



STAMPEDERS



TODD
SAELHOF

Ben Labrosse is making the 2024 Calgary Stampeders' draft team look pretty darn good.

So, too, is Christy Nkanu.

Amid the well-documented struggles of the Stampeders, the two talents — and first-rounders in the 2024 CFL Draft — have been unheralded bright spots for the Red and White in their rookie season.

And, of course, that bodes well for the three-down team's future.

"Ben and Christy have probably played more football than I even thought they would — and played well," said Stampeders GM/head coach Dave Dickenson of his two prized prospects — one a defensive back and the other an offensive lineman — selected with the fourth- and eighth-overall choices, respectively, of the annual pick-em.

"One of the things that's hard on these young guys is they've never played this much football — 18 games," continued Dickenson. "I was talking to Christy, and he's never played more than 11 games (in a season). And Ben with McGill (University), he would have never played eight or maybe nine."

Indeed, Labrosse came to the Stampeders after starting for the McGill Redbirds in short-season U SPORTS action.

And Nkanu, a fellow Quebec-born footballer, was a standout with the Washington Cougars, having played a few more games in the NCAA ranks.

But both have adjusted to the longer season of the CFL and even improved to become consistent starters as the year gets deeper, continuing with Friday's Week 20 contest for the Stamps (4-11-1) against the host Hamilton Tiger-Cats (6-10) at Tim Hortons Field (5 p.m., TSN, QR Calgary).

"It's pretty good," Nkanu, the 6-foot-2, 309 lb. guard, told Stamps TV. "I'm having a good time, and I get to play a lot as a rookie, so that's always good."

"Yeah ... doing well," agreed Labrosse, the 6-foot, 191 lb. defensive back. "I'm getting into more the hang of it on defence. So it's going well."

Very well, in fact.

While Nkanu's name is rarely called — which is a good thing for o-linemen — Labrosse's name is getting heard more and more when



DARREN MAKOWICHUK/POSTMEDIA;
INSET: GAVIN YOUNG/POSTMEDIA



Stampeders offensive lineman Christy Nkanu (above) and defensive back Ben Labrosse, left — battling Edmonton Elks receiver Tevin Jones — have been bright spots in a difficult year for the Red and White after being selected in the first round of this year's draft.

GOING THE DISTANCE

Stamps rookies Labrosse, Nkanu 'what we need' moving forward as they quickly adjust to longer season

the Stamps' defence is on the field.

In 12 games, including seven starts, Labrosse has 31 defensive tackles including two tackles for loss, two special-teams stops, one fumble recovery and two knockdowns.

In the Week 15 loss to the Montreal Alouettes, the 24-year-old native of Greenfield Park, Que., had three tackles, including a tackle for loss and a fumble recovery. In the Week 16 drop to the Saskatchewan Roughriders, Labrosse recorded a team-leading eight tackles. And in last Friday's 23-18 fall to the Edmonton Elks, only fellow DB Tyler Richardson — with seven — had more tackles than Labrosse's six.

"We're a tight-knit group in the DB room," said Labrosse, when asked who has helped him to improve on the year. "So we're always bouncing ideas off each other and we're working together. We'll get some extra work in together. We'll talk about, 'Oh, how do you see this? How do you see that play out?'"

"The DB room has really been helping me get better and helping me understand the game a bit better."

But Labrosse did have the skill himself to be earmarked as a first-round draftee, and that prowess is further helping him in becoming a key contributor, whether he's in coverage or in pursuit.

"Yeah ... when I look back and I watch some of the plays, I just realize how now I understand the concepts a little bit better and I under-

stand my job a little bit better, so I know how to use my leverage and I know where to be," Labrosse said. "Instead of chasing someone, I'd rather let them come to me. So I'm starting to kind of get the hang of things in that sense more."

"It's one of those things where I think Ben has consistently gotten better, but there's still plays here and plays there and I know he needs the reps, and he needs to do it over and over again in order to see it and then be that much better," Dickenson said. "But he fits in well. He's doing a lot of good things. You know ... he tackles well. He's probably our best tackling DB, and it's what we need."

Nkanu, too, after Dickenson admitted early on in the season that the Montreal native was going through growing pains.

But a few injuries along the o-line allowed him to time to work through any issues, and he's now participated in 16 games and started nine of them.

"I get to learn from Zack (Williams) and Bryce (Bell) — they

always give me tips," said 25-year-old Nkanu, of his older, wiser fellow linemen. "So it's been pretty good with the vets."

"I'm the youngest guy in the room. So I get to learn from those guys, and then it's just kind of fun to be around them, as well."

It's fun for anyone when there's improvement afoot, like there is for youngsters Nkanu and Labrosse.

"With the season coming to an end, it's like all while you want to heal your body because it's a long season. You also think, man, it's going to be a long off-season, too, and I'm going to miss football," added Labrosse.

"I don't want to stop the rhythm — I just want to keep going."

SHORT YARDAGE

WR Reggie Begelton returned from illness Wednesday to practise and ready himself for Hamilton ... WR Cam Echols (head) is available to play, as well ... WR Erik Brooks (arm) was back at practice this week after missing most of the season but hasn't been cleared for contact yet ... DB Daniel Amoako (knee) practised fully Tuesday and Wednesday but is out for Friday's game ... Stamps who didn't practise Tuesday are WR Ishmael Hyman (calf), WR Cole Tucker (hamstring) and LB Darius Williams (wrist).



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