



Former safety Patrick Mahnke believes lining up nearer the line of scrimmage at inside linebacker is a better fit.
Photo Courtesy: CUBuffs.com



03/15/2010 B.G. Brooks, Contributing Editor

Brooks: Rippy, Mahnke Get Spring Seminar At ILB

BOULDER - For a couple of decades, venerable Colorado assistant Brian Cabral has called his new linebackers his "puppies." Since they're both new this spring to learning from Cabral, we'll assume Doug Rippy and Patrick Mahnke still qualify as "pups."

But in that sense only. Otherwise, they don't qualify.

Both are veteran squad members who have moved under Cabral's umbrella as he goes about restocking an inside LB corps that lost two starters and a pair of key reserves to graduation.

Rippy's switch took him from the outside (or Sam) spot to the middle (Mike), so he's moved laterally within the position. Mahnke, meanwhile, shifted from free safety to the inside (Will) spot, a change that positions him about 10 yards nearer the line of scrimmage and brings the action to him much faster than at his former position. Plans are to also give him a look at playing linebacker in the nickel package.

Rippy, a sophomore, is playing behind senior Michael Sipili, who shared time last season with

graduated Marcus Burton. Mahnke, a junior, is backing up sophomore Jon Major, who was behind departed Jeff Smart and Shaun Mohler in 2009.

Rippy is a chiseled 6-foot-1, 240-pounder who, with seasoning, probably could play any of the linebacker positions. "At the end of the day, it's all the same - learning, taking it all in and doing what they're telling you," said Rippy, who manned an inside spot in high school (Trotwood, Ohio, Madison).

The 6-1 Mahnke concedes, "I kind of consider myself a slow DB, so I guess I'd consider myself a fast linebacker. The only problem physically would be weight-wise. I'm 205 and by far the lightest linebacker."

Weight aside, Mahnke is athletic and considered a playmaker, and a little more than a week into spring practice, Cabral likes how he and Rippy have embraced and adjusted to their new roles.

Said Cabral: "I'm excited that they're excited. We're going to get the best guys on the field in the best positions. That's what spring is for."

The duo was approached about making the moves when they returned to campus after Christmas break.

"We evaluated some things, looked at our numbers (inside and outside) and really it was to balance our numbers," Cabral said.

"They're both doing well . . . really, an exceptional job from the moment they agreed to move to the first day of practice. They've done good film study, good prep in making the switch.

"I'm pleased with they're at right now. It's just a matter of them learning the positions and seeing everything and experiencing everything. We'll take it one day at a time and see where it all goes."

Both admit they're still in the learning process.

"I'm having to read more things . . . when you're on the edge, you only have to read the tackle," Rippy said. "You could tell, obviously, when he pulled, what was coming. Now, you have to read both guards, see where the back is and see what the formation is.

"That's been the biggest adjustment, but at the same time it's coming along pretty well."

Mahnke's biggest adjustment comes from where he now lines up. "Coverage-wise, I don't think it's that hard," he said. "But I would definitely say it's a lot harder mentally because everything happens so much faster.

"When you were at safety, you were 10 or 12 yards away, so you could see things develop. At linebacker, you're three yards from the line of scrimmage, so it's like everything happens in a snap - just so quick.

"When you're in the secondary, where you started kind of stays the same. At linebacker, if someone motions, you change your alignment or your responsibilities. The hardest part is changing from formation to formation."

Late last season, Mahnke got an inkling that a position switch might be percolating. Then-redshirt freshman Ray Polk, a converted tailback who approached former secondary coach Greg Brown about moving to defense, was getting more playing time at safety. Players and coaches "kind of joked about (Mahnke moving). Then it went from joking to serious in the off-season - and I made the change," Mahnke said.

"I think linebacker plays to my strength better. So, yeah, I'm definitely excited for the opportunity."

With Brown leaving in December for Arizona, Mahnke would have changed position coaches even if he had not changed positions. Ashley Ambrose, an NFL veteran who assisted Brown last season as a defensive technical intern, was promoted into Brown's slot.

Learning a new position under Cabral, said Mahnke, "really helps out a lot . . . he's a good coach."

When Rippy signed with CU, his high school coach, Maurice Douglass, briefed him on Cabral. Douglass and Cabral had played together with the Chicago Bears in the mid-1980s.

"Coach Cabral can teach the mechanics and basically help me get my footwork down," said Rippy, who has been spending as much time as his schoolwork will allow with Cabral to acclimate himself with his new position.

"He can be tough sometimes, especially if he expects something out of you and you make mistakes," Rippy said. "You'll do it over and over. He's on us pretty hard, but it's to help us all get better."

BUFF BITS: As the halfway point of spring drills approaches, coach Dan Hawkins says his punters and placekickers "are not where we should be . . . the numbers are not what we want." Redshirt freshman Zach Grossnickle and senior Aric Goodman are competing for both jobs, but Hawkins already is saying in-coming freshman Justin Castor (Arvada West) will be in the mix in August . . . Junior tailback Rodney Stewart was back at practice Monday after missing Friday's work to attend to academics . . . Thursday's first full spring scrimmage is scheduled for 4 p.m. in Folsom Field, although Hawkins said some preliminary work could be done on the lower practice fields . . . Former CU defensive back Ronnie Bradford, who played in the NFL for 10 seasons, has joined the University of California staff as an administrative assistant. Bradford served as a defensive assistant in 2009 with the Kansas City Chiefs for current Cal defensive coordinator Clancy Pendergast.

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Orms turning heads at CU spring practices

By Kyle Ringo Camera Sports Writer
Boulder Daily Camera

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Several times during a difficult 2009 football season Colorado coach Dan Hawkins mentioned a group of redshirt freshman he was looking forward to seeing on the field in 2010.

One of those players is defensive back Parker Orms, a deceptively speedy product out of Wheat Ridge High School who seems to be doing well for himself one-third of the way through spring ball.

Orms is getting first-team reps in practice at nickelback, in part because of a minor injury to Travis Sandersfeld, but also because he has earned them. It seems the more opportunities he gets, the more coaches like what they see from him.

He made two interceptions in practice Friday and followed it up with another solid day Monday. Orms said he understands now where he is supposed to be on the field in different situations.

"He's really kind of a baller," Hawkins said. "He's a very savvy kid. I think he's just been playing sports for so long -- football, basketball and baseball -- that he's a very heady guy. He understands the game. He's one of those gym-rat kind of guys. He can run, too."

Orms said he had a solid winter in the weight room and he feels a little different in practice these days because he knows with his redshirt year behind him, he can earn playing time if he performs well enough on a consistent basis.

"I definitely want to be out there," he said. "So I'm playing for my life, you know? There is no excuses now."

Orms said he was able to learn the system last fall under former secondary coach Greg Brown and is much better prepared for the college game having taken a year to mature in every way. While he is primarily practicing at the nickel position, he is also expected to know the assignments and techniques at safety. He also is working to earn playing time on several special teams units.

Orms was a dynamic threat with the ball in his hands during a stellar high school career, but it might be awhile before he gets to run with the ball in Boulder. He was thought to be a candidate to compete for jobs as a return man, but he said he is focused on being the best defensive back he can be with an eye on getting in the mix as a return man in the future.

"I want to get some experience playing right now," Orms said. "Once I prove that I can play other positions, then maybe they'll give me a shot back there. One day hopefully I'll be back there."

Bumpy road

Place-kicking and punting has left plenty to be desired so far this spring, but coaches are remaining patient with senior Aric Goodman, junior walk-on Marcus Kirkwood and redshirt freshman Zach Grossnickle.

However, Hawkins acknowledged that if the inconsistency continues, true freshman Justin Castor from Arvada West High School, will be thrown into the mix in August.

"You know, the great thing about kicking and punting by and large is you don't have a lot of game plan to follow," Hawkins said. "It's kind of who puts it through the most. So you can be a little bit more objective. There is not as much subjectivity to it. But, yeah, we figure Justin will get in the mix and he'll compete."

Mustache March

Colorado's quarterbacks are all growing mustaches this month, or trying to grow them in some cases. Dan Hawkins has grown one, too, in solidarity with his signal-callers and offensive coordinator Eric Kiesau, who has grown a full beard.

"The quarterbacks called me out on it," Hawkins said. "So I said, 'OK, I'm in.'"

Notable

Offensive lineman Bryce Givens did not participate in Monday's practice. ... Tight end DaVaughn Thornton continues to impress most visitors to practice. The redshirt freshman caught one pass in a full-contact period Monday and ran through a hard hit from a defensive back, then carried several other tacklers. ... Hawkins said the first scrimmage of spring ball Thursday will be conducted at Folsom Field but the team will do some preliminary work on the practice fields before the scrimmage begins. The Buffs practice today and Thursday before taking 10 days off for spring break.

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CU receiver Simmons aims to make impact

Juco transfer caught just two passes last fall

By Kyle Ringo Camera Sports Writer
Boulder Daily Camera

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Hardly a day went by during training camp last summer when coach Dan Hawkins wasn't asked about the status of wide receiver Andre Simmons.

Colorado football fans were excited about the addition of a talented playmaker at wide receiver who was joining the program from the junior college ranks and figured to be more physically and mentally ready to play than freshmen who had signed with the program.

Seven months later, all the Simmons hubbub seems a bit ridiculous through the prism of hindsight.

Simmons spent much of training camp completing an online course through Adams State College in order to be academically cleared to enroll in Boulder. When he finally got on the field, he was considerably behind his teammates in learning the offense and how he was supposed to do things.

Simmons also had spent much of the summer unable to workout because he was recovering from an appendectomy. He caught his first pass for 44 yards in the season opener against Colorado State and then disappeared from the offense for two months before catching his second and final pass of the season Nov. 7 against Texas A&M.

CU fans probably would be surprised to know Simmons played in every game in 2009. While that fact is true, he spent much more time on the sideline in each game than he did on the field. The season -- two catches for 47 yards in 12 games -- seems like a waste of a year of eligibility for an athlete with Simmons' ability. When he looks back on it, Simmons is conflicted about whether he should have been redshirted.

"I can say yes and I can say no," Simmons said. "The reason I say no is cause I feel like I could have came in and played if I could have had the playbook down pat. But I had to wait on my transcripts and that kind of held me back.

"In the yes part, I feel like I could have just sat back and actually learned the offense and now I would have everything down pat, and I could learn different positions. So it's kind of a 50-50 answer."

Here's the thing. The Buffs are in the midst of spring ball having completed the fifth of 15 practices Monday evening, and it doesn't appear that Simmons has made much progress in getting on the field more and having the ball thrown his way. He is generally in the third group of wide receivers used in most drills.

"I expect to be on the field," Simmons said when asked what fans should expect to see from him in 2010. "Even if I have to play special teams, I'll be on the field."

Simmons said he is doing "great" in school, and he is building a good relationship with new wide receivers coach Robert Prince, who joined the program in the offseason from the NFL.

"He's real good," Simmons said. "He explains everything how it needs to be explained. He details it. He's hard on us. He expects 100 percent from us with everything we do."

Simmons is heading into his senior season competing for playing time within a group of wide receivers that is much deeper and talented than when he first decided to become a Buff. In order to get on the field next fall, Simmons will have to wrestle playing time away from Scotty McKnight, Toney Clemons, Markques Simas or Will Jefferson. He will also have to prove to coaches that he is a better option than walk-ons such as Dustin Ebner, Jason Espinoza and Kyle Cefalo, who sat out last season as a transfer from Oregon State via junior college.

Ebner and Espinoza caught more passes last season than Simmons did, and there are several other freshmen and

redshirt freshmen scholarship wide receivers in the mix as well.

Considering there is more competition for playing time, Simmons said he has not completely ruled out the possibility of redshirting next fall and playing his senior season in 2011. But it's not a topic he wants to address until he completes spring ball and evaluates his performance with coaches. He is keeping his goals for the spring simple.

"Just to go 100 percent, give everything I've got and learn the play book, study it," Simmons said.

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New M.O. for Moten

Seeking defensive depth, CU turns to offensive recruit

By Patrick Ridgell
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BOULDER — Josh Moten lined up opposite senior receiver Scotty McKnight at a recent Colorado football practice, and the new freshman cornerback should have realized then and there he was in trouble.

Moten is trying to figure out his new position, and one of the tricks he has been told to master is the one that involves never looking in the backfield. Well, Moten forgot, and right after he glimpsed at the quarterback, McKnight zoomed past him.

“I said, ‘oh my gosh, this is tough,’” Moten said.

It better not be too tough for Moten — because new defensive backs coach Ashley Ambrose said CU might have to play him in 2010.

Moten signed with CU in 2009 and delayed his enrollment for a semester due to issues with his SAT scores that forced him to take the test again. He arrived in January thinking he’d be playing quarterback — his high school position — when spring drills opened. That was the promise CU made him. Instead, Moten has left the offensive side of the ball for a position he has never previously played.

Moten said he sees opportunity.

“Basically, it was just seeing the lack of depth at quarterback and the lack of corners at defensive back, and I just felt it would work better in my favor at corner,” Moten said. “The depth chart is not that full, and the guys in front of me are seniors, and they’re leaving, so I’ll have more time playing.”

CU had success turning Ryan Walters from a high school quarterback to a college safety in recent years. But that was safety. The demands on a cornerback are different.

Ambrose said Moten has “great hips,” the main thing college coaches seek in a cornerback. Moten is “a natural at flipping his hips” and is starting to understand the game from the defense’s perspective.

Ambrose said CU saw that athletic ability in Moten when he was a quarterback.

“It happens a lot of times with guys that played quarterback and running back,” Ambrose said.

“You watch film ... and you can see guys that make moves and shake and get open and do stuff like that, you know they have to some kind of hips. I mean, I look at it like that, too, because I played quarterback in high school a little bit. A lot of guys that play defensive back played quarterback.”

Ambrose said his starting corners right now are seniors Jimmy Smith and Jalil Brown. No surprise there. Behind them, Ambrose said, are Deji Olatoye and Paul Vigo, two redshirt freshmen who have never played in a college game. Most Big 12 offenses regularly force defenses into nickel and dime coverages, rendering depth in the secondary imperative.

CU's inexperience in the secondary is one reason why Moten might not get the chance to redshirt in 2010.

"We may have to play him this year," Ambrose said.

Moten answered "right" when asked if the plan is for him to redshirt in 2010 and then fight for playing time in 2011. Whether that plan changes come fall figures to depend on CU's health in the secondary, and how well the other corners perform.

Moten said head coach Dan Hawkins assured him that if he had his heart set on quarterback, he could stay on offense regardless of where coaches think his future lies. But the coaches really wanted him to play cornerback.

"I made the decision on my own, and it's working out. I like it," he said.

Will he miss playing quarterback?

"At first I did, but since I love the game of football so much, to get on the field, I'm just going to have to eliminate all of that," Moten said.

EXTRA POINTS: Running back Rodney Stewart practiced Monday. He missed Friday's practice for school work. ... Redshirt freshman tight end DeVaughn Thornton is making a good impression on coaches this spring. "He has great hands, he can run and he's tough," Hawkins said following Monday's practice. "I think he can put on weight. I think he can be a great player here." CU lists Thornton at 6-foot-4 and 230 pounds. Hawkins said he believes Thornton can reach 245 or 250 pounds. ... Hawkins said the numbers punters and kickers are posting are "not where we want them to be." Incoming freshman punter/kicker Justin Castor will be "in the mix" in the fall, Hawkins said. ... Hawkins said Thursday's scrimmage will take place at Folsom Field.

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

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Change of hands

Newcomers at the receiver spot highlight CU football's practices

By Michael Krumholtz on March 16, 2010

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Behind Scotty McKnight is a black wall that lines CU's practice fields. In big white letters are the words "1990 National Champions."

In front of him, and the rest of his Buffalo teammates, is the 2010 football season. Twenty years removed from the program's only National Championship sounds even longer considering last season's dispiriting 3-9 campaign.

"Winning three games – that hurts," McKnight said. "That hurts when you're home for Christmas and other teams are playing, that hurts the whole offseason. Every single workout you do you can feel that pain."

Though they don't arrive with MDs in hand, two new additions to the Buffs wide receiver corps are trying to doctor McKnight's scars from last season.

One of them is Toney Clemons, a speedy 6-foot-2, 210-pound deep threat who transferred from Michigan.

The other is new passing game coordinator and receivers coach, Robert Prince. Prince coached with head coach Dan Hawkins for three years at Boise State until 2003.

"There's been an improvement in these first four practices with adding those two guys," McKnight said. "[Offensively] we're better than we've ever been since I've been here."

Clemons was ranked in Rivals' top 100 players coming out of New Kensington, Penn. in 2007. After sitting out last season because of NCAA transfer rules, Clemons cited opportunity as the reason he ultimately wound up in Boulder.

"I want to come in and be able to be a catalyst for an offense that's struggling," Clemons said.

The junior receiver had 12 receptions for 106 yards and no touchdowns during his two years at Michigan.



Scotty McKnight, wide receiver. (CU Independent file/Illana Finer)

In his last year wearing the blue and gold, Rich Rodriguez was hired and brought his run-happy spread offense to Ann Arbor.

Clemons was accurate when alluding to a better chance for playing time in Boulder. Last season CU threw the ball 144 more times than the Wolverines.

Another reason Clemons figures to be a major factor in the passing game is the hiring of Prince in February. Prince is coming from a one-year stint in the NFL as the receivers coach for the Seattle Seahawks.

Only a month on campus and Prince has already logged countless hours of work.

"I've watched every game that they played last year," Prince said. "We're always working on the details, and that's kind of the key to the passing game."

Details, such as preventing turnovers, are what the quarterbacks and receivers now have to worry about. After committing 31 turnovers last fall, which ranked 115th out of 120 FBS teams, there has been a clear focus on protecting the ball.

To battle turnovers, the coaches implemented a new rule this spring. An offensive player who turns the ball over once sits out the remainder of the drill. If he turns it over again, he is out for the rest of practice.

"If you're not holding on to the ball, you're sitting on the sidelines the whole day," McKnight said.

This "no mistake" attitude from Prince and the other offensive coaches is their way of saying that 3-9 is not alright. But, that doesn't mean these coaches are glum and not supportive.

"I've had three different (coaching) staffs," Clemons said. "Each staff wants to motivate their players, but at the same time some guys are more positive and some are more negative. These guys are positive. On the field they just encourage you."

Prince was obviously having fun on the field at Friday's practice. During red zone drills, newly reinstated wide receiver Markques Simas caught a touchdown in the corner of the end zone and Prince immediately ran over, leapt into the air, and bumped chests with his player. At the conclusion of practice, Prince ran sprints with the whole team.

Clemons and McKnight both pointed out that their new position coach is a detail-oriented motivator. McKnight was also adamant in saying that the hiring of Prince is a "gift" and a "blessing."

That hiring never would have occurred had Hawkins not been here.

"The reason why I came here was Coach Hawk," said Prince. "I know what kind of man he is, the integrity he has, and I know what he's about. That's a good thing to be a part of."

The fall season is still long off; in the meantime the receivers will be working everyday of the spring and summer to better themselves. Help has arrived in the form of a game breaker and a mentor.

After Friday's practice was over, an evident sign of these changes showed itself. Hawkins was walking tiredly up the pavement hill from the practice fields back to the Dal Ward Athletic Center. Behind him, his good friend and fellow coach from Boise came running up. Prince slapped Hawkins on the back and yelled teasingly, "Are you kidding?" in reference to the head coach's apparent lack of hustle.

Hawkins grinned and said something back then began to run the rest of the way, step-by-step with Prince.

The new coach is even able to motivate the motivators.

"I've coached at college, coached at the NFL, and I coached flag football," Prince said. "The way I am out here, the way I coach – that's how I am at every level."

Notes from Spring Practice:

Junior WR Markques Simas, who was suspended for a DUI in early February, was allowed back to practice with the team on Friday. Simas had 43 receptions for 585 yards last season... Junior OG Ryan Miller is out for the rest of spring with a broken plate in his right arm. Miller re-injured the arm during the team's first practice and has been wearing a sling, while watching from the sidelines. He is expected to return when summer practices begin... Former QB Clark Evans has been working at the tight end position during practices. Another former QB, Josh Moten, has been moved to cornerback.

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