

Former Timberwolves QB signs pro contract

Kent Smith is playing in the Canadian Football League

REGINA — The Saskatchewan Roughriders' quarterbacks are, appropriately enough, predominantly green in terms of development.

Of the four signal-callers who are under contract to the Riders, three have yet to play a down in the Canadian Football League. The signings of two of them — Cole Bergquist and Kent Smith — were confirmed Friday.

Darian Durant is the only Roughriders quarterback with any playing experience at the pro level. He was named a West Division all-star in 2009, his first full season as a starter. Not yet 28, he will likely be the youngest starting quarterback in the West this season.

Durant was the Riders' quarterback of record in all 20 regular-season and playoff games in 2009. In so doing, he became the first Riders passer since Kent Austin (circa 1992) to start every game.

To a degree, the Roughriders' brass is gambling that Durant will enjoy another injury-free season. But that is a tall order in a pass-oriented league in which the quarterback is routinely targeted by carnivorous pass rushers.

Durant is also one of the CFL's elite running quarterbacks. He carried the football 60 times in 2009, averaging an eye-popping 8.4 yards per rush. Tack on 561 passing attempts and Durant was exposed to danger 621 times in the regular season. The figure, which does not include option plays that also leave the quarterback susceptible to injury, increases to 684 once two post-season games are factored into the equation.

As a result of Durant's durability, understudies Steven Jyles and Dalton Bell were virtually welded to the sideline in 2009. Jyles, who is entering his fifth CFL season, signed as a free agent with the Winnipeg Blue Bombers in the hopes of receiving more playing time. Bell, last season's third-stringer, was recently traded to the Toronto Argonauts.

Bergquist and Graham Harrell were also part of the Roughriders' quarterbacking picture last season, which they spent on the practice roster. Harrell arrived in July, amid much fanfare, after enjoying a sensational college career at Texas Tech. Bergquist was also an accomplished collegian, albeit with considerably less exposure while piloting the offence at Montana. He landed in Saskatchewan two weeks before Harrell was introduced.

The only new arrival for 2010 is likely to be Smith — a 6-foot-5, 215-pound southpaw who was a two-year starter at Central Michigan. He had NFL stints with the Oakland Raiders and Tennessee Titans before playing arena football last season with the Peoria Pirates.

Given the Roughriders’ makeup at football’s most crucial position, it is reasonable to wonder whether the dearth of experience will prove to be a liability.

The quick fix would be to place a telephone call to Kerry Joseph, who quarterbacked the Roughriders to the 2007 Grey Cup title two days after being named the league’s most outstanding player. Joseph, 36, was recently released by the Argonauts after two frustrating seasons with the Double Blue.

The Roughriders do not appear to be inclined to revisit the not-too-distant past — not at this juncture, anyway. Their preference is to groom young quarterbacks, even if some excruciating growing pains result.

Harrell’s presence is a huge factor. How often do the Roughriders land a quarterback with his credentials? For starters, his 134 touchdown passes are an all-time NCAA record. In 2008, he finished fourth in Heisman Trophy voting, shared The Sporting News’ national player-of-the-year award with Sam Bradford (Oklahoma) and Colt McCoy (Texas), and won the Johnny Unitas Golden Arm Award as the NCAA’s outstanding senior quarterback.

The Riders simply had to find a way to move Harrell up the depth chart. Although they had hoped to re-sign Jyles, his departure and that of Bell clear the way for Harrell to at least don a green and white uniform this season. The same applies to Bergquist, whom the Riders view as an intriguing prospect due to his running and passing ability.

There is an element of risk in dressing an inexperienced No. 2 or No. 3 quarterback. However, players of that description have been known to come out of nowhere and make an imprint.

As a classic case in point, we present Darian Durant.