



WLB Derrick Webb "is starting to play like a man," says coach Jon Embree.
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Brooks: 2011 Stats Say Up Only Direction For CU 'D'

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BOULDER - Colorado football coach Jon Embree is expecting a significant upgrade from his defense this fall and let's be honest: If the Buffaloes found themselves underfoot in the Pac-12 Conference for most of last season, falling much further in the league's defensive stats might put them underground in 2012.

They gave up a league-worst 63 touchdowns last fall, yielding 40 or more points six times and a league-worst 36.5 points a game. Those horrific numbers elicited this droll National Signing Day observation from Embree: "I felt bad for the opposing teams' cheerleaders, having to do all those pushups (after scoring on the Buffs). I'm hoping we can slow them down (this fall)."

From what he's seen through 11 spring practices, Pac-12 cheerleaders won't get near the upper body workout this season as they did last against CU - or so Embree is hoping. But he can't ignore these numbers: In addition to being last in the Pac-12 in scoring defense, the Buffs were at or near the bottom in interceptions (11th), first downs allowed (11th), red zone defense (12th), and pass defense efficiency (12th). And for the record, CU was No. 10 in both total defense and rushing defense.

If you're thinking there's all kind of room for improvement, you've got company. At Thursday's conclusion of Practice No. 11 - a 41-play scrimmage bracketed by 7-on-7 passing work - I asked Embree where he had seen the most defensive improvement this spring.

"Tackling . . . there's been a vast improvement there," he answered. "And we've been better about when we get our hands on the ball and getting it, instead of having PBUs (passes broken up) or almost recovering a fumble. We're getting the ball."

And, he continued, "I see better communication back there; sometimes that's an issue with us . . . those are the biggest areas of improvement I've seen."

How spring improvement in those three broad areas relates to what happens this fall is TBD. But from a personnel standpoint there were some positives to be taken from Thursday's work. To name two, juniors Derrick Webb (linebacker) and Terrel Smith (safety/nickel) made head-turning plays that got Embree's attention.

Webb, said Embree, is "starting to play like a man. He had a couple of huge hits (Thursday) - one on the goal line to keep the offense from scoring on fourth down. He's playing fast; he's always been able to run, but he hasn't always been able to play fast. His mind hasn't been freed up. He's always thinking . . . he seems to be using his speed a lot better than he has in the past because I don't think he's thinking as much. I've seen a lot of good stuff out of him."

And Smith, who intercepted sophomore Connor Wood early in the scrimmage, is playing more under control, according to Embree: "You mean not running and just hitting anything? Yeah, he's doing a lot better hitting the guy with the ball. You can tell he's a little more comfortable. But a lot of the guys are . . . as coaches it's like a foreign language to the kids. It's good to have them understand what we're saying. They're playing faster; there's just a whole different comfort level."

Webb's speed and physical play - he's 6-0, 220 pounds - has allowed him to operate almost across the board at linebacker, although he's currently settled at the WILL (or weak side) linebacker. Like Smith, he said he's trying to play more under control: "That's one thing I've been trying to work on - when to turn it on, when to burst, having my eyes in the right place and being able to go make a play when I have to. I've tried to bring that to my game."

He's also figuring it's time to begin working his way into a leadership role on the defense. "I've been kind of trying to wait to get older before I start telling people what to do," he said. "But I'm a junior now; I don't have a lot of time left. I got two years to play and I want to make the best of these two years. And I've got something to say about it."

Webb's take on the defense's improvement is based on seeing more "bodies running to the ball" during spring drills and an emphasis on creating turnovers. "That's happened especially these last couple of practices," he said. "Coach Embree challenged us before practice to come out and give a better effort (in those two areas) and I believe the whole defense stepped up. The last two or three practices I've seen a better effort, intensity, running to the ball . . . and we've done pretty good with turnovers. We got two (Thursday) and like three or four last practice."

Webb said his strong hit at the goal line Thursday on running back Tony Jones exemplified the kind of pursuit the defensive staff has been emphasizing. "Team tackling," Webb said. "That's what coach (Greg) Brown (defensive coordinator) wants from us . . . D-linemen running to the ball, linebackers and DBs. If one person misses, another is right there - team tackling. A couple of other guys had (Jones) and I was just able to come in and clean up."

Embree was only half joking (maybe less) when he said Smith now was managing his fervor and not engaging in a bash-fest on every snap. "He knows I love to hit, and other people know I love to hit and make plays," Smith said, laughing. "But I'm not hitting anybody who's moving anymore."

That's because his spring comfort level with the defense in general and his assignments "is like a tremendous change for me," he said. "I know my calls and I'm not thinking so much out there. Last year I was. Now I'm just out there playing instead of thinking so much."

His assessment of the entire defense: "We're more cohesive now; we're playing with excitement. We're out there enjoying it. It's not just a job for us. We're actually loving what we're doing and we're loving doing it together. We're stopping the run, making more plays."

The pick he made Thursday resulted from being between a pair of receivers, waiting to see which one Wood was going to, "then breaking on the ball." Smith said he was getting an equal amount of spring at safety and nickel back, sharing duty at the latter spot with sophomore corner Greg Henderson.

BUFF BITS: Overall, Embree said the scrimmage "went really well. The defense got a turnover - a bad decision - but they were able to get it, which is good. We had some in-game scenarios and they did well in that. The offense looked really sharp when they got it going . . . I'm pleased with how it's been going this spring. The guys are responding and competing; we're doing things to them and doing things they haven't been used to doing (or) asked to do. But each day they've come out and keep getting better and working, so it's good." Of the afternoon's work extending beyond the 30 plays that were scheduled, he supposed, "So I'm in trouble. Whenever we go over like that it means we're having fun . . . things are going well. So I have a tendency to keep going." Among the afternoon's pleasant surprises: The newly acquired receiving ability of senior tight end Nick Kasa, who caught one of Wood's passes for a touchdown and was denied another when he was ruled to have stepped out of the back of the end zone. Kasa, who switched from defense late last season, "caught the ball well," Embree said. "He's struggled this spring but he made some really good catches in traffic, took some shots." Jones also continued his impressive spring running, scoring on a nearly 60-yard run after breaking free on the sideline In addition to singling out Webb at linebacker, Embree mentioned sophomore Brady Daigh: "We thought he was going to be a good player (last fall as a freshman) and he's picked up where he left off." After taking Easter weekend - including Good Friday - off, the Buffs resume practice on Monday. Their schedule next week has practices on Tuesday and Thursday preceding Saturday's spring game at Folsom Field.

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SHOW MENU



CU Buffs' Ray Polk pushes through injuries

By Ryan Thorburn Buffzone.com Boulder Daily Camera

Posted:

Buffzone.com

Cracked sternum.

Just hearing the words is enough to make a lot of grown men cringe.

Ray Polk, who actually cracked his sternum in practice just before the Ohio State game, played through the breathtaking pain for the bulk of Colorado's 2011 season.

The Buffs' ferocious free safety was also making tackles and breaking up passes with torn ligaments in his wrist.

Only the contemporary approach to head injuries -- they are suddenly being taken seriously from the NFL to high school football -- kept Polk out of the lineup (he missed the Oregon and USC games due to concussion symptoms).

"It was a rough year," Polk said after a recent practice. "Being crunched up like that, it was just taking things a day at a time and pushing through it."

Polk stands out during CU's ongoing spring drills when he's wearing a bright neon-orange penny over his uniform, which signals that he isn't allowed to participate in some of the contact drills. The coaching staff held him out of Thursday's scrimmage to make sure his surgically-repaired wrist and sternum continue the healing process uninterrupted.

"You know when Polk is not in there," CU head coach Jon Embree said after Connor Wood and the offense moved the ball well during the 41-play scrum.

In the fall, the fifth-year senior will have everyone's attention on the defense as a leader of young Buffs.

"All of a sudden I'm looking around and I'm the oldest one in the (defensive backs) room. It's weird," Polk said. "There's only a few people left from my class. It's just odd being that old dude hanging around. But it's exciting and it's a chance to help the team out by being a leader."

Polk arrived on campus in 2008 as a four-star running back recruit. With Darrell Scott, the No. 1 prospect in the country at the position, and a determined Rodney Stewart in the same class, he decided to switch to the defensive side of the ball.

Last season Polk finished tied for second on the team with 80 tackles. Strong safety Anthony Perkins also had 80 tackles, despite playing in only nine games due to his own injury problems.

The fierce competitors watched helplessly as Matt Barkley threw a USC-record six touchdown passes against the Buffs' injury-ravaged secondary during a humbling 42-17 loss on Nov. 4 at

Folsom Field.

Thanks in large part to late-season contributions from Polk and Perkins, who are very close friends, CU was able to beat Arizona in the final home game and end a 24-game losing skid outside the state lines with a 17-14 win at Utah.

"What doesn't kill you makes you stronger," Polk said. "When we lost Perk it was bad. It's one of those things that when you play with somebody long enough like Perk, you get that bad feeling in your gut knowing the type of player he is. He's a great player and we needed him out there. That definitely showed in Utah."

Perkins is out of eligibility, but his presence on the field lives on in Polk, who will be mentoring a talented group of young secondary players this year.

Two sophomores (Greg Henderson and Harrison Hunter) and a redshirt freshmen (Brandon Brisco) are competing at left cornerback this spring.

The battle at right cornerback is between a sophomore (Josh Moten) and two redshirt freshmen (Sherrard Harrington and River Thompson).

Parker Orms, a junior vying to fill Perkins' large shoes, is out for the rest of spring with yet another injury to the group. Junior Paul Vigo will be getting most of the reps at strong safety.

And this summer, highly touted freshmen Kenneth Crawley and Yuri Wright will join the fray.

"The influence (Polk) has on our young players, you couldn't ask for anything more," CU defensive coordinator Greg Brown said. "It's going to be hard when he graduates. I've gotten so used to depending on Ray for a long time, and he brings so much to the table."

Polk plays the game on the edge.

Last season the 6-foot-1, 205-pound black and gold flash was flagged for several costly 15-yard penalties.

With better health and some more help surrounding him on defense, Polk should be in position to make a lot of big plays for the Buffs in 2012.

"It seems like Ray's been here forever. He's a fun guy to be around in the meeting room and on the field," Brown said. "He's very popular with the other members of the defense and he relishes the chance to be the leader and to be the guy."

"And he's obviously got some strong physical traits. He's big, he can fly, and he brings the wood."

Notable

CU's scrimmage on Thursday was highlighted by a touchdown-saving tackle by junior inside

linebacker Derrick Webb.

"D-Webb is starting to play like a man," Embree said. "He had a couple of huge hits."

The defense also came up with a turnover at the 2-yard line.

Otherwise, Embree said the offense executed well and Wood played like a starter should "with the exception of two plays."

Nick Kasa, who had struggled catching the ball this spring after moving from the defensive line to tight end, made some tough catches in traffic, according to Embree.

Running back Tony Jones continued a strong spring with two touchdowns. Wide receiver Keenan Canty also got into the end zone.

No injuries of note were reported.