

## 49ers' Barlow looking to make fresh start

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As the line of 49ers signing autographs at Friday's open practice disappeared slowly into the locker room, Alex Smith was set up to be the only player left with the audience. But team officials pulled the No. 1 draft pick aside before he reached the last cluster of fans, who groaned as the quarterback vanished. One player remained, patiently signing item after item passed to him over a rope barrier. It was running back Kevan Barlow, taking the final bow of the day.



The fans can only hope the scene repeats itself on the football field this season, and Barlow minimizes expectations of the quarterback by handling a bigger workload than anyone else on the offense. He is one of the most important and unpredictable elements of the reconstructed 49ers.

Barlow could be the dynamic rusher of his first three seasons in the NFL, when he backed up Garrison Hearst, or he could be one frustrated and frustrating athlete, as he was last year, his first as the team's designated starter. After signing a five-year contract extension worth \$20 million before the season, Barlow started 14 games, compared to four in 2003, yet rushed for 202 fewer yards. His yards-per-carry dropped dramatically, from 5.1 to 3.4. More to the point, he was visibly at odds with his coaches, and it wasn't clear which plummeted further in 2004, his attitude or the 49ers' record. Barlow's interpretation: The 2-14 season dragged everybody down.

"I definitely learned from it, in case I ever go through it again," Barlow said. "Hopefully -- God forbid that ever happens this year -- but if it did, I would know what to expect. I would go about things differently."

He has already started doing some things differently. He went through conditioning workouts at the team headquarters in the offseason for the first time since the winter of 2002. Barlow also added yoga, Pilates, massage and chiropractic care to his routine. The body, he discovered, needs a lot more TLC when it is expected to fill a starting job on the football field.

"I never used to understand all the stuff Garrison Hearst did," Barlow said. "He'd be in the ice tub after practice every day, and I'd get dressed --

boop, boop, boop -- and be out the door. He'd tell me 'You'll see when you're the starter.' Well, I found out what he meant, and now my butt's in the ice tub after every practice."

None of that would have mattered if the coaching staff hadn't changed. Barlow wasn't the only player who became unhappy with the Dennis Erickson administration, but he needed a fresh chance more than just about anyone else. When Mike Nolan was named to replace Erickson, Barlow decided to join the offseason training program, partly to figure out the new direction of the team. After Friday's practice, he gushed about running backs coach Bishop Harris --

"a great guy and a great coach."

When he was asked about last year's coaches, some of the negative feelings resurfaced very briefly. "I don't think they knew what they wanted to do," he said, and then, just as the anger surfaced in his voice, Barlow went quiet. He wouldn't let himself look too deeply into the past.

Through the yoga classes, he has learned about meditation. Barlow found an individual instructor, as well as his own massage therapist and a young chiropractor who adjusted him three times a week, sometimes bunking at Barlow's home in San Jose on weekends.

"George T-r-i-c-i-p-l-a-s," Barlow said, thinking carefully as he spelled out the name. Of course, the best promotion for his fitness crew would be spelled in numerals: perhaps 1,400 yards rushing and 450 receiving.

But Barlow said he had big numbers on his mind last season, and the goals didn't help. "You're thinking 1,500 yards and 700 yards, and that's selfish," he said. "Now, all I'm telling myself is that I have to give everything to the other (10) guys on the field, and that if I do, things will work out."

That's easy to say, especially in training camp. But can he sustain that mind-set when things go wrong, as they surely will this season? The offensive line, horribly depleted last year, has already been nicked, and cultivating a rookie quarterback will require patience from everyone.

"I think last year, I had a lot more pressure on me -- you know, got the contract, and I expected a lot from myself," Barlow said. "... I don't feel there's much pressure on me this year. I feel real free-minded, I feel ready to play like I have in the past."

Channeled properly, his emotions can be a big asset to the team. He has to tend them as carefully as his body, which after a long day of interviewing, autographing and attending double practices, was off to the ice tub Friday night.