



Sophomore Paul Richardson is "a special talent," according to position coach Bobby Kennedy.
Photo Courtesy: CUBuffs.com



Brooks: Receivers Need To Latch On To Consistency

Release: 08/21/2011 Courtesy: B.G. Brooks, Contributing Editor

(Note: Sixth in a series previewing the Buffs position-by-position during training camp. Today: Wide receivers.)

BOULDER - The first day of fall semester classes is a day away, the first tests further back than that. Final grades are somewhere south of the formative stage.

It's the same in Colorado football, where new receivers coach Bobby Kennedy rightfully insists his group is a "work in progress," with progress being the daily emphasis. As is the case on the academic side here, the posting of grades can wait. But if you need an insightful peek at how the receivers are progressing and even want an early grade, sophomore Paul Richardson will comply.

"Right now, if I had to give us a letter grade, this group is a 'B,'" Richardson said the other day. "It's a 'B' because, one, we're all pretty banged up right now ... and, two, because we're more into the playbook and we're playing faster and more comfortable."

The grade offered by "P-Rich" probably requires a footnote. He's saying when total health is restored, when

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training camp's physical toll has diminished, his group's grade will climb. But he's also saying if he and his mates were less into their playbooks, that 'B' likely would be a 'C.'

Asked if an 'A' is close, Richardson answered, "Very close . . . when we get into school week (classes begin Monday) and begin game-planning for Hawaii, the playbook will be chopped down. There's not going to be 100,000 plays, but plays for a specific team. That's going to help everybody."

In Jon Embree's first preseason camp, you can count on a couple of words being used in every conversation regarding the Buffs' development: Physical and consistent. Kennedy, who joined Embree's staff last winter after a seven-year stint at Texas, says his group is learning to be the former and working hard to be the latter.

"Right now, we're not very consistent, but I see good things every day in terms of effort and guys trying to do it right," he said. "We're not a finished product; we've got a lot of work to do but the effort's there."

And this is always a good thing for a position coach to be able to say when preseason camp begins: There's been a personnel upgrade since the conclusion of spring practice, which means he apparently signed the right prospects.

In Kennedy's case, incoming freshmen Tyler McCulloch (Albuquerque, N.M.) and Nelson Spruce (Westlake Village, Calif.) and transfer Logan Gray (Georgia) joined a receiving corps composed of 2010 contributors Richardson, Toney Clemons, Kyle Cefalo and Jason Espinoza. And swift redshirt freshman Keenan Canty showed promise last spring.

Basically from those eight players, Kennedy will find his top six. But during a brutal 13-game schedule, he emphasizes that everyone who practices must be prepared on Saturdays: "I always say this to the guys: No matter where you are right now, before the season's done we're going to need you all to do something. You just never know . . . we're trying to create depth in the group, but also have competition every day.

"What I've told these guys is none of these spots are locked down yet. They're going to be graded on their performances every day, and then we'll make decisions. We're trying to find one guy first, then two, then three, four, five and six. Every day you have to compete, every day you have to bring it."

Richardson "brought it" (and then some) last year as a freshman, averaging a team-best 15.1 yards a catch (34 receptions, 514 yards, six touchdowns). He's spindly (6-1, 175), but speedy. He's a nightmare in single coverage. And he prides himself on catching almost anything within his zip code.

"He's a special talent," Kennedy said. "What he's trying to work on and what I'm harping on him about is working on the little things - getting in and out of his spots, his hand position catching the ball, ball security . . . all those little things. He's talented; the thing I always talk to these guys about is, you can be the best player at Colorado, then are you the best guy in the league, then are you the best guy in your part of the country, then the best guy in the nation? What he needs to do is keep concentrating on the little things and I think he'll develop into a very good receiver."

Richardson entered camp "really wanting to get better on my route running, so I just wouldn't be looked at as 'speed' guy but a really good route runner, too. I think I've definitely done that," he said.

With Kennedy's help, he believes he's learning to "finish my routes, staying in my break . . . so that I don't give the defender any declaration that I'm going to be stopping."

As for doing what receivers do when the ball arrives, "I'm really confident in my catching ability," he said.

Kennedy's expectations are high for Gray, who enrolled at CU to enter a graduate program (curriculum instruction in education) not offered at UGA and has one season of eligibility remaining. A former quarterback (No. 7 high school prospect nationally), Gray lettered three years at the Southeastern Conference school playing

that position, then switching to receiver as a junior. He played receiver and on special teams last season when UGA visited Boulder.

"I'm enjoying it," Gray said of his new environment. "Obviously right now it's still camp and we're kind of in that grind-time period. Everybody feels like they're running in mud . . . your legs are so tired. But it's the same way for everybody in the country. You just keep on pushing through to make sure we're getting better every day because Hawaii is going to be here soon (Sept. 3).

"This is my last year so I'm just trying to make the most of it, and so far I wouldn't say I'm satisfied because I want to keep on getting better and pushing this thing to the max. But I feel like the transition has been good."

He's been used primarily as a slot receiver, but Embree also likes Gray's versatility because of his experience at quarterback as well as on special teams. Gray (6-2, 190) called the Buffs' and Bulldogs' offenses "similar . . . everyone has their own concepts and terminology, that's the biggest thing to learn. But a lot of the actual schemes and plays are the same - just different ways to get into it."

Embree has said the rangy (6-5, 205) McCulloch reminds him of Ed McCaffery - so much so that McCulloch wears the former Broncos receiver's number (87). That's high praise for a freshman, but McCulloch is looking (and practicing) the part.

McCulloch says he's unsure if he's exceeded any expectations he might have had entering his first college camp, but adds, "I think I'm meeting them. I came into camp not knowing really what to expect. I've always had the confidence I could play at the D-I level. This is going real smooth.

"I think I have a good work ethic, and my mindset is to go get the ball no matter where it is. I've been able to get through camp healthy so far. I'm starting to get more reps every day, and that comes from knowing the plays. It's exciting."

Initially a three-sport (football, basketball, baseball) athlete at Eldorado High School in Albuquerque, McCulloch finally settled on football - but not at his current position. He began as a Wing-T quarterback and also played safety, switching to receiver as a high school freshman. He wanted football to take him to a D-I school on scholarship. But in the fourth game of his senior season, he suffered a lacerated liver and spleen and missed the rest of the year.

Contact with D-I recruiters began to dwindle. "I just wasn't there stats-wise; I lost contact with a lot of coaches," he said.

New Mexico and New Mexico State invited him to walk on, but he was aiming higher. "I had sent out some tape, so I think the interest might have been starting to grow a little," he said. "Being the hometown hero (in Albuquerque at UNM) would have been pretty cool, but it was kind of my dream to go play at a big-time D-I school. Colorado was one of my favorites, so when that offer came it was just incredible."

Kennedy calls McCulloch "a pleasant surprise because for a young guy he's come in and picked up the offense really well. But the great thing about him is he's an effort guy."

The 6-2, 200-pound Spruce, says Kennedy, "has made good progress; we're asking him to learn two (receiver) spots. But the thing is, he's really bright and he wants to do well. When he puts it all together I expect him to be a good receiver for us."

Clemons (6-2, 210) has had an up-and-down camp and is at the forefront of Kennedy's call for consistency at his position. "Not only Toney, but all of us have to be more consistent," he said. "Pass routes are such a precise thing and obviously you got to run them right to get open, then there's catching the ball and finishing runs and doing all those things. But we're expecting a lot out of Toney. What we need to see in his last year is a guy who steps up."

Cefalo (5-10, 170) is having a solid camp, and the coaching staff has noticed. That work, plus his off-season efforts, earned him a scholarship for his final year. Kennedy says Espinoza (5-8, 180) and Canty (5-9, 155) have had their moments, but he's still hoping for more productivity from Jerrod Darden, who is 6-5, 210 and offers his position's biggest target.

Espinoza knows all three receiver positions, and Canty, said Kennedy, "is doing some things really well. He's still a young player and is going to make some mistakes. The thing I like about Keenan so far is when he comes off the ball he's going fast. He can stretch the field. He's a guy I'm hoping is in that mix."

CU's offense is putting a heavy emphasis on the running game, and Kennedy's players must block well enough to enhance that. Richardson believes the Buffs' ground game "is going to be dangerous . . . Coach 'BK' and Coach (Eric) Bieniemy have been teaching us how to block. It's just not running out and trying to kill a guy, it's occupying him, giving a running back enough time to get past."

Adds Kennedy: "They're trying to give good effort and get on their guys. Like I said, we're not a finished product. We've got to develop some toughness in our group. But I see little things every day starting to come, and I see the effort."

Blocking among the "good hands guys" is vital, but Embree also is emphasizing how the passing game must become polished enough to play off of his running game.

"You don't want (the passing attack) to be off in a certain game and us not be able to pass," Richardson said. "It has to go hand-in-hand with the running game. That's what we're working hard to do."

THE INSIDE LOOK AT . . .

Wide receivers

Coach: Bobby Kennedy, first season on CU staff.

Returning starters: Toney Clemons, Sr.; Paul Richardson, Soph.

Returnees: Kyle Cefalo, Sr.; Keenan Canty, Fr.-RS; Jason Espinoza, Sr.; Dustin Ebner, Jr.; Jarrod Darden, Soph; Alex Turbow, Soph.

Newcomers: Tyler McCulloch, Fr.; Nelson Spruce, Fr.; Logan Gray, Sr.; Drew Ebner, Fr.; Parker Norton, Fr.; Austin Vincent, Fr.; Makiri Pugh, Jr. (moved this week from defensive back).

Key losses: Scotty McKnight, Travon Patterson, Kendrick Celestine (left program), Andre Simmons (left program).

Stat line: Of the Buffs' 237 completions last season, receivers made 127 of them (McKnight 50, Clemons 43, Richardson 34).

Bottom line: CU must compensate for McKnight's productivity and dependability, but there appear to be players prepared to step in. Clemons' consistency and that of the position overall have been camp concerns, but Richardson seems on target for a breakout year. Gray should prove to be a smart and versatile addition, and McCulloch, who appears to be a real find, and Spruce will add depth. Canty's speed can stretch a defense. Newcomers to watch: Gray, McCulloch and Spruce.

Next: Quarterbacks.

Contact: BG.Brooks@Colorado.EDU

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Monday, August 22, 2011

Buffing up for the football season

Previewing another year of pigskin, this time in a new conference

By Matt Sparkman and Alec Pronk

When Jon Embree, CU's new head football coach, started looking at film from last year's team, what he saw was a team with a crisis of identity.

"When people see us play, I want them to understand we're a physical program, a physical team," says Embree, a former tight end at CU under Bill McCartney. "I don't think we've been able to run the football like we should."

Embree, hired in November 2010, replaces Dan Hawkins, who recorded a less-than-stellar 19-39 record in just fewer than five years at the helm in Boulder.

A graduate of Cherry Creek High School, Embree stayed in state and played his collegiate ball at the University of Colorado as a tight end under McCartney, helping lay a solid foundation for a team that would eventually win three straight Big 8 titles and a national championship. Embree brings to the table a strong NFL pedigree, as do many on his staff. Embree played in the league for two years and coached for four, under coaching legends Mike Shanahan and Herman Edwards.

Experienced at the collegiate level as well, Embree spent a decade in Boulder as an assistant to McCartney, Rick Neuheisel and Gary Barnett.

As the Buffs move into their new digs in the Pac-12 conference, the coaching staff has to adjust to a different, speedier type of football compared to that of the rugged Big 12.

"There is so much diversity in this league offensively and defensively that you're not going to see the same style on both sides of the ball," says Embree. "If you play Oregon, you're going to play fast-break football. And next week, if you're playing Stanford, it's power football."

Embree and his staff face possibly the most difficult schedule in the nation. The Buffaloes are burdened with the task of playing 13 straight games without a bye week. The opposing talent is equally stringent. Foes such as Ohio State and Stanford will open their gates to the Buffaloes, while USC and national championship game-loser Oregon will grace Folsom Field in 2011. There are no easy wins, the closest being games against Colorado State and a home matchup against Pac-12 bottom-feeder Washington State.

Armed with a talented collection of offensive skill-position players, Offensive Coordinator Eric Bieniemy has a relatively talented group to combat its foes. Senior running back Rodney Stewart headlines the list. Stewart ran for more than 1,030 yards and 10 touchdowns in 2009, and should help develop an identity of smash-mouth football that Embree strives to see. Senior quarterback Tyler Hansen enters his first year in a scenario where he is the undisputed starting quarterback, and sophomore wide receiver Paul Richardson came on strong towards the end of the 2009 season, emerging as a legitimate deep threat. Senior Toney Clemons looks to provide a possession-oriented option at receiver, filling the void left by Scotty McKnight, who was drafted in the seventh round by the New York Jets. Along the offensive line, CU is faced with the unenviable task of replacing first-round draft pick and New England Patriot Nate Solder. Senior Ryan Miller aims to anchor the o-line in his last season at Colorado.

On the defensive side of the ball, holes will have to be replaced in the secondary, as the Buffs lose star cornerback Jimmy Smith and safety Jalil Brown to the NFL. Junior Ray Polk and senior Anthony Perkins, both safeties, should provide veteran leadership in the back four. The linebacking corps will have a fresh look as Doug Rippey, Jon Major and Derrick Webb take the reigns from graduated seniors B.J. Beatty, Michael Sipili and Tyler Ahles, who was converted to fullback over the offseason. On the defensive line, CU returns Josh Hartigan, Curtis Cunningham and Will Pericak, all former starters.

Hawkins sealed his fate with the help of his putrid 2-23 road record. No matter how ugly the record itself is, Embree doesn't shy away from talking about it with the team. He believes it is an issue that should be addressed rather than ignored.

"I don't run away from it," says Embree. "I've addressed it with the team. We've lost 18 consecutive games on the road. I believe there is no one on our team that's played in a road win. It starts from how you prepare."

That refreshing air of accountability is being greatly appreciated by Buffs fans. Athletic Director Mike Bohn announced at around the end of July that CU had sold more than 23,000 season tickets, including all of its Folsom Field luxury boxes.

It's clear that Embree's attitude of professionalism and accountability is being embraced by CU's players and fans, but it remains to be seen whether Colorado football can establish a hard-nosed identity and take the new Pac-12 by surprise in 2011.



Colorado, Utah worlds apart

By Chris Dufresne Los Angeles Times
Boulder Daily Camera

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LOS ANGELES -- The Pacific 10 (now 12) Conference is proud to welcome two new lodge members.

One program is disheveled, walks with a limp and wears its shirt tail out -- the other is Utah.

One is a model of efficiency, efficacy and proficiency -- and the other is Colorado.

Did the Pac-12 get better or get buffaloed?

At face, it's not even close. Utah brings cornerstone credibility. Shoot, since 2003, Utah has a 7-3 record against its new conference comrades.

The Utes flexed undefeated teams in 2004 and 2008, produced a No. 1 NFL pick in quarterback Alex Smith and a coach, Urban Meyer, who later won two national titles at Florida.

Utah ventured to New Orleans one year and capped a 13-0 season in the Sugar Bowl by striking a sweet-and-low blow to Alabama, a Southeastern Conference team coached by Nick Saban.

One-loss Florida won the national title that year. Some people thought Utah should have won and, the next year, Alabama did win it.

Utah's eight-year coaching combination of Meyer and Kyle Whittingham has gone 79-20.

And then there's the "Boulder Boys." Wow, what can you say ...

How about that ski team?

Picked to finish last in its first year, Colorado couldn't dig any deeper into the Pac-12 South Division. Cooking instructions on the back of the box: "For best first-year results, combine flour, water and your roster with Washington State's."

Colorado has a new coach, Jon Embree, because its last coach, Dan Hawkins, couldn't squeeze a drop of water out of Boulder. He was 19-38 after taking over for Gary Barnett, fired in 2005 after he lost to Texas, 70-3.

The Hawkins era began with an epic home loss to Montana State, and Colorado has currently lost 18 straight games outside of the state.

"Good teams win on the road," Embree stated emphatically in July at his first Pac-12 Media Day. "Obviously we haven't been a good team or I wouldn't be here."

See where this is going?

Probably not, because here's the bait-and-switch:

Colorado, not Utah, has more long-term upside. It has rich history, is a better academic fit, and has been galvanized by playing Texas, Nebraska and Oklahoma in the Big 12.

The Pac-10 had its eye on Colorado years ago but couldn't pry Texas out of its contract with political cronies.

UCLA coach Rick Neuheisel was Colorado's coach in 1995 when expansion rumors were swirling. "I was so gung-ho for it," he recalled. "Having coached there, I know that California recruiting is vital to their success ... so it will be great for

them."

Colorado, a long time ago, played top-notch football. Ever hear of Byron "Whizzer" White?

Forget Paul, though. Kids these days aren't old enough to remember Bill McCartney.

Colorado, in 1990, led by McCartney -- Bill -- won the Associated Press national title. The Buffaloes were all stars and swagger. Colorado heritage boasts Rashaan Salaam, the Heisman Trophy winner of 1994, and "Ralphie," one of college's top, rip-snorting mascots.

Embree hasn't been a head coach, but he's a former Colorado player and UCLA assistant. His offensive coordinator is Eric Bieniemy, a former Colorado tailback who is a tenacious recruiter of Los Angeles-based football prospects.

"It helps us a lot being able to come back here every year," Embree said of what will be annual trips to USC or UCLA. "We have to get to where we're recruiting this state effectively again."

Utah enters the Pac-12 to settle a bar bet. A lot of folks say great programs from non-power leagues could never contend if they played in "gantlet" conferences.

Utah completed a perfect season in 2008 by defeating an SEC team. But, skeptics asked, what if it had to play in the SEC, or the Pac-10?

"We have had a pretty good track record against BCS schools over the last 10 years," Whittingham said. "We've fared pretty well. It is a little different ballgame playing them week in and week out."

Utah makes its Pac-12 debut at USC on Sept. 10.

"Baptism by fire," Whittingham called it.

Utah actually receives a housewarming present, missing Stanford and Oregon this year while getting Arizona State in Salt Lake City.

Still, Utah's depth will be tested in a gnarly stretch: USC, Brigham Young, Washington, Arizona State, Pittsburgh, California, Oregon State and Arizona.

Is Utah ready?

"We'll have a better answer for you in about four months," Whittingham said.

This lab experiment will play over time. Utah is better than Colorado and might be two years from now -- but maybe not five years from now.

Colorado faces its 19th straight out-of-state defeat with its opener at Hawaii. Embree can't wait. "We need to address that issue immediately," he said of his team's road woes. "I'll leave it at that ... It does not sit well with me."

Things eventually will get turned around.

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