



*Redshirt freshman punter Darragh O'Neill has faced challenges more intense than a heavy rush.*  
Photo Courtesy: CUBuffs.com



## Brooks: O'Neill Aware Of Real Life/Death Scenarios

Release: 08/28/2011 Courtesy: B.G. Brooks, Contributing Editor

*(Note: Last in a series previewing the Buffs position-by-position during training camp. Today: Special teams.)*

**BOULDER** - By most accounts, Darragh O'Neill shouldn't be here - not preparing to punt in his first organized football game ever when Colorado opens at Hawai'i, but *here* . . . upright, breathing, showing a pulse.

Alive.

O'Neill was born 20 years ago in Cork, Ireland's third-largest and southern-most city. That he took an interest in punting about a year ago and now is CU's starter is remarkable enough; that he will celebrate his 21st birthday on Dec. 21 is very close to miraculous.

With jobs scarce in Cork, Colm O'Neill - Darragh's father - brought his family to America, targeting a masters in business administration at the University of Michigan as his path to launching a career as a restaurateur. The O'Neills initially settled in Ann Arbor, Mich., before relocating to Boulder a decade ago.

Colm came to this country with his wife and six children - there are two girls and Darragh is the oldest of four

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boys - and he now is the co-owner of a pair of traditional Irish pubs, Conor O'Neill's, in Ann Arbor and Boulder

As a kid, Darragh (pronounced Dare-uh) worked occasionally at odd jobs at the Boulder pub. He attended Fairview High School, where basketball and soccer were his sports of choice, not leaving any time for football until he enrolled at CU last year, attended several Buffs games and thought kicking was something he could do in American football.

But he came dangerously close to never getting that chance.

The O'Neills return to Ireland almost every summer, and Darragh became proficient playing Gaelic football, which features a punting style among the ways players can advance the ball upfield. "He's always been extremely athletic . . . and he could always kick the ball," his father said.

But in this country, his athleticism steered him toward basketball and soccer. In his senior season at Fairview, he was an all-state (5A) selection, averaging 22.4 points a game and drawing interest from the University of Denver as a possible walk-on. In soccer, he scored 13 of his 35 career goals as a senior and was honorable mention all-state.

If he blossomed athletically in his final year of high school, it was his sophomore year that left indelible memories. Horrific ones. During that year at Fairview, O'Neill complained about what he believed was a sore throat. It was - and it wasn't. He was experiencing the early stages of a once fairly rare infectious disease called Lamierre's Syndrome, which is said to attack the body faster than cancer.

The non-contagious disease usually begins with a sore throat. Blood clots can form in the jugular vein, ultimately traveling to the lungs. Bacteria can eventually spread throughout the body, attacking different organs. The onslaught is swift.

About two weeks before his son was stricken, Colm O'Neill remembers going to Mullen High School for a basketball game and watching Darragh hit a last-second shot in a one-point Fairview win.

"One thing about Darragh, when he's gotten serious and pumping, he's pretty good at whatever he's doing," his father said. "From the word go, he would give a good effort. But he's pretty good when the chips are down, too."

Two weeks after the Mullen-Fairview game, the chips

## SPECIAL TEAMS PREVIEW

Darragh O'Neill and Will Oliver are very different teammates from different worlds. But they share a common bond: Neither has been to Hawai'i, and both will make the college debuts there in the same game.

Oliver, a freshman from Santa Monica, Calif., won the placekicking job early in camp, spending the rest of August sharpening his kicking and getting mentally ready for Game One.

Since being named the starter, Oliver appears to have become more focused and consistent, which he attributes to pressure of a different sort.

"You know you're kicking for a lot of people, and you've always got someone behind you coming for you," he said. "It's sort of like you got there, but you've got a long way to go to keep going. It's about being not being satisfied.

"It gave me a lot more confidence and coach Embree has been real good about being supportive. I've gone in and talked to him a couple of times. He's talked to me about just relaxing and having a good time with it - and trusting myself. It seems kind of dumb that anyone would say that, but it's really helped confidence-wise."

Now, adds Oliver, he's become very aware that he has "something to lose. In the beginning I had nothing to lose. I'm here and have been given a task and I'm trying to do it the best I can."

With O'Neill and Oliver, special teams coach J.D. Brookhart finds himself in the somewhat rare position of utilizing a pair of first-year kickers. Regardless of their class or experience, he says, "There's going to be hiccups along the way. That's part of the game. But you've got to keep them to a minimum and they've got to come through when we need them. That's what we're asking them to do. We've put them in that environment to see how they'll handle it - and that's kind of why they are where they are."

Oliver, said Brookhart, endured one bad day during preseason camp, that being the second day the Buffs were on the field. "Beyond that, he's been consistent. His off days are not bad."

fell fast; Darragh was on life support at Children's Hospital in Denver. He had become violently ill, said his father, as they were watching Premier League Soccer on television. Darragh would spend two and a half weeks in intensive care, four days on life support.

A blood clot in Darragh's jugular vein had moved into his lungs. His lungs hemorrhaged. He said his resting heart rate increased to 210 beats a minutes and he went into septic shock. Doctors induced a coma, and he said he was under for a week.

Said O'Neill: "I actually was given Last Rites."

Thankfully, they weren't needed.

Colm O'Neill said because of a staffing situation at the hospital, Darragh was kept in intensive care rather than being transferred out when he appeared to be improving. When his son's condition unexpectedly worsened and he began vomiting blood, Darragh got the immediate attention that probably saved his life. Said Colm: "By the Grace of God he was still there (in intensive care) . . . it was an absolute nightmare."

Darragh's body rallied and recovered, but a full recovery took time; he was out of sports for about a year.

He has no idea of what brought on his illness, other than being "just completely unlucky," he said. But there's no denying that his Irish luck (or something more potent) kicked in at the appropriate time.

"It was crazy, but it definitely makes you appreciate every chance you get," he said. "So just to be in this position (at CU) is absolutely unbelievable. It taught me to definitely seize the day, take every moment in and be so appreciative of everything that's given to you."

O'Neill's venture into punting initially struck his father as a joke. "But I encouraged him," Colm said. "He had played a reasonable amount of Gaelic football and the way you punt the ball in American football is similar. I thought he could give it a good shot."

Darragh initially approached CU special teams coach J.D. Brookhart about placekicking, but was told to concentrate on punting. Brookhart might not have been expecting what he got; if the Irish kid developed quickly enough from mid-April to early August, it would be a bonus. If not, Brookhart simply would go in another direction.

But O'Neill, who sought punting tips from local

At other special teams spots, Brookhart will "go situational" with his punt returners, utilizing Rodney Stewart, Paul Richardson, Keenan Canty and D.D. Goodson at various times. His kickoff return trio will be Arthur Jaffee, Brian Lockridge and Tony Jones.

Ryan Iverson returns for his second season as a short and long snapper, while Justin Gorman replaces Scotty McKnight as the holder. Brookhart calls Iverson a better-than-average snapper: "He's got a couple of things going for him - tremendous ball speed and his athleticism from a coverage standpoint. Things have changed that way; you don't have to have a guy who's big and can block. He adds a dimension."

Gorman, said Brookhart, "is really good. He's advanced on some other teams, but he's good enough (at holding) that I'd want to travel with him regardless."

Brookhart said the Buffs' overall special teams coverage improved over the course of camp. He didn't spend much time watching tape of past CU special teams because he knew what he wanted his standard to be. "I wanted to make sure that we had quality coverages," he said. "That's where I put my focus from a personnel standpoint. On the return phases, I tried to even things up a little. A lot of times your return personnel are drawn from the defensive side of the ball. So I tried to involve more people on the return units to share the load; that's always kind of been my philosophy with it."

Being first-year kickers, neither O'Neill nor Oliver have achieved any notoriety on campus - yet. "And that's not a bad thing," Oliver said. "If you're going to be recognized, it better be for good things. You've got to do this on the field, that's where it starts. The rest . . . it happens as it happens."

## THE INSIDE LOOK AT . . .

### Special teams

**Coach:** J.D. Brookhart, first season on CU staff.

**Returning starters:** P Zach Grossnickle, Soph.; SN Ryan Iverson, Soph.

**Returnees:** PK Justin Castor, Soph.; PR Paul Richardson, Soph.; PR Rodney Stewart, Sr.; KOR Brian Lockridge, Sr.; KOR Arthur Jaffee, Sr.; H Kyle Cefalo, Sr.

instructor Matt Thompson as well as Oakland backup Glenn Pakulak, "came out the middle of spring ball and just took off," Brookhart recalled. "He's an athletic kid that's good in those pressure situations . . . he's got that mentality of having been there in those situations and I think that helps."

O'Neill was enrolled at CU in 2010 and attended several football games. The atmosphere at Folsom Field inspired him. "I wished I was out there," he said. "I thought I could contribute in some way, and playing soccer I knew I had a good leg, so I just figured I could give punting a try and see where it took me. It's taken me pretty far, so far.

"I think I've been punting pretty well (since being named No. 1). It's nice that the coaches had faith in me as a punter. I think that instilled a little bit of confidence in me, a little extra confidence. I've been punting well since then but I still want to improve."

O'Neill, who is classified as a redshirt freshman, concedes there might be a "few butterflies" at Hawai'i, but adds, "I'm not nervous. I'm just going to go in there and trust my technique and do what I do in practice. I think I'm going to be just fine. Obviously we do some live drills here to get prepared for that and I'm not nervous at all really. I'm sure once I step out there, there'll be a few butterflies, though."

Neither O'Neill nor his family has visited Hawai'i. Colm has been deliberating whether to book a flight for Saturday's opener. He might opt to attend CU's Sept. 24th game at Ohio State, rendezvousing with the co-owner of their pair of pubs. They met while attending grad school at Michigan, "And he's an anti-Ohio State fan," Colm said.

Of course, Colm is anxious to watch Darragh punt. He strongly believes his son will succeed, but acknowledges, "It's a completely different animal when all these fellows are running at you trying to take your head off. I'm confident in him, though. I think being the unknown, being the underdog helps him. When he was the rank outsider (in CU's punting competition) and given zero chance, there was the element of 'I'm going to prove these buggers wrong.'"

Darragh O'Neill has done it before, with the stakes much, much higher.

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**Newcomers:** PK Will Oliver, Fr.; P Darragh O'Neill, Fr.; P Mark Brundage, Sr.; SN Kyle Slavin, Fr.-RS; SN Keegan LaMar, Fr.; PR D.D. Goodson, Fr.; KOR Tony Jones, Fr.-RS; KOR Keenan Canty, Fr.-RS; H Justin Gorman, Fr.-RS.

**Key losses:** PK Aric Goodman, SN Joe Silipo.

**Stat line:** The Buffs were ninth in the Big 12 in punting in 2010 (75th in the NCAA) with a 39.5 average (Grossnickle), and 10th in kick scoring (5.2 points a game). Goodman made 10 of 15 field goal attempts and 32 of 33 PAT tries. Castor's only field goal attempt in 2010 was blocked.

**Bottom line:** CU is looking for an across-the-board upgrade from its special teams, and will try to achieve it in the kicking game with a pair of freshmen - Oliver (PK) and O'Neill (P). The return games were decent in 2010, with Lockridge and Jaffee back to return kickoffs and Stewart and Richardson slotted to return punts, along with Goodson getting a look. Coverage on both kickoffs and punts has been strongly emphasized by the new coaching staff and should improve. Iverson returns as a solid snapper and Gorman should work well as his new holder.

SHOW MENU



# CU Buffs football goes back to move ahead

**Former Colorado players take over struggling program with hopes of rebuilding proud tradition**

**By Ryan Thorburn** Camera Sports Writer  
Boulder Daily Camera

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Colorado fans wanted a Buff.

They got an impressive herd.

When the search for a new head coach began last November, the debate about who should get the job at CU morphed into a black and gold wish list, which consisted of Jon Embree, Eric Bieniemy, Brian Cabral and Bill McCartney.

The first three are all back in Boulder -- Embree as the head coach, Bieniemy as the offensive coordinator, and Cabral as the run game coordinator and linebackers coach.

And the legendary McCartney, who recruited and coached Embree and Bieniemy and hired Cabral as an assistant, was as excited as anyone about athletic director Mike Bohn's decision.

"He's a Buff," Bohn said of Embree, a standout tight end for McCartney in the early 1980s, after making the hire. "He can rally all of the Buffs together. He can attract top coaches to join him. He has the ability to pull that together."

Other members of the new staff who also know what it's like to run out onto Folsom Field behind Ralphie include Kanavis McGhee (defensive line), Darian Hagan (director of player personnel), Jashon Sykes (director of football operations) and Jeff Smart (defensive graduate assistant).

Defensive coordinator Greg Brown grew up around the program and is entering his third stint as a CU assistant. Wide receivers coach Bobby Kennedy is from Boulder and his passion for the game was sparked by watching McCartney's great teams as a kid. And offensive line coach Steve Marshall coached CU's dominant O-line during the 2001 Big 12 Championship season.

## Prepared, not pressured

Hiring familiar faces has been a big hit with fans in the aftermath of Dan Hawkins' disastrous 19-39 run with the Buffaloes over the previous five seasons.

Embree and his staff are still enjoying a honeymoon, which is headed to Hawaii for the 2011 season opener on Sept. 3, but understand that ultimately they'll have to win at CU for the seemingly perfect marriage to last.

"To me, pressure is when you're not prepared. I feel like I'm prepared," Embree said when asked if there is more or less stress for him coaching at his alma mater. "To me, pressure is something outside people have different ideas or thoughts of what we're supposed to be, but it won't affect what I think we should be and how we should be performing.

"Believe me, there is no one out there that is going to be harder on me than me."

Embree is just as demanding of his players. But during taxing spring and summer practice sessions, most of the veteran Hawkins recruits have embraced the tough love.

"I think coach Embree is a professional with the way he deals with everything in his life. He treats everybody the same, I don't care if you're a starter or a fourth-string guy, he's going to treat you the same," senior starting quarterback Tyler Hansen said. "He knows what we're going through. He just knows what it's like to be in Boulder, to play football here, to coach here. So he knows all the traditions and everything.

"I think that's what we needed, a guy who was a Buff and knows everything about the program."

## Tough road ahead

After gaining some preseason momentum with the hiring of former Buffs player Linda Lappe and crowd-pleasing Greeley native Tad Boyle as the new basketball coaches, CU was able to enjoy successful campaigns at the Coors Events Center.

Embree's first season figures to be much more of an uphill battle, given the lack of depth on the roster and a daunting schedule.

"I think Jon is great. He and his staff have brought a great energy, not only to the football program, but to the community, to the university, to the athletic department," Boyle said. "He is a Buff, he bleeds it, and you can tell from talking to him. I'm really excited that he and his staff are here because I think they're going to get it turned around.

"Every situation is different, and he's facing the No. 1 schedule in the country with no bye weeks. There are a lot of things he has to overcome, but there is no question in my mind that Jon Embree is the right guy at the right time for Colorado football."

## 'This is us'

Cabral served as the interim head coach last season after Hawkins was fired with three games remaining. He guided the Buffs to a 2-1 record while restoring some old traditions that were ignored or eliminated since the Gary Barnett era ended.

Embree says he would be rebuilding a program the exact same way even if his first head coaching job were in the SEC or the Big Ten.

"It's who I am and what I know. I would still be like this. I would still be hard on the guys and aggressive," Embree said. "It's the only way I know, and I think it's the right way to go about doing it. ... I've gotta be me."

The coaching advantages true "Buffs" have at CU shows up on the recruiting trail. They understand from experience what kind of student-athlete will thrive on the unique Boulder campus.

"(McCartney) always used to say, 'Who are you? Where are you going? And how are you going to get there?'" Embree said. "Obviously, knowing this place like I do helps me explain to these guys who we are. ... They're starting to understand and embrace that. It makes it easier for them that when I say, 'This is us.' "

## Blueprint in place

Bieniemy watched the team's first scrimmage of fall camp from a tower on the CU practice fields so he could get used to calling the offensive plays from the press box. CU's all-time leading rusher didn't need a megaphone as his message cascaded down loud and clear from on high.

"He wants our team to be tough, physical, and run the ball down your throat. And then we'll go from there," senior tight end Ryan Deehan said. "I think they're coaches that just want to win and they're coaching us hard so we don't get away with the stuff we used to get away with."

Defensively, Brown and Cabral inherit a respectable defensive line and bring a strong history of coaching and developing NFL-caliber defensive backs and linebackers.

"The advantage is the way we've been taught. The advantage is the way we've done it. It's proven," Cabral said. "We've been part of that tradition and know what a successful team looks like. We know how a successful team practices and we know how successful teams are prepared.

"We've got a blueprint and the blueprint comes from something that is proven."

From McCartney's deep-rooted coaching tree.

"He's obviously the guy I learned a lot from. He's got a great ability to get you to believe in yourself," Embree said. "I think that's the most important thing you can have as a coach. No disrespect to our players, and when I say our players (I mean) the guys who were playing back when I was here, but he tricked us a lot into thinking we were better than we were. We

won a lot of games because we didn't know we weren't supposed to win. And that was all because of him."

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# THORBURN: Seeing a brighter 2011 for Jon Embree's CU Buffs

**By Ryan Thorburn** Camera Sports Writer  
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I've been brain-washed.

Or perhaps I just spent too much time in the sun on the CU practice fields this August.

After watching a productive and physical fall camp, hearing the intensity of an experienced coaching staff, and listening to the players' optimism ... well, it's time to look at the Buffs a little differently.

A few months back, my original prediction for the 2011 Colorado football team was a 4-9 finish with wins over Hawaii, Colorado State, Washington State and UCLA.

That's basically what the national outlook for Jon Embree's team has been. Sports Illustrated was the most pessimistic publication, forecasting an 0-9 Pac-12 record for the Buffs in the magazine's on-line preview.

Now I'm ready to summon my inner Neill Woelk and imagine the possibilities this season. If the pigskin spheroid finally bounce's CU's way ...

**Sept. 3, CU at Hawaii, Aloha Stadium** -- Tyler Hansen completes 16 of 20 passes for 212 yards and a touchdown to tight end Ryan Deehan, and Rodney Stewart rushes for 193 yards and two touchdowns to lead the Buffs to a 31-30 victory over the Warriors. Parker Orms intercepts a Bryant Moniz pass in the final minute to deliver a Gatorade bath and a victory for Embree in his CU head coaching debut.

The Buffs snap their brutal 18-game out-of-state losing streak, making the long flight back to Boulder from Honolulu a much happier one.

**Sept. 10, CU vs. Cal, Folsom Field** -- The Bears, who humiliated the Buffs 52-7 one year earlier, have trouble figuring out Greg Brown's new 3-4 defense and are upset 23-17 in Boulder. Josh Hartigan, Doug Rippey and Will Pericak all register sacks for CU. A fumble recovery by Jon Major sets up a game-winning touchdown run by Stewart.

CU is 2-0 following the "non-conference" win over Cal. No one is more relieved than Rocky Mountain Showdown sponsors.

**Sept. 17, CU vs. Colorado State, Sports Authority Field** -- The Rams seize a 17-3 lead after two quarters, but CU responds to Eric Bieniemy's animated halftime speech and pulls out a 23-20 victory. True freshman Will Oliver's fourth-quarter field goal proves to be the difference.

The Buffs are 3-0, and Embree appears on the nationally-syndicated "Jim Rome Show" to talk about the program and the upcoming trip to Columbus.

**Sept. 24, CU at Ohio State, Buckeye Stadium** -- The Buffs are leading 21-10 in the third quarter and on the verge of a top-25 ranking when their lack of depth rears its ugly head. Stewart misses the second half with an injury, and the offense is unable to move the chains. The Buckeyes score two late touchdowns to win 24-21. Ohio State improves to 4-0, despite losing Terrelle Pryor and having four other talented players suspended in the aftermath of Tattoo-gate.

There are still a lot of positives to build on as the Pac-12 season arrives.

**Oct. 1, CU vs. Washington State, Folsom Field** -- A sellout crowd shows up to see the predicted North and South Division basement dwellers battle it out. Paul Richardson sparks the Buffs with a 75-yard touchdown reception and a 63-yard punt return touchdown in a 27-17 victory.

CU remains one of college football's early-season surprises with a 4-1 overall record and a 1-0 Pac-12 start.



**Oct. 8, CU at Stanford, Stanford Stadium --** Andrew Luck shows why he is the Heisman Trophy favorite and the projected No. 1 pick in the 2012 NFL Draft by exposing CU's cornerbacks with four touchdowns and 350 yards passing. Stanford rolls, 49-14.

Embree and his staff challenge the Buffs, who were 3-1 in 2010 before losing five consecutive games, to get off the mat and continue fighting.

**Oct. 15, CU at Washington, Husky Stadium --** Stewart returns to the lineup and rushes for 105 yards and a touchdown. Hansen leads the offense down the field in the final two minutes to set up Oliver's 28-yard game-winner. The Buffs are victorious in Seattle, 27-24.

ESPN's "College GameDay" considers visiting Boulder the following week before deciding to broadcast from the USC-Notre Dame game in South Bend, Ind.

**Oct. 22, CU vs. Oregon, Folsom Field --** The Ducks enter the game 6-0 and ranked No. 2 in the polls. Darron Thomas and LaMichael James combine for five touchdowns as Oregon rolls to a 48-20 victory in Boulder.

**Oct. 29, CU at Arizona State, Sun Devil Stadium --** Dennis Erickson's team is out to prove a point after suffering back-to-back road losses at Utah and Oregon. After a bye week, the Sun Devils beat the Buffs on Homecoming in Tempe, 31-24.

Nine games into the 13-game grind, Embree must prepare for the talented Trojans on a short work week.

**Nov. 4, CU vs. USC, Folsom Field --** Under the Friday night lights, the Buffs play well on national television and upset No. 18 USC, 30-28. Hansen plays his best game at CU to outshine future NFL quarterback Matt Barkley.

The Buffs have already exceeded expectations and are one win away from bowl eligibility.

**Nov. 12, CU vs. Arizona, Folsom Field --** Brown and Mike Tuiasosopo, who were both Arizona assistants in 2010, draw up a brilliant game plan. An interception by freshman Greg Henderson seals CU's 20-17 victory.

The student body storms the field to celebrate the program's first winning season since the Gary Barnett era.

**Nov. 19, CU at UCLA, Rose Bowl --** An embattled Rick Neuheisel gets a job-saving (at least for a couple weeks) victory over his former team. Taylor Embree catches one of the Bruins' four touchdown passes in a 34-24 victory over the Buffs.

An exhausted CU team attempts to rebound against its new end-of-season "rival."

**Nov. 26, CU at Utah, Rice-Eccles Stadium --** The Utes pick up where they left off 50 years ago with a win over the Buffs. Utah clinches the South Division and prepares to spoil Oregon's BCS title hopes when the Pac-12 championship game makes its debut in Salt Lake City.

Embree quickly shakes off the disappointment of the two-game losing streak in the postgame locker room as Mike Bohn informs him that CU has accepted an invitation to play Air Force in the Las Vegas Bowl.

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# Fresh faces will break into CU Buffs' football lineup

## Jon Embree not afraid to use freshmen

**By Ryan Thorburn** Camera Sports Writer  
Boulder Daily Camera

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Bill McCartney let Jon Embree play as a true freshman at Colorado.

Now that Embree is the Buffs' head coach, he's certainly not afraid to throw young players into the fire.

At least four true freshmen -- cornerback Greg Henderson, wide receiver Tyler McCulloch, place-kicker Will Oliver and punter Darragh O'Neill -- will be counted on from the start of the 2011 season when CU kicks off the Embree era on Saturday at Hawaii.

"I'll never forget how Mac used to bring guys on certain road trips when it was a big game," Embree said. "He was like, 'This guy is going to play football for us at some point, and I want him to see what it's like in a hostile environ-

ment.' ...

"I think it's hard when a kid starts for the first time and it's also his first time playing; but he has been on campus for three years. That's not experience. Experience is being in ball games or being around it and at least seeing it."

On the offensive line, redshirt freshman Daniel Munyer will rotate at center with sophomore Gus Handler. In the backfield, redshirt freshman Tony Jones will get some carries behind starter Rodney Stewart.

On the defensive line, redshirt freshman Kirk Poston (left defensive end) and true freshman Juda Parker (Jack linebacker) figure to be in the rotation.

"The thing about having young freshmen around and playing them is they're going to get to go do this and have some experience to draw on," Embree said.

Stephane Nembot, a 6-foot-8, 300-pound true freshman, appears to be the perfect redshirt candidate. However, Embree has hinted that the Cameroon native, listed as a fourth-string right end on the pre-Hawaii depth chart, will contribute on special teams.

"On field goal, punt ... he's such a big guy, and you're using (linemen as) shields," Embree said. "If he can just not even move, it's along way to go around. He can stay in his stance and block two people. We're going to play him in regular down and distance situations. If we're going to play these guys and they can help us on special teams, we'll use them."

Another member of Embree's first recruiting class, Brady Daigh, has emerged as Doug Rippe's backup at middle linebacker. True freshmen Will Harlos (free) and Kyle Washington (strong) are mentoring under starting senior safeties Ray Polk and Anthony Perkins.

"There's probably nine guys in that freshman class, maybe a few more, they're going to play for us," Embree said. "Be it (special) teams or at a position, they have shown that they can make plays."

Senior starting quarterback Tyler Hansen's backups, redshirt freshman Nick Hirschman and true freshman walk-on John Schrock, have never taken a snap in a college game.

Embree said the game plan won't change all that much if the Buffs have to call on their No. 3 quarterback to break the huddle at some point. Considering CU plays a brutal, bye-free 13-game schedule and Hansen (ruptured spleen last season) and Hirschman (foot injury during fall camp) have been hurt recently, that's not an implausible scenario.

"We can run the whole offense with him. That's been the great thing with him getting all of the reps he has gotten," Embree

said. "I feel very comfortable with John Schrock if we needed to play him."

McCulloch, 6-5, wears No. 87 and reminds Embree of former Denver Broncos great Ed McCaffrey.

"Every time you see him, what does he do? Makes a play," Embree said. "He may drop one occasionally, but for the most part the guy shows up."

Oliver will kick field goals and extra points, a job he won during the first week of camp. Justin Castor will still handle kickoffs.

"It's like a quarterback, right? How long are we going to just keep pretending?" Embree said when asked about naming Oliver so early in camp. "He's come out and earned it."

O'Neill and incumbent Zach Grossnickle each kicked seven punts during the final scrimmage of fall camp. The coaching staff gave the players two days off, evaluated the film, and declared the former Fairview High basketball star the winner of the competition.

"There were times where I didn't think that this would really be a possibility. It's crazy that it's actually happening," said O'Neill, who has never played in an organized football game at any level. "The fall camp has definitely prepared me a lot. I punted a lot in the spring, too. They've done a good job of putting us in game-like situations, and I'm confident in myself."

And the head coach enters the season confident in the CU freshmen who will take the field at Aloha Stadium.

## **True freshmen on CU's roster**

Paulay Asiata, 6-5, 295, OL -- Ethan Adkins' backup at left guard

Jermame Clark, 6-2, 195, DB -- Will likely redshirt

Brad Cotner, 6-4, 290, C -- Will likely redshirt

Malcolm Creer, 5-11, 205, TB -- Will likely redshirt

Brady Daigh, 6-2, 235, LB -- Behind Doug Rippey at middle linebacker

Stevie Joe Dorman, 6-3, 210, QB -- Will likely redshirt

Drew Ebner, 5-11, 200, WR -- Will likely redshirt

D.D. Goodsen, 5-7, 165, TB -- Will see action at tailback and as a return man

Woodson Greer, 6-3, 235, LB -- Will likely redshirt

Will Harlos, 6-3, 185, DB -- Third-string free safety and special teams contributor

Sherrard Harrington, 6-1, 175, DB -- Will redshirt due to injury

Greg Henderson, 5-11, 185, DB -- Starting right cornerback

Keegan LaMar, 6-1, 265, SN -- Will likely redshirt

Alex Lewis, 6-6, 270, OL -- Third-string (emergency) left tackle

Tyler McCulloch, 6-5, 205, WR -- Co-starter with senior Toney Clemons at X receiver

Marc Mustoe, 6-7, 275, OL -- Will likely redshirt

Stephane Nembot, 6-8, 280, DL -- Fourth-string defensive end and special teams player

Andre Nichols, 6-4, 215, DE -- Will likely redshirt

Parker Norton, 6-0, 190, WR -- Will likely redshirt

Darragh O'Neill, 6-2, 180, P -- Starting punter

Will Oliver, 5-10, 195, PK -- Will handle field goals

Juda Parker, 6-3, 250 -- Third-string "Jack" linebacker

Nick Plimpton, 5-11, 220, FB -- Will likely redshirt

John Schrock, 6-4, 215, QB -- Third-string quarterback

Nelson Spruce, 6-2, 200, WR -- Behind Clemons and McCulloch

River Thompson, 5-9, 160, DB -- Will likely redshirt

K.T. Tu'umalo, 6-2, 195, LB -- Third-string strong-side linebacker

Austin Vincent, 6-2, 185, WR -- Will likely redshirt

Casey Walker, 6-4, 220, LB -- Will likely redshirt

Kyle Washington, 6-1, 200, DB -- Anthony Perkins' backup at strong safety

Richard Yates, 6-2, 180, DB -- Will likely redshirt

Cody Yellen, 6-3, 225, TE -- Will likely redshirt

### **Redshirt freshmen on CU's roster**

Cordary Allen, 6-1, 235, TB -- Could contribute on special teams

Keenan Canty, 5-9, 155, WR -- Fourth-string Z receiver and kickoff return option

Kaiwi Crabb, 6-3, 300, OL -- A reserve at center and right guard

Justin Gorman, 6-0, 195, DB -- Could contribute on special teams

Nick Hirschman, 6-3, 230, QB -- Tyler Hansen's backup

Tony Jones, 5-7, 175, TB -- Rodney Stewart's backup

Jordan Marquez, 6-1, 185, DB -- Could contribute on special teams

Josh Moten, 6-0, 195, DB -- Third-string at right cornerback

Daniel Munyer, 6-2, 290, OL -- Will rotate as starting center in opener with Gus Handler

Kirk Poston, 6-1, 255, DL -- Third-string left defensive end

Kyle Slavin, 6-4, 235, TE -- Fourth-string tight end

Lowell Williams, 6-1, 200, LB -- Third-string weak-side linebacker

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# Greg Brown back in Boulder with CU Buffs

## Former CU assistant in third go-round with Buffs -- this time as defensive coordinator

**By Joshua Linden**stein Camera Sports Writer  
Boulder Daily Camera

Posted: 08/27/2011 11:27:54 PM MDT

Hearing his players speak, one gets the idea that Greg Brown is decked out in a lab coat and holed up in a basement somewhere on campus brewing defenses in test tubes.

Mastermind, genius, guru, mad scientist is how they describe the University of Colorado defensive coordinator.

"He knows everything about defense," CU senior safety Anthony Perkins said during fall camp. "He knows how to get the most from his players. He's a great coach to play for. I'm really thankful that he was able to come back."

And Brown is happy to be back.

Plenty was made last December of new head coach Jon Embree being hired and bringing to Boulder with him fellow former Buffs Eric Bieniemy and Kanavis McGhee. Former player and longtime CU assistant Brian Cabral, too, would be sticking around.

But Brown's ties to CU and the state of Colorado run maybe as deeply as any. Now in his third stint with the Buffs as an assistant, the Colorado native, Arvada High School grad and son of former CU baseball coach Irv Brown, is at home in Colorado after leaving for one season to be co-defensive coordinator at Arizona.

"I liked U of A and what they've got going on and how (head coach Mike Stoops) has built that program up," Brown said. "But when Jon Embree called, it was a no-brainer."

### Greg Brown

**Position:** Defensive Coordinator/Secondary

**Age:** 53

**CU connections:** Father Irv coached the CU baseball team and was a Buffs assistant football coach; Greg coached the Buffs during two different stints (1991-93 and 2006-09).

A coaching nomad who has never been in one place long, Brown's loyalties to CU developed early on as he tagged along to practices and games in Boulder with his dad, who also was an assistant football coach for the Buffs and is now a legendary sports talk radio personality in Denver on AM 1510 and FM 93.7.

"That was a big deal to be able to come up here and hang out," Greg Brown said.

After lettering twice as a cornerback for the University of Texas-El Paso and spending one season there as a graduate assistant, Brown returned to Colorado where he was an assistant coach for Green Mountain High School.

Irv Brown said he knew his son's destiny then.

"I'd gotten him a job with a friend of mine as a stock broker and he was terrible," the elder Brown said. "He's not a salesman. He's a coach."

Irv said he gave career match-maker one more try, urging former Denver Broncos coach Red Miller to bring his son on board with the USFL Denver Gold to show him the ropes.

"He said, 'I will if you and Joe Williams keep your big mouths shut on the radio,'" Irv recalled.

Two years later, Greg Brown was working in the NFL as a defensive quality control coach for the Tampa Bay Buccaneers and crashing at head coach John McKay's place while he worked his way up to tight ends coach with the team by 1986.

He then spent two years at the University of Wyoming as defensive backs coach and two more years doing the same at Purdue before being hired by Bill McCartney to lead CU's secondary.

He coached with the Buffs from 1991-1993 before getting back into the NFL. Atlanta. San Diego. Tennessee. San Francisco. Atlanta. New Orleans. And all along the way coaching players like Deon Figures, Chris Hudson, Ronnie Bradford, Ashley Ambrose, Ray Buchanan, Scott Case and Rodney Harrison. Not to mention learning from defensive minds like McCartney, Jeff Fisher, Jim Haslett and Dave Adolph.

"He's got tremendous experience," Embree said. "He's got 15 years in the (NFL), He's been a college coach at different levels. You have to be creative and you have to be a good teacher to be able to get your players to have success, and he was able to do that at every level."

Brown returned to Boulder to coach at CU with Dan Hawkins from 2006-09, leading a defensive backfield that included future draft picks Jimmy Smith, Terrence Wheatley and Jalil Brown.

He was instrumental in helping the Buffs become a defensive unit that allowed just 202 yards passing per game in 2009 -- a figure that ballooned to 260 in 2010 with Brown at Arizona.

On a new CU coaching staff that has gained plenty of notoriety for being intense in its loud praise and criticism at practices, Brown is different.

"I like his temperament to be in the back end because you have to forget that last play if you get beat," Embree said. "I think he has a good balance of when to get on guys and when to help them get through the next play."

Said Perkins of having his old position coach back: "He's the same. He's in charge of the whole defense now but that doesn't change how he interacts with his players, how he interacts with other coaches. He's just a great guy to be around."

And one who's hoping to stick around after amassing 15 previous coaching stops over the past 30 years.

Brown said he's in no rush to get back to the NFL and would be happy to "put down roots" in Boulder. But the lifelong coach also knows that, especially as an assistant, you can't often plan beyond the coming season.

"We'd love to have this be a long, successful stay," Brown said. "Now, we've got to play well. That's part of the deal."

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## A closer look at the CU Buffs' 2011 CU football schedule

**By Kyle Ringo** Camera Sports Writer  
Boulder Daily Camera

Posted: 08/27/2011 11:05:37 PM MDT

### Hawaii

**Date:** Sept. 3

**Stadium:** Aloha Stadium

**Time/TV:** 8:15 p.m., ESPN2

**Series:** Tied 1-1

**Last meeting:** Colorado overcame a 10-0 halftime deficit with 31 second-half points to beat the Warriors 31-13 in Boulder last season.

**Quick hit:** The Buffs haven't started a season with a true road game since 1995 when they won at Wisconsin in the first game of the Rick Neuheisel era.

### California

**Date:** Sept. 10

**Stadium:** Folsom Field

**Time/TV:** 1:30 p.m.

**Series:** California leads 3-2

**Last meeting:** The Bears clobbered the Buffs 52-7 in Berkeley in the second game last season (Sept. 11), nearly one year to the day of this rematch.

**Quick hit:** Several coaches have switched sidelines for this one. CU offensive line coach Steve Marshall coached the Cal offensive line last year. Cal assistants Eric Kiesau and Ashley Ambrose were assistants in Boulder in 2010.

### Colorado State

**Date:** Sept. 17

**Stadium:** Sports Authority Field at Mile High

**Time/TV:** 11:30 a.m., Root Sports

**Series:** Colorado leads 60-20-2, including a 6-4 mark in Denver.

**Last meeting:** The Buffs held the Rams to 245 yards of total offense and one 43-yard field goal in the fourth quarter to win 24-3 last season.

**Quick hit:** This is the first time since 2006 the Buffs haven't opened the season against the Rams and only the second time since 1996.



## Ohio State

**Date:** Sept. 24

**Stadium:** Ohio Stadium

**Time/TV:** TBA

**Series:** OSU leads 3-1. The Buffs' lone victory came 40 years and one day to the day with a 20-14 victory at Ohio Stadium.

**Last meeting:** Colorado lost a hard-fought game on the road 13-10 in coach Jon Embree's senior season at CU in 1986. Embree still insists a tying field goal attempt was good.

**Quick hit:** The Buckeyes have been through a difficult offseason losing their coach, starting quarterback and several others players to an NCAA investigation, but should be finding their legs under new leadership by the time this game rolls around.

## Washington State

**Date:** Oct. 1

**Stadium:** Folsom Field

**Time/TV:** TBA

**Series:** Colorado leads 4-2 but the series is tied 2-2 in games played in Boulder.

**Last meeting:** The Buffs used a fumble return for a touchdown by former linebacker/tight end Joe Sanders to spark them to a 20-12 victory on a neutral field in Seattle on Sept. 11, 2004.

**Quick hit:** This is the first official Pac-12 Conference game for the Buffs. It's also a matchup of the two teams picked to finish last in their respective divisions in the conference.

## Stanford

**Date:** Oct. 8

**Stadium:** Stanford Stadium

**Time/TV:** TBA

**Series:** Tied 3-3. The Buffs haven't won in two previous trips to Palo Alto.

**Last meeting:** One of former coach Bill McCartney's most talented teams allowed the Cardinal to score 41 points in a 41-37 shootout in 1993.

**Quick hit:** The Cardinal is 15-2 at home over the past three seasons. Another difficult place for the Buffs to find some confidence on the road.

## Washington

**Date:** Oct. 15

**Stadium:** Husky Stadium

**Time/TV:** TBA

**Series:** Tied 5-5-1, but the Buffs actually lead 3-2-1 in Seattle.

**Last meeting:** Led by former CU coach Rick Neuheisel, the Huskies completed a two-year sweep of the Buffs with a 17-14 victory in Boulder in 2000.

**Quick hit:** CU coach Jon Embree "flipped" three 2011 recruits who were pledged to Washington just before signing day last year. Washington coach Steve Sarkisian will want to make him pay.

## Oregon

**Date:** Oct. 22

**Stadium:** Folsom Field

**Time/TV:** TBA

**Series:** CU leads 8-7, including a 4-2 mark in Boulder.

**Last meeting:** With Colorado complaining that it should have been playing in the national title game instead of Nebraska, Oregon made the argument sound silly by dismantling Gary Barnett's team 38-16 in the 2002 Fiesta Bowl.

**Quick hit:** This is the first regular season meeting with the Ducks since 1987. Former CU offensive coordinator Mark Helfrich returns to Boulder in the same position with Oregon.

## Arizona State

**Date:** Oct. 29

**Stadium:** Sun Devil Stadium

**Time/TV:** TBA

**Series:** ASU leads 2-0 with both victories coming during the Dan Hawkins' era in Boulder.

**Last meeting:** CU squandered an early 14-0 lead and surrendered 33 unanswered points to lose 33-14 in Tempe in Week 2 of the 2007 season.

**Quick hit:** ASU has a bye week to prepare for the Buffs after facing Oregon on Oct. 15. The Sun Devils could still be on an emotional high or down in the dumps when they see the Buffs.

## Southern Cal

**Date:** Nov. 4 (Friday)

**Stadium:** Folsom Field

**Time/TV:** 7 p.m. ESPN2

**Series:** USC leads 5-0, including a 2-0 mark in Boulder.

**Last meeting:** The Trojans dismantled the Buffs on their home field with a 40-3 shellacking on Sept. 14, 2002. The Buffs were held to four first downs and 61 total yards of offense.

**Quick hit:** In the five previous meetings combined, USC has outscored CU 138-24.

## Arizona

**Date:** Nov. 12

**Stadium:** Folsom Field

**Time/TV:** TBA

**Series:** Colorado leads 12-1, including a 5-1 advantage in Boulder.

**Last meeting:** The Wildcats' only win in the series came in Embree's last season as a player in Boulder in 1986 when they won 24-21.

**Quick hit:** Former CU safety Ryan Walters is in his first season as secondary coach for the Wildcats.

## UCLA

**Date:** Nov. 19

**Stadium:** The Rose Bowl

**Time/TV:** TBA

**Series:** UCLA leads 4-2, but the Buffs hold a two-game winning streak with victories in 2002 and 2003.

**Last meeting:** Embree and offensive coordinator Eric Bieniemy were in their first season as UCLA assistant coaches when the Buffs beat them 16-14 in Boulder on Sept. 6, 2003.

**Quick hit:** Story lines abound with Embree's oldest son Taylor in his senior year as a wide receiver for the Bruins. Former Buffs Josh Smith and Kai Maiava are completing their careers and everyone knows the history with coach Rick Neuheisel.

## Utah

**Date:** Nov. 25 (Friday)

**Stadium:** Rice-Eccles Stadium

**Time/TV:** 1:30 p.m. FSN

**Series:** CU leads 30-24-3, but the Utes won the final two games in a series that was interrupted 49 years ago.

**Last meeting:** Utah beat the Buffs in the 1962 season opener 37-21 after NCAA sanctions and a summer eligibility problem ended up costing CU 16 of its top 33 players for the season.

**Quick hit:** Utah starting quarterback Jordan Wynn was initially committed to CU before changing his mind and going to Utah. CU starter Tyler Hansen hosted Wynn on his official visit to Boulder in 2008.

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# Anthony Perkins solidifies secondary for CU Buffs

## Strong safety returning for fifth year after ACL injury

**By Joshua Linden**stein Camera Sports Writer  
Boulder Daily Camera

Posted: 08/27/2011 06:24:57 PM MDT

Spend a few minutes chatting with Anthony Perkins and it isn't difficult to see why his fellow Colorado defensive backs call him "Papa Perk."

The Buffaloes' starting strong safety is well-spoken and even-keeled. He's married. He earned his bachelor's degree in integrative physiology in 3 1/2 years and is now working on a second degree in history. And in a secondary that has gotten most of its attention in fall camp for its inexperience at cornerback, he's the man directing traffic, making sure everyone is where they're supposed to be to ease the transition.

"He's like our dad," quipped true freshman cornerback Greg Henderson, who is expected to start Saturday when the Buffs open the season at Hawaii.

Call him what you want. Perkins, a 5-foot-10, 200-pound fifth-year senior and co-captain, is just happy to be back on the field after missing the final seven games last season and all of spring ball with a torn anterior cruciate ligament in his right knee.

"That rehab process was a long one, but it's paying off right now," Perkins said last week. "(The knee) feels strong."

After starting nine games as a sophomore, Perkins started the first five last season before getting injured. He led the team in tackles at the time and still finished 10th on the team.

And there was a definite correlation between the defense's production and the timing of Perkins' injury. The first five games, the Buffs allowed just one foe 400 or more yards of total offense. In the final seven games, it happened six times.

As for any athlete, watching from the sidelines for several months wasn't easy for Perkins. But he also took the chance in spring ball to take a step back and see the defense as a whole instead of focusing on just his own reads.

That experience, he said, has helped him become a better player this fall, though CU defensive coordinator Greg Brown said the cerebral side of the game has always been a strength for Perkins.

Brown, who is back with CU after a one-year hiatus, said Perkins used to come to Buffs practices in the spring of his senior year at Northglenn High School after he'd signed a letter of intent, already then trying to "get a leg up on guys."

"He's an extension of the defensive staff out there," Brown said. "He's so smart and conscientious and studies. He's a baller. It's important to him."

Embree said Perkins has a "great way of communicating with his teammates." That kind of rapport -- whether it's critiquing his or someone else's mistakes in a film session or barking instructions on the field -- has gained Perkins a following among young teammates like Henderson.

"I trust him a lot because he knows what he's doing," Henderson said. "He's like Coach Brown playing on the field."

Plenty has been made of the Hawaii passing attack, especially with the Buffs losing Jimmy Smith and Jalil Brown at cornerback. But both of the Buffs' safeties -- Perkins and junior Ray Polk -- started every game they played last year, including a 31-13 win in which CU managed to contain the Warriors offensively.

Perkins earned honorable mention Jim Thorpe Defensive Back of the Week honors for his play in the game with seven tackles, a pass break-up and a fumble recovery on the CU 2-yard line on Hawaii's first possession.

"You expect that they're going to go out and complete their passes," Perkins said. "And what you want to do is you just want to be able and try to contain them and limit the big plays that they make."

Perkins said he understands the concern from outside the program over CU's cornerback situation because of the two guys the Buffs lost. But he said corners Henderson, Travis Sandersfeld and Parker Orms have earned their spots and the confidence of their teammates.

"We're going to go out there and compete every single week, and I definitely feel like we'll contribute this year," Perkins said.

Perkins -- who is still weighing his post-collegiate options -- said he doesn't have any individual goals he'd like to accomplish in his final season other than leaving knowing he was a part of turning the program around after five rough seasons.

"It's been such a blessing just being able to come back from an injury like that and still be out here competing, running around with everybody," he said. "I'm very thankful that my knee's healed up."

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cu football

## CU's Jon Embree brings Cherry Creek attitude

By John Henderson  
The Denver Post

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BOULDER — The distance from Smoky Hill High School in Aurora to Cherry Creek High in Greenwood Village is about 11 miles. Jon Embree's Cherry Creek Bruins could've put up a 40 spot on an opponent by the time it takes to drive from one school to the other. Yet, when Colorado's first-year football coach made that move in the eighth grade, it may as well have been to another time zone. Or country. Or galaxy.

Whatever CU's win-starved fans see in Embree trying to turn around a school-record five consecutive losing seasons was forged in his days at Cherry Creek. If you believe in omens — and not preseason media polls — you'll like this note about Embree.

He helped start Cherry Creek's collection of eight state

titles in the 1980s and 1990s. His recruiting class led to Colorado's first undisputed conference title in 28 years.

Embree wears a buffalo on his heart. But he has a bruin in his gut.

"Coach Mac (Bill McCartney) used to say, 'Iron sharpens iron,' " Embree said. "And I was

fortunate I was around a lot of iron."

He's the son of a Bronco and the father of a Bruin. Taylor Embree didn't go to Cherry Creek. He's a starting receiver for UCLA who grew up listening to his father talk about glory days.

Keep in mind his father helped turn around Colorado, played two years with the Los Angeles Rams and coached on the staffs of Colorado's Big 12 championship team as well as the Kansas City Chiefs and Washington Redskins.

What does Taylor's dad talk about when he tries "to recapture a little of the gloria"?

"To be honest with you, I heard more about Cherry Creek," Taylor said. "He always bragged about how good Creek was."

### Life at Cherry Creek

When Jon gave Taylor tips as a youth, he didn't show him tape of his days as a tight end for the Buffaloes or Rams. He showed him tapes of his days at Cherry Creek, like the clip that showed him breaking the sternum of a Douglas County

High player. Embree was playing tight end. A pass happened to get tipped to a defender waiting in the end zone. Before the ball came

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down, Embree knocked him into Jefferson County.



Jon Embree led Cherry Creek to the state title in 1982 with a victory over Regis Jesuit. (Courtesy of Linda Embree )

"I just wanted (Taylor) to see that you can play aggressive and physical on offense," Embree said. "You don't have to do it just on defense."

He learned all this under Fred Tesone, the architect who made Cherry Creek the scourge of the state. Jon's father, John, a receiver for the Broncos in 1969-70, could see Cherry Creek's collegiate-like foundation building while sitting in the family home in Aurora.

They lived on Pheasant Run near Smoky Hill High back when Smoky Hill was only four years old and the football team wasn't much more than suburban cannon fodder. When Jon was in eighth grade, the family moved to Cherry Park near Arapahoe and Holly.

Cherry Creek seemed odd, like a school from a futuristic society. High school sports weren't just after-school activities. Athletic teams had year-

round programs and a big-time weight room.

"That's where I developed the mind-set and culture about winning," Embree said. "It's not about being close. It's not about anything else but winning and competing. That's where I learned how to compete. That's where I learned how to win. That's where I learned to play as the hunted."

The social assimilation to his new school was almost as shocking. At Smoky Hill, his classmates' goals centered around getting a new pair of sneakers or checking out the new neighborhood burger joint.

Cherry Creek's playgrounds were more like think tanks. Embree didn't just learn about crossing patterns. He learned about the importance of looking beyond football.

"I'd never heard of the Ivy League until I went to that school, having friends say, 'Oh, I'm going to Harvard, Yale,' " Embree said. "What are you talking about? They said, 'That's the best.' What? I just never thought about any of that stuff. We had a kid, Kevin Baird, who went to Stanford on a football scholarship.

"I'm like, 'Wow! This is serious.' "

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His new, richer classmates never held his naivete, nor his Smoky Hill background, against him. While Smoky Hill was a melting pot, Cherry Creek was as white as the school's away football uniforms. In his class of 1,100, he remembers being one of about five African-Americans. But he found a very welcoming environment.

"We never didn't fit in," said Sean Embree, Jon's younger brother, who won a state title with Creek in 1986. "We were greeted with open arms. Our friends never saw color. We all had something in common — sports — and we won.

"We won a lot of games."

## Dad's influence

Jon vaguely remembers running around the turf at Mile High Stadium after his dad's Broncos games. His father caught only 33 passes in his 20-game NFL career, but he forged an NFL mentality his son still retains.

Jon remembers one of his first football drills as a youth. It was called the Bull in the Ring. Your teammates form a circle and you stand in the middle running in place. The coach calls a jersey number and you and the player hit each other.

"He calls out a number and I'm looking at the coach," Embree said. "A kid comes from behind and just kills me. I'm laying on the ground and thinking, 'Now what?' He calls out another number.

"Guys are just coming in and hammering me."

Of course, being 10 years old, he got up crying. His father, out of the NFL by then and doing some coaching, pulled him aside. "So you want to play football? Then get your butt back out there and you show them what you're about!"

From that point on, said Jon Embree, "I remember trying to kill everybody."

From about that point, his lifetime goal was playing in the NFL. He'd lie on his bed at night and throw a football at the ceiling, catching it in the dark. Soon, the ceiling looked like a relief map of the moon. His mother jumped all over him. From then on, Jon lied down on the floor so he had more space to throw.

"And he broke the light," recalled his mom, Linda, who worked for AT&T. "He was so focused."

He took that attitude all the way through Cherry Creek, where he played tight end, a secondary player on a powerhouse team with three 1,000-yard rushers. In Embree's varsity seasons, Creek went 35-6.

"He was really good," said J.D. Brookhart, Colorado's passing games coordinator and special-teams coach who was a receiver on those Creek teams. "He was a dominant player we didn't use like we could've. Jon could've caught 100 balls if we wanted to."

Colleges took notice, though. Schools such as Ohio State and UCLA came calling. A lot. Colorado? During Embree's junior year at Creek, Chuck Fairbanks was leading the Buffs to consecutive losses to Drake.

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In Embree's senior year, a defensive coordinator out of Michigan named Bill McCartney came to Colorado and went 2-8-1 in his first year.

"They used to give you tickets when they're recruiting you," Embree said. "I'd give my tickets to my teammates. I'd never show."

Embree's 1982 senior season produced a bumper crop of college prospects, players such as David Tate at Mullen and Barry Helton at Simla and Ed Reinhardt at Heritage. McCartney made sure he brought them all in on their last recruiting visit. They started building a camaraderie not much different than what Embree experienced at Cherry Creek.

"It wasn't like we didn't have choices," he said. "We started talking: You think we're all good enough to move the needle, to change this? We all kind of made a pack: Let's come here."

By his junior year, Colorado played in the 1985 Freedom Bowl, their first bowl game in nine seasons. Four years later, the Buffaloes played for the national title.

Embree's task today isn't nearly as difficult. Colorado actually has an outstanding weight room. When he arrived in 1983, Cherry Creek had a better one than CU. He has some offensive weapons for his new pro-set attack and a staff assembled from the glory years under Coach Mac.

And he has an easy pitch to sell. All he has to do is sell his story.

"That's what I'm trying to impress on kids in state now," he said. "You can go and try to do something out of state. That's great if that's for you. But I tell you what. I've been fortunate to be in the NFL and be around great players.

"There's nothing I've done in my life that I feel more proud about than what happened my four years here."

His next turnaround job begins in six days. Colorado is the bull in the Pac-12's ring. Let's see if the Buffs respond like their coach once did.

*John Henderson: 303-954-1299 or [jhenderson@denverpost.com](mailto:jhenderson@denverpost.com), [twitter.com/johnhendersonDP](#)*

## Embree timeline

*A look at Jon Embree's run from Cherry Creek to head coach at Colorado:*

**High school:** In his senior season, he won the 1982 state title, which was the first of eight for Cherry Creek.

**College:** At Colorado, he was in Bill McCartney's first recruiting class and from 1983-86 Embree played tight end and caught 80 passes for 1,116 yards.

**NFL:** Drafted by the L.A. Rams in the sixth round of the 1987 draft, which was the same year as the lockout. He played two seasons but suffered a career-ending elbow injury in 1989 and needed "Tommy John" surgery.

**Coaching:** First job was as a volunteer coach at CU in 1991 under McCartney. Full-time CU

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assistant from 1993-2002; went to UCLA in 2003 for three seasons, becoming assistant head coach. Moved to NFL in 2006 and coached tight ends at Kansas City from 2006-08 before going to Washington and coaching the next two seasons.

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