



Malcolm Blacken forsees a productive second winter at CU.

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Brooks: This Winter Finds Blacken Better Equipped

Release: 01/18/2012 Courtesy: B.G. Brooks, Contributing Editor

BOULDER - Exactly a year ago, Malcolm Blacken was scoping out the University of Colorado's strength and conditioning scene as the school's newly hired director of that program. New football coach Jon Embree had equipped Blacken with a roster of returning players, an injury report and a mandate: Find out who can play, who wants to, size them up and get back to me.

Blacken did as he was told during a grueling winter conditioning program . . . and the returning Buffs grew to respect the regimen as well as the man running it. CU football's second winter under Blacken began early Wednesday morning, and "Coach Black" believes he's better equipped this time around in almost every area.

Ask him how so, and he'll start by citing a more thorough knowledge of returning personnel, with more reasons to follow.

"Coming in fresh last year, I did not know the personnel," he said Wednesday morning before the second of three group workouts. "I evaluated them during this period last year, got a feel for some guys, but I didn't know what they could do on the football field when it counted - and how much of this stuff transferred out to the field."

With a season in the books - albeit a disappointing three-win season - Blacken has files to consult. His understanding of the guy he's working for and the players he's working with has increased tenfold. And he has a better grip on what Embree needs from a strength and conditioning standpoint (additional recruiting classes

aside).

"I think we have some good building blocks," Blacken said. "I've spoken with the guys who are going to be big factors, guys who are going to contribute a lot to this team next year and told them, after having a year under my belt, what we have to work on between now and the first game next fall. I've identified strengths and weaknesses and we're going to work on both. Communication with these kids - they're like sponges at this age; they like to learn."

That process started Wednesday morning with one group reporting at 6:30 and two others at 11:30 a.m. and 1:30 p.m. About 80 returning players are participating, with that number divided into three groups. Class schedules permitting, Blacken has tried to place players in groups that will be competitive according to positions - i.e., O-linemen and D-linemen, receivers and defensive backs, etc.

Skill position players are doing full-body workouts on Monday, Wednesday and Friday. The "big guys" are doing lower body work on Monday, upper body work on Wednesday and a combination workout on Friday. The full team runs on Tuesday and Thursday.

The winter conditioning work will not conclude until March 9, the Friday prior to the start of spring drills on Saturday, March 10. A team bench press competition is scheduled for March 7, with CU's pro timing day on March 8.

Blacken generally was pleased with last winter's program and how players responded, noting their overall strength gains "were pretty good." But in Year 2, he wants to integrate "a little bit of rehabilitation in some of the programs now to work with the guys who are coming back from injuries, who have recurring injuries and will contribute in the fall. I want to make sure we get the shoulders - or whatever the ailment is - as strong as possible. I'm doing more of that. I had an injury report (last winter) but I hadn't seen how these guys would deal with contact. I just want to make sure they can handle a load of contact in the spring, a load of contact in the fall and still get through this 12-game schedule unscathed. That's my biggest thing - to be a healthier ball club in the Pac-12."

Most would agree - Embree and Blacken among them - that CU's first exposure to the Pac-12 last fall exposed the Buffs' overall lack of speed. He might not be able to lower 40-yard dash times by a couple of seconds, but Blacken is doing what he can to help the last portion of the bigger/stronger/faster equation.

"I changed a few things," he said. "After looking at this team and how we compared in the Pac-12, I'm starting my speed work sooner this year. I'm working on a lot more power from the ground movements. Football is a game of balance; you get knocked off balance, you have to recover it in a short amount of time. We're going to do a lot of sport specific training, more so than we did last year."

He's also stressing better hydration and nutrition. "We're going to beat into these guys' heads how important it is to get the proper rest while they're training, and how one part of the focus on fitness affects the other," he said. "We can work their butts off, but if they're sleeping three hours a night and eating bad, then that hurts us in the long haul. But we've got time."

Entering spring drills and fall camp, Blacken also will have a better understand of how Embree conducts his practices - "And that changes things for me a little bit," Blacken said. "As far as cardio (work) is concerned, he runs a fast-paced practice, and that's good. The players understand that and we'll train accordingly."

"Right now my focus is to train these kids well enough to get through spring ball without incident, so they can run around fast, move fast without pulling and snapping stuff. That's my goal."

Or at least one of them . . . With Embree's blessing, Blacken also is emphasizing more intense competition this winter. A strong carryover to the field is expected for spring and fall. "Our motto this off-season is competition . . . it starts within this football team before we play anybody else," Blacken said.

The competitive aspect has been ramped up. A year ago, he wanted to teach the Buffs to "be comfortable being uncomfortable," and that's still on the docket. "When Oregon is running a no-huddle offense, I want our defense to be OK with that," he said. "That doesn't start next fall, it starts now, getting them into that competition mode."

"When we run on Tuesdays and Thursdays, guess what? That O-line is competing against the D-line . . . and within the D-line group, they're competing for playing time. I want to get that minute in the competition. The running backs are competing with the linebackers, but there's still competition among the running backs for playing time. That's the competition I want broken down within the group. We're going to compete at weight lifting, at team finishes, everything we do, but still get our work done. I don't want anybody taken aback by elite competition when it's time to play football."

Embree and Blacken also are stressing "the privilege" players should recognize in working out and competing at CU. "We don't take that for granted, and I remind those guys of that all the time."

"I like these guys; I think coach Embree has done a great job of honing in on who wants to be on this club. I'm not talking about the recruits coming in, I'm talking about who's here now. I think the whole persona of what we are at (CU) has changed in 12 months. It's a privilege to be in this room and we will treat it that way as long as I'm here."

A tryout for walk-ons is planned next month, and Blacken said Embree's goal of stocking his team with players who value football will be among the criteria used in gauging any potential newcomers: "The first thing I'm going to tell those guys is, 'If you're not serious about this, if you're not into this thing 120 percent, don't waste our time. It is important to us that we're giving you this opportunity and it has to be important to you. This is not a situation where you tried out for the football team just to have something to tell your girlfriend. We want you to contribute and I will train you that way.'"

Blacken has met with visiting prospects and detailed his off-season work for them and how they can benefit. He knew he would be asked by some prospects why he left the NFL (Washington), and his answer is straightforward: He wanted to contribute more in teaching and development at this level, he wanted to do it in a place where he and his family believed they could settle in, and he wanted to accomplish both in conjunction with a head coach/program he viewed as being on the rise.

Is it? Blacken believes it is. The Buffs won two of their final three last season, including the win at Utah that snapped CU's 24-game out-of-state losing streak. Progress finally arrived in measured steps, and that's all Blacken is looking for this winter.

Contact: BG.Brooks@Colorado.EDU

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