



Cabral expects LBs to be strength on Buffs' defense

By Kyle Ringo
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BOULDER, Colo. — Brian Cabral has seen enough in more than 30 years of playing and coaching defense to know that CU must get a few young defensive linemen to play above their heads this season for the team to be successful.

But he's also convinced his deep pool of linebackers collectively has enough intelligence, toughness and athleticism to erase many of the mistakes made in front of them.

That's just what he has challenged his linebackers to do beginning with the start of fall camp later this week.

"We should be one of the strengths in our defense," Cabral said. "We have to understand the problem. We have to understand the issues and we have to understand our responsibility to make that better.

"So my theme going in with my linebackers is, 'Make them right' regardless of what they do. We're going to play off of them and we're going to make the defense right. The onus is on us to adjust, and, at times, cover up the mistakes of a young defensive line."

The story line is familiar to any CU fan paying attention since the end of last season. The Buffs must replace former starters Brandon Nicolas, Maurice Lucas and George Hypolite who combined to eat up the majority of the playing time on the defensive line over the past two years.

The Buffs ended spring practice with Marquez Herrod, Curtis Cunningham, Eugene Goree and Conrad Obi atop the depth chart at the four defensive line positions. That group combined to play 433 snaps in 2008, with Herrod accounting for nearly half that total.

They are bound to make mistakes this season, particularly in the early going, and the pressure will be on linebackers to shake off blocks and make plays anyway.

"I think the ability to roam freely sometimes is going to be skewed," senior middle linebacker Marcus Burton said. "We may have to fight off a couple of o-linemen before you get to the ball carrier. But I think the way our defense is set up, it makes it a lot easier for the d-linemen to make plays."

Colorado practiced a lot in the 3-4 defensive scheme in spring ball, and players said they expected to be creative on defense this fall with coaches varying looks more often. Coaches also were using more movement from the defensive linemen during spring to confuse blockers.

"I think the biggest challenge will be just making sure that they get lined up correctly and make sure that they are in the right alignments and doing their responsibilities," said senior linebacker Jeff Smart, who

led the team in tackles last year. "I think the group is young and inexperienced, but I think they proved this spring that they can definitely play and do some good things. I was very pleasantly surprised this spring."

While Cabral believes in his players for good reasons, it is also true that the two players likely to see the most playing time at middle linebacker -- Burton and Michael Sipili -- played sparingly last year.

The duo combined for 186 snaps last year when Smart and Shaun Mohler made their mark. Those two are competing at the WILL position this year. Sipili played in only seven games and Burton played in 10. Both have played more in the past and have overcome off-the-field problems to earn new opportunities now.

"Those guys have experience, and, more importantly, those guys have turned the corner," Cabral said. "Those guys have both been through a lot. There are a lot of things now that they have put in balance in their lives. They're a more complete person as well as a complete player."

"I'm fully expecting and every sign is pointing toward Marcus having his best year and Mike having his best year. I like that tandem."



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[Hawkins expecting success despite early Colorado struggles](#)

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Posted by ESPN.com's Tim Griffin

While going back through some tapes over the weekend of the recent Big 12 media days, I was struck by an interesting comment by Colorado coach Dan Hawkins.

Before coming to Colorado, Hawkins was one of the hottest young coaches in the nation. His five teams at Boise State from 2001-05 had a combined record of 53-11. Those Bronco teams posted a winning percentage of .828 that only those like Bob Stoops, Mack Brown, Jim Tressel and Urban Meyer know about.

And if you ask Hawkins, similar success is approaching at Colorado, where his team is 13-24 and has made only one bowl appearance in his three-season coaching tenure.

"I just know," Hawkins said. "I know great things can happen and you're just a stone's turn away from those things happening.

"You start getting a little bit of momentum. You stay healthy, you start putting things together and get a couple breaks and, 'wow,' it happens. Every place I've been we've won championships. Every place. Part of that is it's the expectation."

Obviously keeping his line healthy and getting increased production at quarterback would certainly help. But Hawkins realizes there's a fine line between success and failure.

The Buffaloes are my dark-horse team in the North Division. Hardly anybody is talking about this with most of the early interest centered on Kansas and Nebraska.

But Colorado's schedule and underrated talent might keep them in the North Division title chase longer than most might think.

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2008. He has covered the Big 12 since its inception, among a variety of beats during a 24-year career at the San Antonio Express-News. Griffin, a Memphis State University graduate, lives in San Antonio with his wife and son.

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