



*A solid spring has elevated redshirt freshman Nelson Spruce.
Photo Courtesy: CUBuffs.com*



Brooks: Spruce Springs Ahead, Snags No. 2 WR Spot

Release: 04/09/2012 Courtesy: B.G. Brooks, Contributing Editor

BOULDER - Spring football drills were launched at Colorado last month with receivers coach Bobby Kennedy having no doubt about his No. 1 guy. But behind junior-to-be Paul Richardson, the question marks were piled high.

With three practices remaining - including Saturday's spring game at Folsom Field (5 p.m.) - Kennedy can reduce the pile by one; he's fairly certain about Nos. 1-2.

Nelson Spruce spent last fall as a redshirt, getting a handle on his first year in college, CU's offense, what Kennedy expects of him and really what Spruce expects of himself. Now, Spruce has a pretty firm grip on all of the above, as well as the second spot behind Richardson.

"He's had a solid spring . . . he's light years ahead of where he was when last season ended," Kennedy said Monday of Spruce, a 6-2, 195-pounder from Westlake Village, Calif. "Things have slowed down for him, he's able to execute better and he's got a better understanding of what we're trying to get done . . . he's not thinking as much, he's able to play a little faster."

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How much faster is "a little faster?" Kennedy characterizes Spruce as "deceptively fast," which elicited a grin and a chuckle from Spruce. "I guess that's accurate; I've been hearing it since high school," he said. "Maybe it's my stride or something . . . it doesn't look like I'm running that fast. But I feel like I'm fast. I've been working on showing my speed all over the field, and my bursts off the line. I think it's improved since I've been here."

At Westlake High School, he was swift enough, shifty enough or had plenty of whatever else was required to make 149 career receptions for 2,795 yards and 37 touchdowns, earning him a spot on the Ventura County All-Decade Team.

Spruce lists two of his strengths as "having sure hands and running good routes," which always leads to early characterizations about the kind of receiver he will become. Sure, you know where this is going, but Kennedy isn't sure the "possession receiver" label fits.

"It's always good to have a guy you know is going to catch it," Kennedy said, "but from what I've seen out of Nelson, he's able to wriggle free and make some big plays and score some touchdowns. I wouldn't necessarily think of him just as a possession guy. I've seen him as he continues to gain more confidence be a guy who can make plays. He can become an impact guy."

Spruce's high school numbers and overall athleticism (he played defense, returned punts and for two years was a third baseman/shortstop) might have suggested that he was D-I ready when he arrived at CU last summer.

Instead, Kennedy saw a young player in a transitional period.

"I always tell guys it's great if you can come in and make an immediate impact," Kennedy noted. "That's outstanding and that's what you'd like to do. But on the other hand, you have to understand that guys are usually better in their fourth years than their first. So if you can gauge that the right way and understand that they're going to continue to progress, they are going to be better as they get older . . .

"Nelson had two older guys in front of him in Kyle Cefalo and Logan Gray; we didn't necessarily need Spruce (last fall). And when you're in an offense that does so much with multiple formations and you're outside or inside in different formations . . . I just think for a lot of guys it's hard to grasp. In high school you played one spot and learned everything from that one spot. Now we're asking more - to play all three spots and sometimes they're thinking so that doesn't let their athletic ability take over. The redshirt season really helped him."

Spruce agreed: "Looking back on it, it really helped me a lot. I'm feeling more comfortable with the offense and adjusting to the speed of the game . . . I came in (this spring) focused. I made it a point to make an impact and contribute, and it's paying off so far."

In mid-March, the odds-on favorite to snag the No. 2 spot might have been sophomore-to-be Tyler McCulloch, who played in all 13 games (one start) last season and made 10 receptions for 96 yards and a TD. But Kennedy said Spruce's spring productivity has moved him ahead of the 6-5, 200-pound McCulloch and behind Richardson, whom Kennedy noted has matured in a leadership role "but still has a ways to go in terms of coming off the ball every play and playing fast. We need him to step up significantly."

Kennedy termed McCulloch "still a work in progress" and said he must overcome day-to-day inconsistency: "He'll have a good day, an off day . . . he needs through the summer to keep progressing and put things all together. We need him to step up and start making (plays)."

More specifically, Kennedy said, McCulloch's lanky physique often seems a detriment to his release from the line of scrimmage against press coverage. "He's got to continue his development there," Kennedy said. "And he needs to stop trying to 'body' catch; he's got good hands. He just needs to continue to develop confidence in his hands. He can use his body and reach for things; catch them clean rather than trying to 'body' things."

Behind Spruce and McCulloch, sophomore Keenan Canty and senior Dustin Ebner are battling to make the six-man first and second groups that Kennedy wants established exiting August camp. More consistency also is

Kennedy's goal for Canty and Ebner, but he adds, "I'm not disappointed with either of them; they're further along that last year, Keenan especially. Dustin has showed some things; he didn't get many opportunities last year. But he's showing he can make some plays. Keenan is doing so many things better than last fall, but he's a guy I'm talking about when I mention consistency . . . he's got to show that."

But he wants his position as a whole to show it: "When a guy's number is called, make plays. I don't think we're near where we need to be in terms of consistency catching the ball on a play-in, play-out situation. We've got to be better. When that ball is thrown we've got to think it's ours. We have to make a catch. We have to get to a point around here where it's not OK to say, 'Oh, I dropped one.' Well, it's not OK to drop one. You've got to expect more of yourself and expect to catch them all."

Kennedy sees a flicker of that quality in his players, but added he expects to see even more as more competition arrives: "I think when more competition comes in, those guys who are out there in that second team spot have to understand that if you've been around here for a while and you're going to make the same mistakes, the same drops the young guys are making, then you're going to drop."

Competition will arrive this summer in the form of three incoming freshmen - Texans Jeffery Thomas (Dallas) and Peyton Williams (Southlake), and Gerald Thomas (New Orleans). That trio is likely to have a large, loud say in establishing the depth chart.

"They'll get a long, hard look," Kennedy said. "We'll see if they can compete with the older guys and give them the opportunity to earn a spot, just like we did with Tyler last year, and see if they can grab it and hold onto it . . . it depends on how they are when they get here, how quickly they learn, if they're able to step up physically and compete with older guys. That's always the big thing with wide receivers; you know they're talented, but just like with Nelson last year, are they thinking quick enough to allow them to play fast?"

Spruce began spring drills focused on improving his blocking, but that was a general order among the receiving corps. "Since last year, that's what 'BK' (Kennedy) and coach 'EB' (offensive coordinator Eric Bieniemy) have been stressing to help out in the run game," he said. "We've spent a lot of time on that."

And the investment appears to be worth it. Blocking by his group "has shown 100 percent improvement," Kennedy said. "We don't have the issues we had in our running game in terms of them getting to the right spots. They've also shown a willingness to be physical, and that's half the battle for wide receivers."

On a scale of 1-10, Kennedy said his group would emerge from spring drills with "a six. We're starting to get over the hump; we're starting to compete. I'm not disappointed in where this group is. We lack depth right now this spring, but hopefully with the addition of those three (freshmen) it'll help that."

BUFF BITS: Monday's practice included red zone work for the offense and defense along with two-minute offensive work. Quarterbacks Connor Wood and John Schrock also saw different pressures and coverages. Coach Jon Embree said personnel evaluation would continue for a few players over the next two practices (Tuesday, Thursday) leading up to Saturday's spring game at Folsom Field (5 p.m.). Tuesday's work will be done in "shells," giving the Buffs a chance to recoup "and see how our bodies are," Embree said, adding that "a number" of players would be held out of the spring game. He mentioned defensive tackle Will Pericak, defensive end Chidera Uzo-Diribe and receiver Paul Richardson Of the approximately 50 attendees scheduled for Junior Day, Embree said about 35 were out-of-staters. He noted that good attendance for the spring game might help the Buffs' cause and said recruits who took their official visits to Boulder for last fall's home game against No. 9/8 Oregon were impressed by the engaged crowd (52,123) at Folsom Field - even though the Buffs lost 45-2 Sophomore quarterback Nick Hirschman, who has missed all of spring drills due to a broken bone in his foot, said he expects to be cleared to resume conditioning work - including running - next week.

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SHOW MENU

CU Buffs center gets handle on job

By Kyle Ringo Buffzone.com Boulder Daily Camera

Posted:

Buffzone.com

There aren't many players on the Colorado football roster who can feel comfortable -- in the final week of spring practice -- that they will be in this fall's starting lineup against Colorado State.

Center Gus Handler is one of the few who can rest easy, though coaches would never recommend it.

"He's got some work to do and some things that I'm on him about, but he is consistent as the day is long," offensive line coach Steve Marshall said. "He comes to work every day and you get the same amount of effort out of Gus every day. This whole staff has a certain comfort level with the guy and he's turning into a very, very good Pac-12 center."

Just one year ago, Marshall admits he would have been surprised to hear himself heap praise on Handler in such a way.

Marshall said Handler was one of the players he butted heads with most last spring. He said Handler just kept coming and slowly improved throughout the summer and fall.

The Buffs opened the season with Handler and Daniel Munyer splitting snaps at Hawaii.

Neither player had separated himself enough in Marshall's eyes to warrant being named the No. 1 center. But when Munyer suffered a leg injury against Colorado State in Week 3, Handler began taking almost every snap in practices and games, and he took control of the position.

"You've got to give the kid credit," Marshall said. "I was on him hard last spring and last summer and the kid has just came on. You know I anticipate him being an All-Pac-12 guy by the time he is done."

Handler, a fourth-year junior, wears a mop of long, light brown hair he first began growing three years ago as a senior in high school.

Combined with his beard and mustache, he looks a bit wild at times, especially when the helmet comes off after a long day on the field.

He says the look fits his personality -- he likes to have fun.

After sitting and watching most of the time during his first few seasons in the program, Handler is having a lot more fun these days as he becomes a player coaches are depending on.

"He's not one of the biggest, fastest, strongest guys on our football team, but he may be one of our most valuable guys right now," Marshall said.

Handler said he learned a lot last season being able to play between senior guards Ryan Miller and Ethan Adkins, both of whom will likely end up in NFL training camps this summer.

Miller is expected to be drafted in the middle rounds of the NFL draft later this month.

Handler said the two veterans were a calming influence on him at times because he knew he didn't have to see everything.

"It helped out a lot because they were like the big brother," Handler said. "If they saw something that I didn't see from their game experience, they would help me out a lot. I think we played pretty well together because we all understand the offense and understand what we have to do."

The Buffs were plagued at times last season by illegal procedure penalties.

Coach Jon Embree said Handler often did everything right in barking out calls to his teammates and helping identify blitzes and stunts, but there were a few times when he forgot to snap the ball on the right count.

Handler is able to laugh about it now, but admits in the heat of those moments his head was spinning.

He is expecting much less of that next season when he will be playing along side two guards with far less experience and who will be counting on him. Right now, sophomore Alex Lewis is the starter on the left side and Munyer is the starter on the right.

"I've been impressed with Gus really since starting last spring," Embree said. "He's done a great job of transforming his body. His weight may be different but he's leaned out.

"He's more muscle than just the polite way to say fat. He's filled out and he's a lot stronger. I've been pleased with what Gus has done. He's a guy we can definitely count on and he's been kind of the anchor up there."

Richardson hurt

Wide receiver Paul Richardson was injured late in Monday's practice and was taken to the training room for evaluation. Embree did not seem concerned.

"I think it's an ankle or something, fatigue," Embree said. "I think he had class. So it's like, 'Let's get him up there and evaluated and off to class.'"

Embree said he had planned to hold Richardson and several other Buffs out of Saturday's spring game to protect them from injury. Watching Richardson laying on the ground at Monday's practice only reaffirmed that decision.

Embree turned the focus of his conversation with reporters about Richardson away from the injury when he mentioned that Richardson is doing much better academically this spring than he did in the

fall and could make the honor roll.

"How about that?" Embree said. "How about that? Shoot, he might make it. We'll see."

Large junior day expected

Embree said he is expecting to host approximately 50 recruits for junior day on Saturday, including about 35 who are making the trip to Boulder from other states.

He said he hopes CU fans show up in large numbers Saturday, as well.

"That's why it's important our fans come out because a lot of those kids saw what kind of crowd we had last year," Embree said. "That lets them know football is important to the community and to the university. It's not like that at a lot of schools. You go to the spring game and they get a thousand. So when you get in that 15,000 to 20,000 range, it means a lot."

Notable

Embree said the final week of spring ball is focused on evaluating some players and working on situational football, such as the 2-minute drill and red zone plays. ... Place-kicker Will Oliver underwent a second shoulder surgery during spring break and has his left arm in a sling. He is expected to be ready for training camp but is out the rest of spring. ... Embree said "quite a few guys" will be held out of the spring game to avoid injuries or to continue recovering from them. He said the list won't be finalized until later in the week but he said Richardson and defensive linemen Will Pericak and Chidera Uzo-Diribe likely won't play Saturday.