force get him on the field. Problem was, there wasn't a spot. So, the Falcons made one.

"We created a little something," coach Troy Calhoun said. "He earned that. He made it to where we had to create it."

Lacy, who played defensive end in spring and defensive tackle in fall camp, now plays nose guard for Air Force as a third-down specialist.

The 6-foot-4, 250-pound junior has only been credited with two tackles this year, but he's brought pressure on multiple plays. By breaking through the line in the first quarter against Fresno State last week he forced a quick throw that was intercepted by Roland Ladipo and helped Air Force seize momentum in a game it won by scoring the final 42 points.

"In subtle ways he's done a really good job for us," defensive coordinator Steve Russ said. "He's growing into that role. I think that's a good role for him. I'm really proud of how he's attacked that and how he's learning it. He's still got to get better and clean some things up because he's new to it, but that's nice little role for him."

Lacy has grown accustomed to switching positions. He was recruited as a quarterback and played that position at the prep school, but Calhoun called him into his office early in his freshman year to tell him he'd be working with the outside linebackers. As he has filled out his large frame, he has moved closer to the line of scrimmage.

"Whatever's going to help the team, I'm down with it," Lacy said. "If it's my third-down role now, that's fine. I could play safety next year. Whatever it is, I'm happy with it."

"My mom always said and what the Bible says is, 'they that wait.' So, I've waited, got my opportunity and I've been blessed with it and I'm just rolling with it."

With Alex Hansen (four sacks, eight tackles for loss) and Samuel Byers (two sacks, three tackles for loss) occupying the edge spots on the defensive line, and with Lochlin Deeks holding down the every-down spot at nose guard since the injury at Navy to David Harris, it was difficult to see a natural fit for Lacy on the line. But when he generated some pass rushes against San Jose State in limited time, the Falcons knew something had to be done.

"He's unrelenting in terms of his hustle and the way he approaches what he does and he's just so darn likable because he just has enormous amounts of energy and enthusiasm," Calhoun said.

Added Russ, "He's so athletic. He's got great size, great athleticism. He can save us on some things."

Lacy said his quick move through the three defensive line positions since spring has been aided by d-line coach Tim Cross, who is in his second year at Air Force after stops at Minnesota and Texas.

"Coach Cross is the man," Lacy said. "We all love him like he's our own dad sometimes. We takes care of us. We couldn't ask for a better d-line coach. He asks everyone to buy in, and when we do he takes care of us and we take care of him."

"Anyone in that room would take a bullet for him. Whatever he wants us to do, that's what we're going to do."

OK, no one is asking anybody to take a bullet on the field. But Lacy's new role has added a key weapon to Air Force's defensive arsenal.

Air Force Backup Bryan Driskell Seizes His Moment with 144 Yards Rushing

Today's U, Oct. 29

By Tom Shanahan

"It's better to be prepared for an opportunity that might not come than have an opportunity come and not be prepared." – Air Force third-team running back Bryan Driskell.

Bryan says he lives by those words learned from his parents, Stancey and Ernestine Driskell. They especially sunk in watching his mother beat cancer.

"The whole time she was there for us," Driskell said. "She always did the best she could, and she always had a smile. That's a big reason I always smile, too. She instilled in me to be relentless no matter the circumstances. You never know when your time will come. If you quit, you might miss your time."

The junior's moment on a football field finally came last week at Fresno State.

Driskell had been buried on Air Force's depth chart, but for the Fresno State game the Falcons were without injured fullbacks Shayne Davern and D.J. Johnson. Air Force coach Troy Calhoun and his staff shifted Jacobi Owens from tailback to fullback and started Benton Washington in place of Owens.

Driskell, a 5-foot-8, 190-pound junior from McKinney, Tx., had only five carries for his career entering the game – all in 2015. He had played on the JV team as a freshman and didn't carry the ball as a sophomore. But when his time came, he carried 12 times for 144 yards to lead Air Force in rushing in a 42-14 win at Fresno State. How ready was he? His first carry went for 54 yards to the Fresno State 15-yard line. Six plays later quarterback Karson Roberts scored the first of his four on a 1-yard run.

"I couldn't sleep the night before the game," Driskell said. "That first play helped."

It was an option with the defense loaded between the tackles to focus on stopping the veterans inside, Owens and Roberts. They weren't as worried about the new kid positioned to run wide.

"It was an option play and the defense covered the fullback," Driskell said. "Karson pulled it out and pitched to me. All I saw was open space. I ran until I saw the safety and cut back to a big hole. I used my speed to try to get to the sideline. It was just a play that happened."

By the end of the day Driskell added to his 54-yard gallop with four other double-digit gains of 11, 25, 11, 17 yards. His gross and net yardage totals were the same – meaning he wasn't stopped for a loss on any carries. He didn't score a touchdown, but all that mattered was moving the chains for others to score.

"I felt coming into the season — even before I was in the mix — I'm going to work my butt off," Driskell said. "I wanted to keep the mindset I would work as hard as I could so I'd be ready when my time came. I did not want to let circumstances dictate how hard I worked. I also had a lot of support from my coaches, teammates and family. God had a course for me."

Air Force's victory combined with results from the previous two weeks — Utah State upset Boise State but then Utah State lost at San Diego State — has the Falcons tied atop the Mountain West Conference's Mountain Division race. All three teams are 3-1 in the MW Mountain, while Boise State is 6-2 overall and Air Force and Utah State both 4-3.

For now, Driskell is back to third on the depth chart as the Falcons prepare for Saturday night's game at Hawaii (6-2, 0-4 MW West). Next, the Falcons play host to Army (2-5) Nov. 7 at Falcon Stadium. It's one of their two rivalry games after losing to Navy earlier in the year.

"Every week we take one game at a time," Driskell said. "If you look at things over a longer period you'll get caught looking ahead. We live day by day. Today we're trying to have a lights out practice for Hawaii."

That's a message that no doubt comes from the coaches, but Driskell could deliver it just as well.

Army-Air Force Lacks Army-Navy History, but Not Intensity

Today's U, Nov. 4

By Tom Shanahan

College football fans understand the history of the Army-Navy rivalry. Fewer are aware of the Army-Air Force rivalry's intensity in the round-robin series for the Commander-in-Chief's Trophy between the service academies.

Part of the reason is Army football has been down for so long. The Black Knights haven't won the C-i-C Trophy since 1996. Air Force, which took it home last year, and Navy have been long swapping the trophy that comes with a trip to the White House.

That brings us to Round II of the series with Army (2-6) playing at Air Force (5-3) Saturday at Falcon Stadium in Colorado Springs.

Although Air Force has been eliminated from the Commander-in-Chief's Trophy with its 33-11 loss to Navy a month ago, that doesn't dampen the desire on either side.

For one, Army can salvage its season by claiming the C-i-C with wins over Air Force and then Navy (6-1) on Dec. 12 in Philadelphia. Meanwhile, Air Force doesn't want to be swept by its academy rivals.

College fans may not understand this, but Air Force's senior right tackle Sevrin Remmo explains the Falcons expect an equal challenge from Army that they faced against a Navy team with a winning record.

"The Army games are always physical ones – similar to Navy," Remmo said. "I know the type of game this will be. They're always physical and intense. Army's defense is always stout, and playing against the defense is my focus as an offensive lineman."

Remmo, who started three games in 2014 before he was out for the season with a foot injury, has added motivation. He missed both the Navy and Army games last year. A loss to Army would mean not participating in a win over one of the two academies his junior or senior years.

"It means world to me to beat Army," Remmo said. "I was injured last year so I wasn't able to play in a service academy game at all. All of the seniors are close and we want to finish out with a win."

Remmo represents the quintessential academy athlete. He's an overachiever, lightly recruited yet willing to serve his country in exchange for an elite education that includes a chance to play Division I football. Remmo played on the junior varsity as a freshman, contributed in a backup role as a sophomore and broke into the starting lineup as a junior.

He grew up in the shadow of the University of Colorado of the Pac-12, but the Buffaloes (4-5) overlooked him in their backyard playing high school ball at Boulder Fairview. Often times, Power 5 conference recruiters pass on a lineman that the academies will accept because of a lack of height. But Remmo stands 6-foot-3 with his 255 pounds.

Remmo mentioned the prospect of walking on at Colorado State in Fort Collins or Colorado, but he said "Colorado" with a discernable edge to his voice.

"Colorado State wanted me to walk-on," he said. "Colorado – never heard from them. I probably could have walked on there, but I never heard from them at all."

No matter – Colorado’s loss was Air Force’s gain. Air Force needs one more win to qualify for its third bowl trip in Remmer’s four seasons at the academy, in addition to the Falcons winning the Commander-in-Chief’s Trophy his junior season. Colorado hasn’t been to a bowl game since 2007 and is on its third head coach since then – two coaches since Remmer graduated from Fairview.

In Remmer’s four Air Force seasons, Colorado has gone 2-10 in 2014, 4-18 in 2013, 1-11 in 2012 and 3-10 in 2011. The Buffalos lost at Hawaii to open 2011, which accounts for the 13th game. Air Force visited Hawaii last week and won 58-7.

Air Force has won three of its last four games to jump into the running for the Mountain West Conference Mountain Division after losing two in a row at Michigan State, 35-21, and at Navy. The Falcons followed Navy by beating Wyoming, losing to Colorado State and defeating Fresno State and Hawaii the last two weeks.

The Falcons, 4-1 in conference play, are tied with Boise State (7-2, 4-1 Mountain) and Utah State (5-3, 4-1 Mountain). Air Force still has games remaining Nov. 14 with Utah State at home and Nov. 21 at Boise State.

“We realize we control our destiny in conference play,” Remmer said. “Our side of the conference is pretty much open the way the season plays out. We’re starting to hit all on all cylinders on offense and defense. Everyone is finding their role. It is fun to play on this team.”

Timothy McVey making a name for himself in mop-up time for Air Force football

Gazette, Nov. 4
By Brent Briggeman

Air Force running back Timothy McVey (33) runs with the football as Hawaii linebacker Malachi Mageo (38) attempts to track McVey down in the fourth quarter of an NCAA college football game, Saturday, Oct. 31, 2015, in Honolulu. Air Force beat Hawaii 58-7. (AP Photo/Eugene Tanner)

A question about the name had to be asked.

Timothy McVey wasn't offended.

"I get questioned on my name all the time, especially at airports," said the Air Force sophomore running back, who was born eight months before Timothy McVeigh carried out the most deadly act of domestic terrorism in the nation's history in Oklahoma City.

McVey has been told there was talk of using his middle name or even changing his name, but those thoughts were shelved.

"My parents," he said, "were just like, 'You know what, we'll stick it out.'"

Now an Air Force running back and special teams player, McVey is fine sticking with his current role despite some spectacular displays in mop-up time.

"I'm going to play like I play and if they want to play me more, I'm always up for some more competition," said McVey, who has 16 carries for 170 yards this season, a stunning 10.6 average. "I'm excited with my role and I'll do as much as I can to help the team."

McVey's breakout game came last week at Hawaii when he ran for 113 yards and two touchdowns on just seven carries.

"I think (running out the clock) was originally their plan, but when you get the ball you just can't help but run and try to do your best," said McVey, whose touchdowns came in the final seven minutes of a 58-7 victory.

McVey's teammates enjoyed the late show.

"We're all happy for him," quarterback Karson Roberts said. "He's really seized the opportunities that he's gotten with the ball and has had some good runs. We're all excited and happy for him. It's always good to have depth back there."

McVey, from Lundhurst, Ohio, played in high school for a St. Ignatius program that was ranked in the top five in the nation during his senior year. That year he ran for 1,699 yards and 39 touchdowns and finished with 3,049 and 61 in his career.

So, his contributions this year didn't exactly come out of nowhere.

"We call him Turbo for a reason," Air Force offensive coordinator Mike Thiessen said. "He's a guy that slowly but surely earns your trust. You don't worry about putting him in there. He's earned the opportunity to get on the bus and play on special teams and have a role."

But, Thiessen said Air Force also isn't ready to change his role.

"You let him fit where he's supposed to fit," Thiessen said "We've got Benton (Washington) and (Bryan) Drisk(ell). Tim's behind those two guys right now, but if we've got to play him we'll play him and we won't think twice about it."

Air Force's offensive adjustments include location of coordinator

Gazette, Nov. 6

By Brent Briggeman

Offensive coordinator Mike Thiessen has given up the wide view of the press box for the close-up view of his quarterback's eyes.

So far, the change has resulted in 154 points over four games with three victories.

OK, maybe playing struggling teams in Wyoming, Fresno State and Hawaii played a major role in Air Force's run, but the Falcons do like the new setup of bringing Thiessen to the sideline, a move that started against Wyoming.

"It puts me just a little more in tune with talking to the quarterbacks eye to eye and making sure we're getting our checks right," Thiessen said. "Just communication stuff."

In moving Thiessen, Air Force put tight ends coach Steed Lobotzke in the box along with graduate assistant Kale Pearson - the Falcons quarterback last year. Lobotzke has spent 11 years as offensive coordinator at Wake Forest, so the move helps tap into his ability to survey defenses and contribute advice on the fly.

"Instead of being a signal guy, now he can see everything and provide input and be more useful in that way, too," Thiessen said. "So, there's a lot of reasons it's good."

Coach Troy Calhoun was an offensive coordinator in college and the NFL, so this is an area he knows well. He spent time both on the sideline and in the press box and found advantages to both.

"A little bit of it depends on how much your quarterback has played," Calhoun said.

"(Thiessen) came down once Karson (Roberts) went in because Karson hadn't played quite as many games. When you're up top you can see all 22 guys, but other things are hard to see, especially into the eyeballs.

"Sometimes you can be so detached, maybe there's a crucial third down and you want to look right into a left guard's eyes and say, 'I want to run right behind him.' And just sometimes even just overall communication with the quarterback, too, which I think can be very helpful."

Roberts entered the lineup late in the second game of the season after starting quarterback Nate Romine was lost to a season-ending knee injury.

Recent weeks have also seen the Falcons change some of their offensive approach with more injuries, particularly at fullback, where tailback Jacobi Owens has moved in for Shayne Davern and D.J. Johnson. Play calls are more predetermined and fewer changes are being made at the line in an effort to simplify the offense.

The changes are working, as Air Force's offense enters Saturday's game against Army (2-6) averaging 35.8 points (second in the Mountain West) with 353.4 rushing yards per game (second in the nation).

"It's good to have (Thiessen) on the sidelines for sure because you can bounce stuff off of him and you don't have to worry about going to the headsets, or maybe the headsets weren't working right or whatever," Roberts said. "I like having him down on the sideline."

Garrett Griffin's Return helps Air Force Remain in MWC Race

Today's U, Nov. 11

By Tom Shanahan

Air Force tight end Garrett Griffin took the field for the Falcons' season opener against Morgan State feeling good about himself and his team.

He had put in the necessary off-season work preparing for the 2015 season, which, come to think of it, goes without saying with academy athletes. But he still had to find time within his academy schedule. Griffin focused on improving his blocking; he wanted the Falcons to be confident running the ball to his side. He had already proved his value as a receiver last year with 16 catches for 307 yards and four touchdowns. With the added strength and weight he checked in for his senior year with an NFL body as a 6-foot-4, 240-pounder. And then the unthinkable happened. He suffered a knee injury during pre-game warmups.

"It was just a one-on-one drill and somebody rolled up on my leg," said Griffin, who was relieved to learn no surgery would be required.

Griffin missed five games, including the 33-11 loss to Navy, but he has returned in time to help Air Force make a second-half push for its first conference title since 1998. It turns out he has time to be part of a special season despite his injury sidelining him and the Navy loss having eliminated the Falcons from the Commander-in-Chief's Trophy.

"We always talk about winning the conference title, but we've stubbed our toe early (in the past)," Griffin said. "We've done a good job this year, and hopefully we can turn the corner. This is pretty big and it's a new position for us."

Another factor allowing Air Force to remain in the Mountain West Conference Mountain Division race this late into the season was Utah State's upset of Boise State. The Broncos have been known to run away with the lead. Entering last week, the Falcons (6-3, 4-1 Mountain) were in a three-way tie for the division lead until Utah State (5-4, 4-2 Mountain) was upset at New Mexico (5-4, 3-2 Mountain). Air Force and Boise State (7-2, 4-1 Mountain) now share the division lead.

The Falcons control their destiny with a home game Saturday against Utah State and a trip Nov. 21 to Boise State. That's a new feeling of excitement at the academy.

Air Force's resurgence has coincided with Griffin's return. The second-year starter from Louisburg, Ks., played a limited role his first game back, a loss to Colorado State. But since then Air Force has rolled up back-to-back 500-yard-plus total offense games in wins over Fresno State and Hawaii and defeated service academy rival Army. Griffin caught two touchdowns to contribute to beating the Black Knights, 20-3.

"It's been awesome to do whatever I can to help the running game," Griffin said. "When Army loaded the box, we had the opportunity to pass."

Griffin caught three balls for 32 yards. His 3-yard TD catch was good for a 10-0 lead in the second quarter and 23-yard TD in the fourth period put the game away at 20-3. For the season, he has four receptions for 56 yards in his four games.

Griffin's injury was among several that contributed to three losses in the first six games, including to a season-ending knee injury to quarterback Nate Romine in the second game. But backups such as quarterback Karson Roberts and tight end Ryan Reffitt have limited the drop off.

“We pride ourselves on depth, and we’ve had to utilize that depth,” Griffin said. “Guys who didn’t expect to play that much this year have stepped up. It’s given us a chance to make a run at the conference title. This is really nice.”

After Utah State and Boise State, Air Force finishes the regular season Nov. 28 at New Mexico.

“I think we were struggling to find our identity with the injuries,” Griffin said. “But the last three weeks we’ve been pounding the ball. I think we have a little more energy and we’re on a roll. Winning the conference would be great for this program.”

Air Force quarterback to talk satellites with ESPN crew

Gazette, Nov. 11

By Brent Briggeman

Karson Roberts spent part of his Tuesday going to class and walking around the Air Force Academy with an ESPN crew following his every move.

It wasn't the quarterback's launch to stardom that prompted the move - though he has certainly played an integral role as the Falcons have won four of five to earn bowl eligibility - but rather a launch he'll be part of in September at Cape Canaveral, Fla.

Roberts is part of a group of cadets working on a capstone project that will culminate in placing a satellite in orbit. Outside military and civilian personnel are also involved, but the day-to-day testing and preparation largely falls on Roberts and his group.

When ESPN decided to take its set to the academy in honor of Veterans Day on Wednesday, the combination of Roberts' prestige as the quarterback of the football team and out-of-the-ordinary work as a cadet made him a natural pick for a special segment.

"It's cool that they get to come and film and see a day in life of what we do," Roberts said. "It's a cool opportunity."

The ESPN exposure also comes at a pivotal part of the season for the Falcons. At 6-3, 4-1 Mountain West, Air Force controls its fate in the conference. In fact, if Boise State beats New Mexico this week and the Falcons can earn their 12th straight home victory with a win over Utah State, then next week's trip to Boise, Idaho, would determine the Mountain Division champion.

Air Force follows the games against Utah State and Boise State with a trip to New Mexico, which has won four of six.

Coach Troy Calhoun brushed off any talk that adding some national exposure, even the kind that focuses on the academic work of a cadet-athlete, brought any benefits.

"I think it's one of those things where it's too easy to get enamored with perception," Calhoun said. "It's better off just sticking to the core of what you do, it just is."

Elsewhere, there is buzz about the ESPN visit. The Air Force Academy and the Mountain West promoted it on social media and linebacker Connor Healy said cadets have mentioned it.

"I know a lot of people are excited about it," Healy said. "Having them come out and do their broadcast here. I think there was 'SportsNation' here a couple years ago, so it's always a big deal."

Kicker's emergence has Air Force ready for a close game

Gazette, Nov. 13
By Brent Briggeman

Air Force has played nine games. Not one of them has been close.

The six wins have come by an average of 31 points. The three losses have come by an average of 14 points. None of the nine games has been decided by fewer than 14 points.

For Luke Strelbel, the second place kicker Air Force has broken in this year, the lack of late-game drama has been a nice luxury, but one he's kind of ready to end.

"It's kind of a bittersweet nightmare," said the sophomore from Nashville, Tenn. "I'd love to get that opportunity, but I can't imagine, you know?"

So far, Strelbel has eased into the role in a way that has been pretty much ideal at a spot where confidence is so important. He first appeared in a game in the opener, kicking the last two extra points in a 56-point victory over Morgan State. Then, as a mid-game replacement for the injured Drew Oehrle at Colorado State, he kicked his first field goal - from 41 yards - in perfect weather conditions and with Air Force trailing by 25 points in the fourth quarter.

Since then he has hit five-of-six field goals in Falcons victories. Two of those attempts came in the first half with the score tied, and he went one of two in those situations.

"It hasn't been pressure free," Strelbel said. "But it certainly hasn't been a game-winner."

This week marks the final home game of the season for the Falcons. Last year in the home finale Will Conant hit the game-winning kick against No. 21 Colorado State as time expired, putting an exclamation point on a season in which he was named Mountain West Special Teams Player of the Year.

With Conant gone, the pressure was on among the kickers to earn that role. It first went to Oehrle, a senior who is working his way back from a groin injury. Now it seems Strelbel has grabbed ahold of the position.

But even the process of replacing Conant, Strelbel feels, has left him with some experience in pressure situations.

In practices in the spring and fall stats were kept on the kickers, with the top three fighting within a percentage point or two of each other.

"Every kick kind of had a little bit of pressure to it," said Strelbel, a systems engineering major who was a state champion in soccer and a wide receiver in addition to kicking field goals in high school. "It doesn't quite compare to game day, but it gives you a taste."

With the Falcons facing Utah State, Boise State and New Mexico over the final three weeks, there's a strong chance a close game is on the way. There's confidence on Air Force's side that, if it happens, the kicker will be ready.

"Will was great, I mean, I never even questioned it," offensive guard A.J. Ruechel said. "It's great to have Luke stepping up and filling that role. It's definitely relieving to know you can hit a 3-pointer if you need it."

Added coach Troy Calhoun, "the temperance that he has, you like that kind of keel you have in a kicker. He has really good focus, and yet takes pride in being an athlete. I think he's going to keep getting better and better, I really do."

Sweet ending in sight for Air Force running back Jacobi Owens

Gazette, Nov. 27

By Brent Briggeman

The climb to 1,000 yards was almost too easy for Jacobi Owens the first time around.

The Air Force runner tore through FCS foe Nicholls State for 233 yards in his college debut as a sophomore last year, then averaged 91 yards over the next nine weeks. The only drama came when he missed reaching the mark by 12 yards in front of friends and family in his hometown as the Falcons hammered UNLV.

He hit the mark the next week. Then he hit the greatest adversity he's met as an athlete.

Two bones in the middle of his foot slid out of place in a Lisfranc injury. Some of these are minor and require a few weeks of rehab. Owens' fell more in the category of potentially career ending.

It didn't end his career. In fact, a year - and a position switch - later, Owens is again within reach of 1,000 yards.

"If I get it, it would mean a lot more," Owens said. "This foot injury has been the hardest thing I've had in my life. Ever. It would mean a lot more."

Owens missed spring practice after surgery following last season, then was eased back through August. He started at tailback in the season opener, but he averaged just 10.2 carries (down from 20.4 the previous year) over the first six games as the Falcons started the season 3-3.

Then, Air Force's coaching staff showed some creativity.

With Shayne Davern out for the season with a torn ACL and D.J. Johnson fighting ankle injuries (he is now out indefinitely with a hamstring injury), the Falcons (8-3, 6-1 Mountain West) needed an experienced runner at fullback.

Owens - who still calls himself a "hybrid" instead of a fullback - made the switch.

He ran for 137 yards in his debut at the new position. He put up 133 the next week. Last week he cut through Boise State for 145 yards, 43 coming when Owens carried six times on an eight-play, fourth-quarter drive. It forced the Broncos to burn their final two timeouts and resulted in a field goal that all but clinched the victory.

Owens has 818 yards with three games remaining. Considering he has averaged 102 yards since switching to fullback, finding 182 more in three games should be doable.

"Just tells you he's got to have an awful lot of grit and mental toughness," coach Troy Calhoun said.

Owens could post the sixth 1,000-yard season for an Air Force running back in nine years under Calhoun, but he would be the first to do it after a position change.

It should be noted that Air Force's fullbacks combined for 136 yards and three touchdowns against this week's opponent, New Mexico, last season.

"To do both, really, I've never seen a guy do both since we've been here," Calhoun said. "And to do both really, really well. We've had some guys we'd maybe put in there for a carry or two depending on maybe a goal-line or short-yardage situation, but he's been really, really solid."

Taking Chance on Roland Ladipo Paid Off For Air Force

Today's U, Nov. 27

By Tom Shanahan

Six Big Ten schools possess losing records one victory shy of bowl eligibility: Illinois, Indiana, Maryland, Minnesota, Rutgers and Purdue.

Six Mid-American schools are in the same position with one regular-season game to play: Ball State, Buffalo, Eastern Michigan, Kent State, Massachusetts and Miami.

All them passed on a prospect in their Midwestern backyard who could have helped their cause: defensive back Roland Ladipo, a Class of 2013 recruit out of Pickerington High in suburban Columbus, Ohio.

Their loss was Air Force's gain.

"A lot of teams looked past me; they thought I was too small," the Falcons' junior starting cornerback told Today's U. "Air Force got on me late, too, but once I visited in December, I loved it. I declared after I came out here. They gave me an opportunity I could not pass up, and I've done everything I can to take advantage of it. It's a great education and great football program."

Of the above schools with losing records, the Big Ten's Indiana, Nebraska and Minnesota and the MAC's Buffalo can still gain bowl eligibility with a win in their respective regular-season finales. The others, though, will be staying home.

But while Indiana, Nebraska, Minnesota and Buffalo try to avoid joining the others that are already stuck staying home for the holidays, Ladipo is making his second straight bowl trip.

Last year, Air Force defeated Western Michigan in the Famous Idaho Potato Bowl. This year, the Falcons have two post-season games awaiting them — the Mountain West Conference championship game then a bowl invitation to be determined.

Air Force (8-3, 6-1 MW Mountain) clinched a berth in the Mountain West Conference championship game on Dec. 5th, representing the Mountain Division against West Division champion San Diego State (8-3, 7-0 MW West). The clincher was last week's win at Boise State (7-4, 4-3 MW Mountain) combined with New Mexico's upset loss to Colorado State. But the Falcons can claim the division title all their own by winning this week at New Mexico (6-5, 4-3 MW Mountain).

"This is a talented team," Ladipo said. "It's a great feeling to win our division and to be playing for the conference championship. To win the conference will be an unbelievable feeling, but we can't look past this week."

Air Force rose among the "others" in the AP writers Top 25 poll with 15 points to equal No. 31. The Falcons have six points in the USA Today coaches voting to equal a tie for No. 34 with West Virginia.

Ladipo has made a strong impact as a first-year starter. He is second to All-MWC safety Weston Steelhammer in team tackles, 68-67. He has 3.5 tackles for loss, one sack, three interceptions and leads the team in pass breakups with 16. His 12 tackles against Colorado State share the team's season high with defensive lineman Alex Hansen against Navy.

Actually, he has made quick impressions ever since he arrived on campus.

Ladipo was ticketed for the freshman team when he arrived at the academy for fall camp. After one day of practice he was promoted to the varsity. He played in all 12 games as a freshman backup corner and on special teams, and all 13 as sophomore in the same roles.

Whatever Air Force coaches saw in Ladipo to recruit him, the only other schools that saw it enough to offer were Ivy League school Cornell and Football Championship Subdivision member Holy Cross. Ladipo opted for Air Force. But that's what's special about service academy football. Coaches such as Troy Calhoun, a former Air Force quarterback and NFL assistant, identify over-achievers and bring them to the academy to continue to over-achieve.

"They saw something in me and developed me quickly," Ladipo said of his freshman promotion. "Maybe it was my work ethic; I'm not sure. I know they had bigger cornerbacks than me, but I thank God I had the opportunity to come here."

Humble Alex Hansen one of four Air Force football players to earn first-team All-MW honors

Gazette, Dec. 2

By Brent Briggeman

Alex Hansen won't say much about himself.

Others at Air Force aren't so shy when it comes to talking about the defensive end.

"He's like the Hulk," outside linebacker D.J. Dunn said.

"He's my best friend," tight end Garrett Griffin said.

"He's as good a college football player as we've coached here," coach Troy Calhoun said.

On Tuesday, the Mountain West spoke up, too. Hansen was named a first-team selection on the defensive line as the conference announced its awards for 2015. Safety Weston Steelhammer and cornerback Roland Ladipo joined Hansen as first-team picks on defense from Air Force, while tackle Sevrin Remmo was selected on offense.

Guard A.J. Ruechel was a second-team pick for Air Force, while running back Jacobi Owens and wide receiver Jalen Robinette earned honorable mention.

San Diego State, which will host Air Force in Saturday's Mountain West championship game, led the conference with seven first-team selections and swept the major awards. Running back Donnel Pumphrey was the Offensive Player of the Year, defensive back DeMontae Kazee earned the defensive honor, returner Rashaad Penny was the top special teams player and Rocky Long was named Coach of the Year.

Hansen was a nominee for Defensive Player of the Year, and there's no doubt his coach was solidly in his corner after a season in which Hansen recorded 7.5 sacks, 14.5 tackles for loss, two blocked kicks and ranks third on the team with 59 tackles.

"Snap after snap in terms of his involvement, his octane, his fight, his skill - he's as good a college football player as we've coached here," Calhoun said. "He's that talented and that unrelenting. He's smart. He's tough. Every intangible you could possibly have, he has it. In many instances, many times over, too.

"He's probably the most intense young person I've ever been around. You just kind of wonder, does he ever exhale? It's incredible. I joke all the time about type-A personalities that come to the United States Air Force Academy. Golly, there's got to be a whole new letter in the alphabet for what he is."

Hansen, a four-year starter who earned second-team all-Mountain West honors last year, seems embarrassed to hear this kind of talk.

"I don't like that kind of positive attention," he said.

But he isn't embarrassed about how he got there. Hansen is among the strongest players on the team, with a bench press of 410 pounds, a 365-pound power clean and squats that have climbed over 500 pounds.

"You can tell so much the way you play on Saturday and the focus you have during the week," he said. "It's crazy how correlated it is."

There's a saying that more is caught than taught, and the captain's influence has been noticed by teammates.

"Every single play he's just beating somebody up," Dunn said. "It never stops. And it starts, well, as a matter of fact it starts in the weight room. He's the strongest guy in the weight room, period. He's going hard every single play in practice, too, even if he is, quote unquote, our franchise player."

Griffin, a tight end, said Hansen is the most difficult player he has ever blocked - counting all teammates and opponents. But he's more impressed by Hansen's work on the hill in maintaining a GPA over 3.6 as an operations research major - a combination of business, math and computer science.

"Then he comes down here and works his tail off," Griffin said. "He brings it every single day. He's kind of the model for our program and he's been like that for four years.

"Everybody looks up to him because he knows when it's time to work, but he also knows how to have fun."

What Hansen can't seem to do is talk glowingly about himself. That's OK, the others have that more than covered.