



Tackle David Bakhtiari (left) celebrates with teammates last season.
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Brooks: Marshall Furiously Mixing, Matching In O-Line

BOULDER - It's going to be awhile - try mid-August or beyond - before Steve Marshall feels comfortable putting together anything that resembles a depth chart.

Spring practice finds Marshall, Colorado's second-term offensive line coach, scrutinizing 9 or 10 players to determine ability, versatility, temperament, who's better inside, who's better in space, etc. He likes what he's seen so far, but there's s-o-o-o-o much more to see.

"The process is on-going . . . I look at spring as the first 15 practices of fall camp," Marshall said. "It'll go on through the fall, and then we bring in the young freshmen guys we signed, and it changes when Mike Iltis and Shawn Daniels get back. (Both centers are injured; Iltis is out for the spring after off-season knee surgery, Daniels, who is recovering from foot surgery, could return for limited work after spring break.)

"I've been very pleased to this point with their want-to, their work ethic . . . there's some guys up there who are really trying to be the best they can be. We've got a fighting chance if we get that."

In place of Iltis and Daniels, both seniors, Marshall is working sophomore Gus Handler and redshirt freshman Daniel Munyer at center. Both have limited experience, but as Marshall says, "If we didn't move a young guy in there we didn't have one."

The O-line loses All-America left tackle Nate Solder to graduation, and last season's starting right tackle, David Bakhtiari, has shifted to the left side - for now. Three players - sophomore Jack Harris, freshman Alex Lewis, junior Ryan Dannewitz - also are working at the position, but Marshall's mixing and matching might shift any of that trio somewhere else.

Bakhtiari, a sophomore, could be shifted, too, depending on his and others' development. Senior Sione Tau has worked almost exclusively at right tackle, but that, too, could change.

Senior Ryan Miller heads the guard prospects, a group that also includes senior Ethan Adkins, redshirt freshman Kaiwi Crabb and senior David Clark. Senior Blake Behrens (shoulder), junior Max Tuoti-Mariner (knee) and junior Bryce Givens (off-field issues) are not practicing. Junior Eric Richter has shifted to the defensive line.

Marshall said Bakhtiari's switch from right to left tackle "has progressed nicely through the first four days. He's learning a new position and a new system, but I've been impressed with his start so far. He's a guy who football is very important to; he's still a young guy and figuring it all out. But he's off to a good start.

"The thing he's got to overcome . . . football is a repetition game and O-line is a repetition position. I don't know if it's a question of overcoming anything, but it's the experience and learning the techniques from the opposite side. As he gets older, I don't see any reason that David couldn't play left or right - even move inside eventually (to guard) if we wanted him to.

"But as a young guy, you don't really want to move him around until he kind of masters one (position) instead of trying to be a jack of all trades. He just has to get the experience and the repetition in practice in the things we're asking him to do."

Bakhtiari isn't entirely new to the left side. He was on last spring's depth chart at that position and started the spring game at left tackle. He performed so well that the coaching staff moved him to the right side as the starter.

"I've been jumping left and right . . . but I've things to work on in the offensive line in general," he said. "I'm a little more used to (the left side), but I'm still adjusting to a new coach and what he wants - stance-wise, kicks-wise, my feet . . . Really, I'm comfortable on either side - just give me the same amount of (practice) time at either spot and I'm comfortable."

Finding a comfort level that's compatible with what Marshall wants is the next step. "He's still getting us to try and understand plays before we get into technical stuff," Bakhtiari said. "When we do get into that, we'll just have to scrap some of the old technique and do what he wants. At the end of the day, what he wants is how we're going to get on the field."

So far, Bakhtiari likes what he sees in how the new staff is approaching the run game out of pro-style offensive sets that feature a fullback. "The way the run schemes are looking right now, I'm thinking we can dominate," he said. "And I'm going to work as hard as I can to make sure that happens. I'm loving the run schemes we've already got in; I think we're going to rip up some big

yards."

In February, Marshall talked to his entire unit about the possibility of playing multiple positions, "trying to find the best scenario and the best five guys on the field, regardless of what position they played in the past and regardless of where they are now. It's basically an evaluation that started in February and it will be on-going."

One player whose versatility has been tested early is Dannewitz, who in the first four days of spring work has played four positions (both guard and tackle spots).

"I probably haven't been fair with him, but I've been happy with him," Marshall said. "There's technique work he needs to get down, but I've told these guys down the road that the way college football is today, and especially when we've got to play 13 straight games, we need guys who can play all positions."

"It's going to be a long physical season, and guys like that are extremely valuable and extremely hard to find. I'm trying to develop some guys who can do that. And right now, 'Danno' has been a real pleasant surprise in doing it."

Marshall wants his linemen to play "with their hands on the ground" - in three-point stances - on first and second downs. "We're playing football," he said. But tackles could be "up" on third, or passing, downs.

Three O-line signees - Paulay Asiata (6-5, 295) of St. Louis High School in Honolulu, Marc Mustoe (6-7, 280) of Arvada West, Alex Kelley (6-3, 295) of Vista High School in Oceanside, Calif. - join the team this summer. Lewis (6-6, 270) of Mountain Pointe High School in Tempe, Ariz., was a January enrollee.

BRINGING RBs UP TO SPEED: The early spring results at running back are in - but by no means final. "It's really been a two-man show," Coach Jon Embree said, with the pair in question senior Rodney "Speedy" Stewart and redshirt freshman Tony Jones. Embree said redshirt freshman Cordary Allen "has had his moments" and walk-on Josh Ford "has flashed a little bit." Jones "has a good knack for accelerating, but needs to get stronger." Embree wants a three-back rotation, but said with CU playing 13 games and not having a bye week, "We need four to five (to be ready). You're unfortunately going to have a guy dinged and not 100 percent." Senior Brian Lockridge (ankle) is not practicing this spring.

ENOUGH OF THE PILLOW FIGHTS: The Buffs didn't utilize 9-on-7 work much under the previous staff. For this staff, it's a staple. Tuesday's version was "significantly better" than Monday's, said Embree. "You could tell (Monday) it was their first time doing it for some of them - ever. There was more intensity (Tuesday), you could hear the pads. (Monday) was like a pillow fight. (Tuesday) they hit. That was encouraging, especially it being the second day (in pads). There was a lot of energy, they were physical. They're figuring it out. I'm glad that they're getting better and pushing through this."

LEAD, FOLLOW OR . . . : It's early in spring drills, but never too early for prospective 2011 leaders to emerge. Embree said on offense, quarterback Tyler Hansen "is taking the reins," while Miller is exerting himself in the O-line. Also drawing a mention on offense were receivers Tony Clemons and Paul Richardson. On defense, Embree singled out linebacker Jon Major for taking charge and said he

wanted to see the same from defensive linemen Curtis Cunningham and Will Pericak. Although he's still recovering from off-season knee surgery, safety Anthony Perkins is stepping up in secondary. Other DBs, Embree said, are "all looking around and kind of trying to take care of themselves, which is understandable because a lot of these guys are fighting for positions . . . a lot of guys are just trying to worry about themselves, and that's OK. But there's some (leaders) there and we'll keep developing them. That's part of it for the coaches . . . and we have to lead as coaches." Embree said although it was possible for Perkins and safety Parker Orms (knee) to return after next week's spring break, the ultimate goal is to have both "ready to go full speed in August."

SPRING BREAK (FOR SOME): At least not fully for Embree. After Thursday's practice, the Buffs are off until Monday, March 28. Embree's family will come to Boulder from Virginia, but he will begin studying opening-opponent Hawaii (Sept. 3) and No. 2 opponent California (Sept. 10). On Sunday, he and the staff will have a personnel meeting to digest the first six days of spring drills and begin shaping the roster. "We want to see where we're going to need freshmen have an impact . . . or who to redshirt," Embree said.

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SHOW MENU



Injuries to Daniels, Ittis open door for young centers

Handler, Munyer gaining valuable experience in spring ball

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If all goes as planned over these next five months, a pair of senior offensive linemen will be locked in a heated battle in August to be the starting center at Colorado in 2011.

The thing is, if anything has been learned from the careers of Mike Ittis and Shawn Daniels to this point, it's that things generally don't seem to go as planned for either of them, particularly when it comes to staying healthy.

Both are out of action this spring recovering from serious injuries that required surgery.

Daniels was pushing for playing time early last fall before a torn ligament in his foot cut short another season and forced him into the operating room. Ittis started the final 10 games of the season at center and was performing well, helping lead the way for running back Rodney Stewart to rack up more than 1,300 yards on the ground and become the third leading rusher in the Big 12 Conference.

But at Nebraska, as the Buffs were trying to pull off an upset and earn bowl eligibility, Ittis suffered the second major knee injury of his career. He knew it was bad when it happened because he had been there before. He blew out his right knee prior to the 2008 season.

When he returned to Boulder from Lincoln, Neb., he learned he needed surgery to repair a torn anterior cruciate ligament, a torn medial collateral ligament and torn meniscus in his left knee.

Instead of building on a nice season this spring, Ittis finds himself waiting for another injury to heal. He is standing and watching and trying to keep up in learning the new offense, despite not being able to actually practice it. Daniels is in the same boat.

"Sometimes you get frustrated," Ittis said. "Sometimes it is kind of like, 'What the heck? Why?' But at the end of the day, there is nothing you can do about what happens except for the way you move forward with it. It is a step back and you have to regain that ground you've already covered before, but it's another challenge and football is all about the love for the challenge, going against somebody, figuring out the defense and trying to beat the other guy."

Offensive line coach Steve Marshall has liked what he has seen from his entire group so far this spring, but he cautions that it is early and there is still a long way to go.

In the absence of Ittis and Daniels, two young centers -- sophomore Gus Handler and freshman Daniel Munyer -- are getting all the work and loads of valuable experience sharing all the practice repetitions.

"Without question it helps them light years," Marshall said. "They're getting every rep. Only time will tell how much it will help them, but hopefully down the road it will pay big dividends."

Marshall said Ittis and Daniels have to do a good job of "practicing without practicing." They have to be engaged and paying attention because falling too far behind might allow one of the youngsters to take over.

That's just what Munyer hopes to do. The 6-foot-2, 295-pound product of Tarzana, Calif., received rave reviews last fall from former offensive line coach Denver Johnson, and he's determined to earn the same praise from Marshall.

"My goal is to be starting here," Munyer said. "So I am doing whatever I can. Just getting in my playbook, watching film, getting in the training room and rehabbing as much as I can just to put all of my performance on the field and show the coaches what I can do."

So far both players have worked with the first team. Handler, who was recruited to CU by linebackers coach Brian Cabral because of his tenacity as a high school player, was listed as the third-team center all of last season. Marshall said both centers have picked up things well to this point.

One trouble spot has been a rash of fumbled exchanges between the centers and the quarterbacks. CU head coach Jon Embree said the problem continued during the first closed practice session of spring ball on [Monday](#). One possible explanation is that all three quarterbacks, Tyler Hansen, Nick Hirschman and Brent Burnette played in spread systems last year and took most of their snaps in the shotgun formation.

"The ball was on the ground way too much today," quarterbacks coach Rip Scherer said.

Like most offenses, the new system being installed at CU will rely heavily on the center to make all the calls and adjustments on the line. Marshall said the responsibility doesn't fall solely on one player, but it definitely starts with the center.

Embree said regardless of who ultimately earns the starting job at center in 2011, having two young players taking most of the snaps at the position this spring will help in the future whether they play guard or center.

"Them moving to the center position forces them to learn everything cause they've got to make calls," Embree said. "It's important those guys up front know what's going on and they're not waiting for the center to make the call for them because there might be situations where you don't get to hear or it might be a situation where it happens late and you need to see the same thing he sees."

Marshall said he hasn't really taken it easy on the amount of information he feeds his players. He said he has "thrown the kitchen sink at them." And more is being added to their plate every day. Munyer said Marshall seems to coach many of the same concepts and techniques as Johnson, but he does it with different terminology.

Meanwhile, Iltis and Daniels wait their turn hoping their bodies will cooperate.

"Going through it before really gave me an edge because I knew what to expect for the most part," Iltis said. "It's a mind game. With injuries and anything that is hard in life, it's your mental take and how you go about it after. You can either go in a positive way or in a negative way."

