



*Nick Kasa is practicing for his final CU season as a tight end.
Photo Courtesy: CUBuffs.com*



Brooks: Buffs Tight Ends Need Strong Spring Finish

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BOULDER - J.D. Brookhart hopes the productivity at his position begins making a steady ascent from now to early August, then continues to Sept. 1 and beyond. Among his other duties, Brookhart coaches Colorado's tight ends, and with six spring practices remaining he conceded on Tuesday he doesn't yet "have a comfort level" with what's going on there.

Don't take Brookhart for a gloom and doomer; there's still time for improvement and he's already seen some from the trio of tight ends currently practicing. But if the position is going to be what it should be in the Buffaloes' offense, any April upgrade needs to double (or better) come August. And three incoming tight ends will need to hit the ground running - as well as blocking, catching and learning.

"By the time we hit September, you'd like to have a good two deep in your two-tight end package - four to five guys prepared to play," Brookhart said. "Some guys can cross over, but you want defined roles for each of those four or five guys."

Brookhart's current tight end threesome includes senior Nick Kasa, junior Scott Fernandez and sophomore Kyle Slavin. There's not a lot of game experience or receiving experience in the group; Kasa, a late-2011 convert to the position, has the only reception (11 yards) among the three.

Outgoing senior Ryan Deehan made 24 receptions for 322 yards last fall (one touchdown) and junior DaVaughn Thornton, who since has shifted to receiver, made six catches for 69 yards in 2011. Brookhart would have liked to have seen more productivity at his position, but he doesn't blame Deehan, whose reception total was fifth among the Buffs.

"We were trying to feature Toney (Clemons) and Paul (Richardson) as our big play guys," Brookhart said, adding he believes the receiving capabilities for tight ends can increase in 2012. "Absolutely . . . between Nick, Kyle and the new guys, I'm hoping we do."

Ah, the new guys . . . CU signed three tight ends in its 2012 recruiting class: Vincent Hobbs (6-3, 240, Dallas), Sean Irwin (6-4, 230, Cypress, Texas) and Austin Ray (6-6, 235, Columbia, Mo.). In August camp, one, two or all of that threesome will get significant chances to earn playing time, and Brookhart already is predicting, "It's going to be a battle."

The trio already on the roster - Kasa, Fernandez and Slavin - is "chasing their goals," Brookhart said. "It's a continual process. A faster track needs to happen for Nick. Kyle has made the most of his opportunities. He's showing a more maturity; he just needs to continue to upgrade that, but he's definitely improved. Scott has made good improvement athletically . . . he's an extremely intelligent kid who gets what we're doing. He's gotten less reps and still has improved, he really has."

Kasa has been the most scrutinized of the threesome, mainly because he was a nationally recruited local high school player (Legacy) who has bounced from defense to offense trying to find what position fits. If that fit is tight end, his improvement needs to hit overdrive: "He needs to get four years of practice in the next three months - that's what he needs to do," Brookhart said of the 6-6, 265-pound Kasa.

"Athletically he's capable of doing everything," Brookhart continued. "Right now, it's just a matter of comfort in the pass game, which is not second nature at all. It's a long ways away for him. That's the biggest challenge for him. In the run game, I'm confident we can get him to 80 percent of where he needs to be by September."

On occasion last season, freshman tackle Alex Lewis was used as a third tight end. But Brookhart said that option doesn't appear to be in the 2012 plans because of possible depth issues in the O-line. Lewis has been practicing this spring at left guard and is projected to start there.

Thus, CU's depth chart at tight end has a very good chance of taking on an entirely new look before the Buffs open on Sept. 1 against Colorado State.

Brookhart also oversees special teams, and on the kicking front the last half of spring drills finds him without sophomore placement specialist Will Oliver, who underwent shoulder surgery over spring break. However, Brookhart said Oliver, who hit 29-of-31 PATs and 11-of-16 field goals last season, had shown improvement during the first eight spring practices.

"He's getting the ball up better - which was his challenge," Brookhart said, adding it would be up to head coach Jon Embree as to how much kicking would be emphasized over the final half of spring work.

Kickoff/punt returners will not be identified until well into August camp, and kickoffs, noted Brookhart, will not receive extensive spring attention because the staff still is determining the best approach to deal with rule changes for kickoffs.

In an attempt at increasing players' safety, the ball will be kicked off from the 35-yard line instead of the 30 and a touchback will bring the ball to the 25-yard line instead of the 20. Additionally, players on coverage (kicking) teams will only be allowed a running start of 5 yards.

Embree believes junior Justin Castor is capable of regularly kicking the ball into the end zone and said Castor currently is "the leader in the clubhouse" to handle kickoffs. But Brookhart reiterated that the staff still must determine its kickoff strategy: "Do you want to give (the offense) the ball at the 25? I don't know. From a

defensive coordinator's standpoint, you say, 'No way.' But as a coach in kickoff coverage, you say, 'Heck yeah.' With the returners we see in (the Pac-12 Conference) . . ."

Brookhart wants sophomore punter Darragh O'Neill, who had a 38.8 yard net average last season in his first full football season, to improve in "kicking to his left" as well as on his rugby-style punts. O'Neill, who can punt with either foot, "didn't quite understand" the value of the rugby punt because of his lack of football experience, Brookhart said. "He just didn't understand (its) usefulness . . . it's not just a changeup."

As for punt protection and coverage, Brookhart contended what he's seen this spring is "light years ahead" of where the Buffs were a year ago. "We understand what we're doing now."

Brookhart said he expects his kickers and punters "to come in more game ready" when August camp opens. "The off-season is a chance to improve yourself. I didn't feel like we did (during the winter). We weren't very good the first half of spring. We need to be ready on the first day of camp and not have them take their time getting in the groove."

BUFF BITS: Tuesday afternoon's inclement weather didn't send the Buffs inside their practice bubble. Instead, they worked for 2 hours on their grass fields, by choice dealing with the elements, said Embree: "The guys wanted to work outside." He told the players in their post-practice huddle that on days like Tuesday they should find reasons to be successful rather than offer excuses why shouldn't. So far this spring, no practices have been conducted indoors On Monday, the first day after spring break, the edge in practice went to the offense. Tuesday concluded with the other side holding the upper hand. Said Embree: "The defense really looked good." . . . There's no practice on Wednesday, but Thursday's scrimmage will offer players a final chance for a thorough evaluation by their position coaches in a "live" situation. The spring game (Saturday, April 14) is CU's final practice, but Embree told his players that Thursday's work could be the bigger difference maker for spring evaluations.

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Bakhtiari sees chemistry, urgency with Buffs

By Ted Miller

Receiver [Paul Richardson](#) is Colorado's best player. He's got Pac-12 speed, which the Buffaloes were sorely lacking in 2011. Coach Jon Embree's chief task in recruiting is to get more Paul Richardsons -- speedy guys for both sides of the ball.

But the rebuilding project in Boulder is going to require just as much

[David Bakhtiari](#) as Paul Richardson. Bakhtiari, the Buffs' left offensive tackle, earned second-team All-Pac-12 honors in 2011 as a sophomore, the only Colorado player to get an All-Conference nod.

He's a want-to guy. A guy who talks about chemistry and a sense of urgency. A guy willing to lead. A guy who seems slightly bothered -- politely so, of course -- when a reporter notes the Buffs' significant holes heading into 2012.

Why should folks believe Colorado can improve on a 3-10 finish despite losing its top passer, top rusher and top-two receivers (Richardson missed four games due to injury)?

"There is definitely a sense of urgency that I can see from last year's team to this year's team," Bakhtiari said. "People are moving around with a purpose. They are buying into our common goal, which is a bowl game. We've decided we are tired of going home in December and watching all these games."

Bakhtiari has been impressed with QB [Connor Wood](#), the Texas transfer who has the inside track to replace [Tyler Hansen](#). He raves about RB [Tony Jones](#), who will step in for [Rodney Stewart](#). Stewart only led the Buffs in rushing four consecutive years and now ranks second on the school's all-time rushing list. And a healthy Richardson is the obvious choice to replace the receptions that departed with Stewart (45) and [Toney Clemons](#) (43).

But if the Buffs are going to improve, they are going to need to score more than 19.8 points per game, a total that ranked last in the Pac-12 in 2011. That starts with Bakhtiari and the O-line, which is replacing guards [Ethan Adkins](#) and [Ryan Miller](#).

Offensive line coach Steve Marshall, [speaking to B.G. Brooks](#), called Bakhtiari "probably was our most productive player (in 2011) game in and game out." He'll be protecting Wood's blindside as well as leading the charge for a rushing offense that needs to do better than 3.5 yards per carry and 109 yards per game.

Like most Colorado players, Bakhtiari was recruited by Dan Hawkins, a far softer touch than the demanding, straight-talking Embree. (Said Bakhtiari, "Embree is a little more, 'I want production and I'm going to get it.'"). Unquestionably, there was an



Offensive tackle David Bakhtiari has high expectations for the Buffaloes this season.



adjustment to the change in styles in 2011. There was a lot less nurturing and a lot more barking at practices. And Embree isn't afraid to publicly question his players commitment to winning.

But there were hints of accord late last season between coaching staff and locker room. After a 1-9 start, the Buffs won two of their final three games, including a shocking and impressive 17-14 win at Utah, which knocked the Utes out of the Pac-12 title game.

"Guys are now understanding what these coaches want and how they want it to be," Bakhtiari said. "Last year, we were kind of chickens with our heads cut off."

That's a start. It's probably going to take a few more Richardsons and Bakhtiaris to get the Buffs into Pac-12 South Division contention. But that's a start.
