

CU Buff Darragh O'Neill won't punt on improving

Punter awarded scholarship this spring after breakout freshman year

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One of the positive surprises of the 2011 football season at Colorado was the emergence of freshman punter Darragh O'Neill.

O'Neill had never punted in a football game in his life and had minimal exposure to the sport, having excelled at Fairview High School in soccer and basketball.

He spent the fall of 2010 at CU as a student attending CU football games and decided he would give punting a try.

A year ago this month, he joined the program during spring football and by the end of August he had stolen the job from incumbent sophomore Zach Grossnickle.

O'Neill kept the job throughout the season and impressed coaches enough that they rewarded him with a scholarship this spring.

"It's pretty awesome," O'Neill said. "It's definitely a lot of hard work put in. I'm very happy and very pleased that all the hard work paid off. Going forward it doesn't really mean that much. It's definitely a sign of respect to earn it, but I still have to work just as hard and earn that spot every year."

The fact that O'Neill served as the punter all of last season and did well enough to merit a scholarship in the coaches' eyes doesn't mean he can settle in for another three years in the position.

CU special teams coach J.D. Brookhart says the job is open for competition and Grossnickle could just as easily reclaim the spot this year.

"Zach is a talented player," Brookhart said. "If he can become consistent, he can be our punter. It's open. Darragh's to lose, but it's open."

Brookhart said O'Neill was asked to do a lot of different things last year, especially considering it was his first year of punting -- ever. He said O'Neill gave himself a lot to build on this spring and summer as he prepares for the 2012 season.

"There was a lot of good," Brookhart said. "He had some misunderstandings of what we meant because of his lack of football knowledge with some of the rubies and things like that. He's getting the game better right now. He understands that piece of it. At the end of the year, he became a good direction punter."

CU finished eighth in the Pac-12 last season in punting, with a net average of 37.3 yards. O'Neill also finished eighth in the league in the individual punting statistics, averaging 42.6 yards per punt.

There are few interesting footnotes to that performance.

Every other punter in the top 10 in the conference was either a junior or senior last season with previous punting experience.

O'Neill also punted a league-high 74 times.

The next highest total was UCLA punter Keff Locke, who punted 64 times and averaged 44.3 yards per attempt.

Another intriguing aspect to the O'Neill story is that he was initially attracted to the idea of punting at CU by attending games at Folsom Field and feeling the excitement of game days and wanting to be a part of it.

But one of his toughest lessons in his first season was finding out how brutal and fickle that support can be sometimes.

He said it took him awhile to get used to the idea that he was being watched and judged constantly.

"One day you could be the player of the game, and the next day they could not want you to be the punter any more," O'Neill said. "Especially as a specialist, it's a tough job. You have your ups and downs, but I think it's important to stay level-headed and be as cool as you can be because otherwise you'll be on top of the world one day and be depressed the next."

O'Neill is a self-described perfectionist.

He said he has watched tape of last season's games multiple times, searching for mistakes and ways he can improve.

He was subjected to a lot of different situations and conditions, including having to punt in 70 mph winds in November during a home game against Arizona.

All of that should help him going forward.

"If I'm happy with how far I've come, then I think I've lost because I'm not going to make strides to get better," O'Neill said.

O'Neill said he has worked on small things this winter when good weather days for kicking have been few and far between.

He has focused on his drop, strength training and leg quickness.

He also has done plenty of punting in the practice bubble.

"That definitely hurts a little bit because you're not seeing where the ball goes," O'Neill said. "It just kind of hits the roof and you just hope it was a good hit. You've just got to trust yourself."

O'Neill plans to travel to Dallas again this summer, as he did last year, to work with former Oakland Raiders punter Glen Pakulak.

He said he will do whatever he can to keep his job and continue to improve.

"It's definitely not going to be easy," O'Neill said. "Zach is a heck of a good punter. He has improved a lot too since his freshman year of playing. But I have confidence in myself. I have to keep working, keep making tweaks to get better. I have no doubt in my mind that I can continue to get better."

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