



Zach Grossnickle is ready to compete for CU's punting, placekicking duties.
Photo Courtesy: CUBuffs.com



03/11/2010 B.G. Brooks, Contributing Editor

Brooks: Grossnickle Feeling More Comfortable, Confident

BOULDER - Zach Grossnickle entered his freshman football season at Colorado fairly certain of what he wouldn't do this summer before his redshirt freshman year: Participate in Ultimate Frisbee.

Huh?

Stay with me here.

When the Denver East product reported for camp last August, he wore a cast on his lower left arm and wrist. In May, he'd broken a bone in that area when he leaped for the plastic dish and was undercut by a competitor.

Grossnickle broke his fall with his left hand - and broke something else.

"Freak accident," Grossnickle said, filing it away in the lesson-learned category.

As a placekicker/punter, the injury wasn't much hindrance for the former duty. As for the latter, it

definitely was a hindrance; fielding center snaps with one hand/wrist in a cast is a handicap/headache no punter (or special teams coach or head coach) needs.

"I think he could have helped us as a punter, but we were a little leery about whether he could catch the ball," Buffaloes coach Dan Hawkins said.

Added special teams coach Kent Riddle: "I can't say if he'd been used if he wouldn't have had the cast. It definitely hindered his development a little bit; it's hard to catch a snap and hold the ball when you've got a broken bone in your wrist . . . He really did an awesome job the last month of the season, but it was just hard to justify pulling a redshirt off at that point."

In addition to the wrist cast, Grossnickle also was coping with the usual freshman acclimation issues. Despite his being reared 30 minutes from Boulder, as Riddle pointed out, "Living away from home is living away from home."

Then, there was school, new teammates, new duties, etc. Dealing with those matters, plus not being able to work out regularly, took about 15 pounds from a 6-foot-2 frame that didn't need any unauthorized reduction.

But March 2010 finds 'Z' in better health and in a better state of mind. The cast is gone, the 15 lost pounds (and maybe a few more) are back, and spring drills have begun with him cast as the heir apparent to CU's No. 1 punting job. Plus, he's competing with senior-to-be Aric Goodman and junior transfer Marcus Kirkwood (Concordia) as a placekicker.

CU's winter conditioning regimen helped restore Grossnickle's weight, as did a fairly regular workout routine with his father at a Denver fitness facility. Familiarity with his surroundings and the accompanying maturity are helping, too.

"I feel really comfortable with team and my punting . . . it's a lot easier when I don't have the cast on," he said. "I think I've gotten used to the whole system and the speed that things come . . . I have a confidence there now."

That could be good news for the Buffs, who need to upgrade their punting/placekicking. Matt DiLallo, last season's punter, averaged 38.6 gross and 31.9 net, with both figures last in the Big 12 Conference. CU also was last in field goal percentage (.556, 10-of-18).

To help correct the punting issue, Riddle is emphasizing better hang time this spring.

"When your gross punt (average) is not very good, it's hard for the net punt to be great unless you've got tremendous hang time," he said. "Low, short punts is a bad combination. So we're really emphasizing hang time, hang time, hang time."

"If distance comes with that, that's great. But the reality is, if you had a 36-yard net and it was 36 yards every time with no return, you'd be in the top half of the conference - more like the top third of the conference."

"If it's over 4.2 (seconds) in the air, but only 35-36 yards and they fair catch it, we'll survive that. Do we want 45 yards (per punt)? Yeah, everybody does. But the reality of it is, we'll live for another day."

"If you hit a line drive down there at 41 yards and the (returner) has got 10 yards between you and your nearest cover guy, it doesn't matter what you're doing . . . you're not going to be successful. We had that happen a lot (in 2009). We're really working hard on ball in the air, ball in the air, ball in the air."

Grossnickle and the others have gotten the "hang 'em high" message. But not to be forgotten is the rugby punt, which some teams almost have adopted exclusively. Riddle's view: There's a time and place for it - if you've got a punter who can execute it and you're facing a returner who's best avoided.

Riddle says the Buffs were "decent" at best with the rugby punt last season. But both styles' goal is the same: "Keep the ball in the air (longer) or away from the returner on the ground . . . if you rugby punt, you want the ball on the ground as fast as possible versus in the air as long as possible - unless your guy has the ability to roll out and kick it high and far. But those guys usually stay in Australia."

As a high school senior, Grossnickle averaged 40 yards per punt and had 10 punts of 50-plus yards, giving credence to Hawkins' and Riddle's scouting reports of Grossnickle "having a big leg."

He's not averse to the rugby punt - "We do it every day in practice" - but he'd just as soon hit it high and let the coverage do its job.

"If we're getting great hang time with the normal style of punting, then I don't think we'd go to rugby very much unless there's a very good returner . . . most of the time, I think we'll just want to get the ball to hang up there - that's the goal."

It's one of many - none of which involve a return to Ultimate Frisbee.

BUFF BITS: Justin Drescher held down the long- and short-snapping duties for four years. Now that he's graduated, Riddle is looking at converted defensive tackle Joe Silipo, a 6-2, 250-pound senior, as a possible replacement. Also in the mix is sophomore Mario Conte - but he's not cut from a normal snapper mold. He's a 5-10, 180-pound receiver. Riddle expects a couple of incoming freshmen to possibly assert themselves at the position . . . The Buffs were in full pads Thursday for the first time this spring. Contact work included goal line drills . . . Sophomore guard Max Tuioti-Mariner, who sat out last season after a pair of knee injuries, said he "feels like this is the year . . . it's fun (but) there's a lot of competition." Tuioti-Mariner, a 6-2, 305-pounder, is spending most of his time at right guard. When junior Ryan Miller reinjured his surgically repaired right forearm on Day 1, it meant more work for Tuioti-Mariner. "I'm seeing more time there, but the competition is really good - David Clark, Shawn Daniels . . . we've got some really good O-linemen." . . . CU conducted a high school coaches clinic Thursday and will again on Friday.

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SHOW MENU



Bufs' Kasa has plenty to fuel his fire

Knee injury, bout of mono limited DE as freshman

By Kyle Ringo Camera Sports Writer
Boulder Daily Camera

Posted: 03/12/2010 12:12:35 AM MST

Defensive line coach Romeo Bandison sat down with freshman defensive end Nick Kasa not long after last season ended and reviewed clips of every play Kasa was on the field in 2009.

It didn't take long. There were only 47 of them.

Bandison showed the highest-rated member of the 2009 recruiting class his mistakes and successes and sent him into the offseason program with a few thoughts in mind. He didn't want Kasa to add too much bulk to his 6-foot-7 frame in the weight room or the dining room, and he emphasized visualizing playing in his gap and avoiding the temptation to look around trying to see the big picture.

"I think it really helped and I think he really knows what he's got to get better on," Bandison said. "I think that is really going to help him this spring and next fall to get where he needs to get."

Kasa was beginning to blossom in fall camp and appeared to be on his way to playing early and often as a true freshmen, but he suffered a sprained knee ligament that forced him to miss the remainder of camp and the first three games of the season.

When he returned he was able to play during four games in the middle of the season before contracting a case of mononucleosis that ended his season. It was a frustrating start to his college career and compounded when he did not qualify for a medical redshirt season under NCAA rules because he had played too late in the year.

"You need to use all that stuff for fuel and hopefully he looks at it that way and goes, 'OK, I'm going to make my mark,'" coach Dan Hawkins said. "I think he has so far. He's had a really good offseason in the weight room and he's running around right now pretty good as a player."

Kasa completed the third practice of spring ball Thursday -- the first that included full pads and tackling -- and says he feels "awesome."

He squatted 620 pounds recently, proving his knee is completely healthy, and he's focused on making up for lost time during his sophomore season next fall.

"Mostly it just made me really mad," Kasa said. "I couldn't get my redshirt, which was unfortunate, and it just really angered me and gave me a lot of motivation to do well this year."

Bandison said some of Kasa's mistakes when he was on the field last season were costly, but that is generally the case with any freshman. He said as Kasa improves his technique and grows more accustomed to the speed of the college game, he will play a bigger part on game day.

"He has all the tools, and he wants to be good," Bandison said. "I think it's just going to be a matter of time, but he's going to be a good player for us."

Kasa finished last season with two tackles in those 47 plays from scrimmage. One of those takedowns went for a three-yard loss. He said last season wasn't a complete disappointment. He feels very confident in his overall understanding of his responsibilities as he begins the next chapter.

"I was hurt during the season so I missed a lot of practices and stuff, but I would look through my playbook and got a chance to do that," he said. "I've got the smarts for it, I just need to catch up to what everybody got last year with practicing."

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Evans` aggressive style makes him good fit at TE

By Kyle Ringo Camera Sports Writer
Boulder Daily Camera

Posted: 03/12/2010 12:11:17 AM MST

They are only three practices in, but it's looking like the decision to move Colorado freshman Clark Evans from quarterback to tight end might have been a good one this spring.

Evans came to Boulder last year after a standout high school career in Southern California during which he earned comparisons to former Florida quarterback Tim Tebow because of his aggressive style.

At 6-foot-5 and 225-pounds, he fit the mold of what many CU fans want in a quarterback. But somewhere between his arrival last summer and the start of practices this spring, CU coaches decided his future wasn't under center, where the program has junior starter Tyler Hansen and senior Cody Hawkins.

"More than anything, he's too good an athlete to stand over there at a position where we've got two experienced guys and only one of them is going to be on the field at a time," tight ends and special teams coach Kent Riddle said. "He's a big, fast, athletic guy who is tough. He's done a nice job."

This is take two for Riddle when it comes to converting a quarterback to tight end. He did it once before in 2006 when former Buff Patrick Devenny made the switch.

Riddle said Evans` move to tight end is not necessarily analogous to Devenny`s because they were two different kinds of players and athletes at the time they made the move. But he said there are things he learned in tutoring Devenny that could help him with Evans.

Devenny came to CU after a high school career as a drop-back passer. He had to learn to be aggressive enough to bang heads with defensive lineman coming off the ball and linebackers. It was something he struggled with even as a senior after four years at the position.

Evans played a much more physical role as the quarterback of his high school offense. He was used as a ball carrier and was asked to carry the ball in short-yardage situations. He even played defensive line earlier in high school.

That experience has probably prepared him to make the transition a little easier than Devenny, who finished his career with 28 catches and six touchdowns.

"Mostly I just think Clark is a little further along because he's done more of that type of thing earlier in his career," Riddle said.

Hang time

The Buffs finished last season 12th in the Big 12 Conference and 113th nationally in net punting. Riddle said much of the problem came in not getting enough hang time on kicks last season, which allowed return men to field the ball cleanly and make decisions about where to run.

He is emphasizing hang time with freshman kicker Zach Grossnickle and senior Aric Goodman this spring with mixed results to this point. The punting in practices hasn't been consistent and has sent return men sprinting toward sidelines and straight up field at times in an effort to catch short or wobbly punts.

There might be an opportunity for Justin Castor, a recruit signed last month from Arvada West High School, to earn immediate playing time at punter when he joins the roster next fall.

Snapper

Senior Joe Silipo is getting most of the reps at longsnapper so far as coaches try to replace for-year starter Justin

Drescher.

Silipo practiced last year as a defensive lineman and longsnapper but is focusing his attention on snapping this spring. Riddle said several offensive linemen can fill in as longsnappers if needed and walk-on wide receiver Mario Conte (5-foot-10, 180) also has longsnapping experience and is listed second on the depth chart.

"He's doing a very good job," Riddle said of Silipo.

Notable

CU coaches are conducting a two-day coaches clinic hosting many area high school football coaches Thursday and today. ... The Buffs practice today from 4 to 6 p.m. and will take the weekend off. The first scrimmage of spring comes next Thursday at 4 p.m.

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Buffs seek solutions for special teams

By Patrick Ridgell
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BOULDER — Not everything went wrong with Colorado's special teams in 2009.

The Buffs covered kickoffs pretty well. Before he was injured and later quit, Darrell Scott returned them well. And Brian Lockridge took one back for a touchdown at Oklahoma State late in the season that almost proved to be the difference that night.

Otherwise, there were problems.

Among the priorities in spring drills is to get better on special teams. That means Kent Riddle's to-do list is long. CU's specials teams coach wants more field goals made, longer hang times, better tackling and the emergence of play-makers. The short answer to what he believes must be accomplished this spring is as follows:

"We just have to get a lot better," Riddle said.

CU finished last in the league in net punting — averaging 31.9 yards a kick. Following a recent practice, Riddle discussed that statistic the most.

"When your gross punt is not very good, your net punt, it's hard for that to be great," he said. "Unless you have tremendous hang time. We had low, short punts, which is a bad combination. So we're really emphasizing hang time.

"If distance comes with that, that's great, but the reality of it is, if you had a 36-yard net and it was 36 yards every time with no return, you'd be in the top half of the conference, easy, probably more like the top third of the conference. So we're just going, 'Hey, if it's over 4.2 (seconds) in the air but only 35, 36 yards and they fair catch it, we'll survive that.'

"But if you hit a line drive 41 yards and the (returner) has 10 yards between you and the nearest cover guy, it doesn't matter what you're doing on punt, you're not going to be successful. We had that happen a lot."

Matt DiLallo averaged 38.6 yards per punt in 2009, among the Big 12's lowest averages for regular punters. He has graduated. CU lists Aric Goodman and Zach Grossnickle as its top two punters, but Riddle said he thinks it'll be Grossnickle's job in September.

Grossnickle broke his left arm in May, 2009, playing Ultimate Frisbee, and he wore a cast last season that Riddle said hindered his development as he redshirted. Grossnickle also lost "a ton of weight" during his freshman season, Riddle said, but has been better able to keep it on since last year. Grossnickle said his arm is fine now, and he's kicking well.

"He's doing great," Riddle said.

The emphasis on hang time does not necessarily mean CU won't use the rugby punt in 2010.

"We were actually decent when we rugby punted," Riddle said.

The Buffs have to replace long-snapper Justin Drescher, who exhausted his eligibility in 2009 and left behind teammates that describe his snaps as “perfect.” Riddle said senior transfer Joe Silipo is doing a “great job.” Silipo played defensive line at Northern Colorado, but has given the position up at CU to focus solely on long snapping.

“It’s what’s best for the team,” Silipo said.

CU might also try sophomore receiver Mario Conte at long snapper. His size — 5-10, 180-pounds — make him difficult to block off the line, essentially creating another gunner on punt coverage.

Goodman is a senior who last season went 10-for-18, a clip he called “nowhere near where I expect myself to be.”

“Inside 40 to 45 yards, I expect to be perfect, and last season I wasn’t,” Goodman said.

Goodman was 5-for-6 from 30 to 39 yards, and 2-for-7 from 40 to 49 yards. He missed his final four kicks of 2009, three of which came from 42 yards or longer.

“I need to focus on not trying to do anything that’s extraordinary or outside what I’m supposed to be doing,” Goodman said. “I need to make sure I’m coming through when I need to and when everyone expects me to.”

CU listed 10 players as its kick and punt returners on its first spring depth chart. They’re all getting chances in the early part of spring drills.

Read Patrick Ridgell’s CU sports blog at www.timescall.com/blogs/ridgell. He can be reached at pridgell@times-call.com.