



WR Paul Richardson (6) hopes a monster off-season carries into the 2012 season.
Photo Courtesy: CUBuffs.com



Brooks: 'P-Rich' Returned From Christmas With A Gift

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BOULDER - Malcolm Blacken has seen a lot of football and a lot of football players. Good ones, bad ones, some who didn't know how to be good or how good they could be, others who couldn't help but be bad. He has an eye for those who have the ability to excel, and right now he has both eyes on Paul Richardson.

"I've seen a lot of good receivers," Blacken said in his office the other day. "And for where he is with his age, and in his life, he's in a good spot. I expect huge things from him this fall. Anything short of that will be disappointing. He's on the road going north with his blinders on; he ain't looking to the side and he ain't looking to the back. He's only looking at what's in front of him. I commend him for it."

That Richardson's full focus is straight ahead (and that he still wants to run his routes this fall for the University of Colorado) qualifies as pretty big news for "P-Rich" and, of course, the Buffaloes. When the 2011 season ended, Richardson was on the mend physically but not doing so well mentally.

After an explosive start - he set a school record for receiving yards (284) and tied the single-game reception record (11) in Game 2 vs. California - a knee injured in practice kept him out of four games and reduced his role to little more than a decoy for much of the rest of the season.

By itself, that gnawed at Richardson, who has a strong distaste for being inactive and unproductive. But a by-

product of his not being 100 percent physically was a perception that it had diminished his self-worth and his ability to lead.

"I lost my voice and took a step back," he said.

He finished out the 2011 season with these numbers: 39 catches, 555 yards, five touchdowns. Remove the Cal game and these numbers remain: 28 catches, 271 yards, five TDs.

"Statistically it might have seemed like I disappeared or wasn't contributing," he said. "Our coaching staff knows what I was able to do and what I wasn't able to do. They were trying to protect me . . . I understood. I didn't want to make the (injury) situation worse than what it was."

NEVERTHELESS, HE WENT INTO THE off-season dissatisfied and susceptible to transfer chatter that was stirring more outside the CU football environment than inside Richardson's head. But he heard all the questions and tried to answer most of them, sometimes cavalierly.

"It was like after my freshman year," he said. "You get a lot of negative attention and it makes you think about things. There were people asking you questions and already answering for you . . . then having you respond to the answer they gave you. It was overwhelming, very overwhelming. I wasn't laughing it off like I did after my freshman year; getting those questions again, I wasn't stable enough at the time to deal with it."

Recurring questions peppered him about his future "from what was I going to do as far as my junior year (was concerned) and even about staying in college," he said. "But I knew after I talked with coach (Jon) Embree a few times and after I had a deep conversation with coach (Eric) Bieniemy, my mind was made to stay here because this is where my heart is.

"The only attention I was getting was whether I was staying or leaving . . . not attention of your team is doing such and such, you're doing such and such. It was like you're doing nothing and your team isn't being successful on the field - where does that leave you? I wasn't ready or prepped for that.

"This is where I've been putting all my hard work in. Just because a program is struggling or if I'm struggling individually . . . I'm very sincere about this: I put this team before me. That has been my whole attitude since we got back from (semester) break. I had different things I needed to work out and I worked them out as a young man."

Before Christmas break, Blacken, the director of CU's speed, strength and conditioning program and an NFL veteran in that capacity, said he and Richardson "had a heart-to-heart," with the upshot being that Richardson had the capability to lead players who "don't want to be home for Christmas next year . . . if you went home and didn't have a sour taste in your mouth, you don't understand what we're all about. I think he had that sour taste. I think he made a dedication to himself."

In fact, the CU staff - from Embree and his assistants to Blacken and his - couldn't have imagined how dedicated Richardson would be. He went to Blacken; speed, strength and conditioning assistant Steve Englehart; and even the football operations staff, looked them in the eye and announced, "I'm all ears and all eyes until camp starts," Richardson recalled.

"I let them know that I'm all about working hard. I didn't want them to see me as being complacent or see me as feeling in any way against the team or putting my accolades before the team. I let them know I'm all eyes, all ears, and anything you feel like you need to tell me, don't hold back."

And "P-Rich" wasn't done.

Before spring drills began, his plan was to visit with every offensive coach and "find out what they want to see from me during the spring. It's because I care that much. It's been growth over the past few months that has

gotten me to this point, to where I was able to go tell the coaches I'm all eyes and ears - and now I'm going to be all action. I've been that and more. I'm taking a lot of pride in doing the things that are expected of me and appreciating the things I do that aren't expected."

AFTER FEELING HE HAD UNDERPERFORMED last fall - for whatever reason - Richardson also wanted his teammates to see his transformation and believe in him.

"What are you left to do but make assumptions about another individual?" he said. "I didn't want people to be feeling like I was selfish, I was a head case, I was not a humble person . . . I'm very humble, I'm very open to suggestions and trying to get better. Regardless of how anybody feels my attitude is, I'm always going to be the hardest worker - that's just what I pride myself on. When I felt like people were losing a sense of that, that I wasn't as hungry as I was before, it drove me to want to prove to them how much I'm into this."

Idle chatter? Anything but.

When he returned from Christmas break and the team was beginning 6 a.m. winter conditioning workouts, Richardson said he felt the need to "discipline" himself for something he said he believed was "morally right . . . a character thing. It was not for something I did blatantly wrong. A few people on the staff knew, my roommate, (senior linebacker) Doug Rippey knew. The whole team didn't."

So at 5 a.m., an hour before the rest of the Buffs began their winter workouts, Richardson was doing his self-imposed penance for . . . whatever. It continued for at least two weeks, Blacken recalled, and Richardson emerged from it hoping anyone who took notice would see that "I'm 100 percent here, I'm all in; there are no question marks and it's going to show. I don't want to be seen in a dark light; I want to be seen in a bright light."

During Coaches' Week - the winter conditioning wrap-up in which players compete in various grueling drills - Richardson was one of several players singled out by Embree and other staffers for being relentless, even ruthless, in the competition. When Englehart asked Richardson why he had worked so hard, the reply was, "I told him that I felt like I was a monster. He said, 'You're here every day doing this and that . . .' I told him again, 'Coach, I feel like I'm a monster. This is what I was made to do.' I know how hungry I am and where I want to be in life; it all determines my work ethic. I'm doing it every day with a smile on my face."

Richardson isn't a physical monster; he stands 6-1 and weighs 177 pounds. Weight doesn't go on easily, and he doesn't want it to if it means losing a step. "Being 190 plus, being 200, and running a 4.6 is not going to cut the cake," he said. "My coaches would rather me be at a weight I can control and be able to play at the speed I'm playing at."

So how fast is he now?

"I'm way faster than last season . . . it's almost scary how fast I am now," he said.

So what was his top 40-yard dash time during winter work?

A wide grin, but no answer.

"I don't want to say any times right now . . . I'd rather not," he said. "But I'm confident. I'm definitely a lot faster than I was, and I'm hitting my top speed in fewer steps than I was. I'm really happy; I've been working hard."

RICHARDSON GETS COMPLIMENTED by the staff frequently, "And it's not because I'm a kid who needs to be complimented," he said. "I'm self-motivated. I don't need anybody's burst of energy to hype me up. I've been trying to be the hype man for the guys around me. And more and more guys collectively are starting to follow suit. The coaches talk to me about it all the time. I just need to keep it up."

Embree said before spring drills began that the Buffs were on the lookout for leaders. Voids in leadership can't

be filled by anyone, but the way Richardson worked during the winter puts distance between him and just about anyone else. He has reached out to teammates, "making myself very open to them and letting them know that they can do it, too. I've been pushing my group to the standard I hold myself to. And I hold myself to a very high standard."

Blacken sees Richardson's leadership skills becoming apparent in nearly every area: "He's making guys around him run faster because he's the rabbit. He's setting the pace. That's what I love to see. He has to understand that's what his pace should be because he's the fastest guy out there. Ray Polk (senior safety) may have something to say about that, but offensively, (Richardson) goes. He's our guy on offense; he should run full speed all the time. He knows he can't get tired, can't get winded, in the fall. He has to have a certain stamina that's unprecedented for anybody else . . . he knows it's going to elevate his game if he can play at a high level for four quarters."

Richardson is aware of that for several reasons, the biggest being the time he missed due to injury last fall and several passes he missed due to a lack of focus and not being 100 percent healthy when the season started. He opened with the lingering effects of a groin injury, but he's blaming his hands and mind for the drops more than that ailment.

"I did have some (drops) and that's never OK," he said. "I was not 100 percent healthy the whole season, and when you're injured you're worried some about protecting yourself and you lose focus . . . I told my family I knew something was wrong because the game was happening fast to me. My whole life, football has been in slow motion; I've been the only one going full speed. Me being able to see things people wouldn't usually see and being able to make plays that people wouldn't usually make was due to the game happening so slow."

"But with me being hurt, it was happening fast. It was like football wasn't reacting to me anymore; I was reacting to football. It's not an excuse, but that's exactly what was going on. I dropped two passes that hit me right in my face against CSU, then I tried to make a play on a ball on the sidelines and dropped that one. That was a bad game. At Ohio State, I dropped one over the middle that hit me in the face as well. Lack of focus, concentration, whatever excuse a guy wants to throw . . . I don't make excuses for myself. That was me not making the play."

WHEN RICHARDSON WAS STRUGGLING through that period, position coach Bobby Kennedy said his philosophy was receivers who make catches get more opportunities. Richardson agreed that's the way it should be: "The biggest thing is, coach Kennedy has seen me make those plays. I know I can make them. Me hearing that right now, I think he was implying that I could be getting the ball more but the (passes) I am getting, I should be able to catch. I completely agree with him and respect him for saying that. If the ball is in the vicinity of the receiver he should make the play anyway - whether it's high, low, wherever."

The Buffs embarked on their winter conditioning work with a new motto - "Do Work. All Day." Embree, Kennedy, Blacken, et al, expect that slogan to run through spring drills, into August camp and throughout the 2012 season. Also, Richardson says he and his teammates are urged to work locally, think globally.

"Coaches have always made sure I understood there's a world outside the state of Colorado and outside this football team," he said. "They want to make sure I'm not just the best here, but I'm pushing to be the best nationally. I've taken a lot of pride in my workouts. My mindset is to be really, really, really strong when I'm working out. I compete with myself, try to outdo myself."

Blacken doesn't need to be convinced of that. Richardson has allowed the staff and his teammates a glimpse of a new maturity and a renewed conviction. Said Blacken: "I see what Jon sees . . . I think I'm seeing a young man grow up before my eyes. I think he understands what we want, what we expect of him and what it takes to get there. If you put those three things into play, the sky's the limit for that kid."

Contact: BG.Brooks@Colorado.EDU

SHOW MENU

CU Buffs' Kyle Washington trying to embrace switch

Freshman safety moving to linebacker for now

By **Kyle Ringo** Buffzone.com
Boulder Daily Camera

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Kyle Washington has been down Position Switch Alley before.

Having that experience under his belt is allowing him to attack his move from safety to Will linebacker this spring with little worry, though he admits it might have helped if coaches gave him a little more notice about their plans than the week or so he had this time.

Washington played well as a true freshman safety last season, considering he was not only thrust into a major role early, but even spent a few games as one of the senior members of a badly depleted secondary.

He was on the field for 192 snaps on defense in eight games and also contributed on special teams.

Coaches liked what they saw from him, especially when reviewing film this offseason while thinking of ways to get more speed on the field. Moving Washington to linebacker was one of their first ideas.

"He's got some work to do, but I like what I see so far," veteran linebackers coach Brian Cabral said.

How soon could Washington adapt and possibly make an impact on game days?

"It depends on his instincts," Cabral said. "It depends on how physical he is. It depends on how fast he learns. Some guys are bigger projects than others. I'll know more after the first day of full pads."

The Buffs will don full pads for the first time this spring on Thursday, but a full practice with tackling won't come until this weekend. By the halfway point of spring ball at the end of next week, Cabral should be better able to project how much Washington will be able to help him in 2012.

Washington says he is unsure whether the coaches see his move as a spring experiment or if he will be a linebacker from this point on.

"Of course right now I'm biased toward safety just because I'm used to it and I don't really have to learn too much because I played last year," Washington said. "But that's probably the only reason why is just experience-wise."

Washington is 6-foot-1 and 220 pounds. He plays with aggression and hits with force. Add that to the increase in speed he brings to the linebacking corps and it's a pretty safe bet he will remain at linebacker, especially considering the reinforcements CU has added to the secondary in the 2012 recruiting class.

Washington said he is fighting through some simple growing pains right now, learning his new position, but he likes the challenge of it.

"It gets me disappointed every once in awhile just because I like knowing what I'm doing and I like being sure," Washington said. "You know, you just get those points where you're not sure sometimes. Boots are not my best friend right now, seeing the lineman going one way and the play going the other, but I'll get it."

In his new role, Washington said he will be asked to rush the quarterback, drop into coverage and fill gaps on run defense. He said he has a ton of new responsibilities, but he believes his speed will be a huge asset once he gets the mental side down.

"I think that is what's helping me right now," Washington said. "I feel like I can get to places. My reads are a little slower just because I haven't been doing it that much, but I feel like once I get it, I can get there a little faster, which will balance out."

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