



Offensive coordinator Eric Bieniemy believes his unit is making spring strides.

Photo Courtesy: CUBuffs.com



Brooks: Offense Has 'EB' Croaking - But In Good Way

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BOULDER - Eric Bieniemy's voice (or lack thereof) suggests that a slipshod beginning to Colorado's spring football practices have required him to be more of a screamer than normal . . . normal in this case being a 747 a couple of seconds before takeoff.

Not so. The Buffs' first seven spring drills - No. 7 unfolding on a brilliant Tuesday afternoon - have been, according to Bieniemy, decent overall, promising, and "so much fun for me." It's been that way for CU's offensive coordinator, as well as defensive counterpart Greg Brown, head coach Jon Embree and the entire staff, because they're a full year into their mission in Boulder.

If 'EB's and other voices were raised last March (and yes they were) his explanation as to why might not have included "fun." Last spring found the CU staff in full attitude-realignment mode. A new foundation - the "change the culture" cliché fits nicely here - was being laid in every area, which included players being introduced to coaches, their personalities and expectations.

This spring finds all the introductions out of the way. If an offensive player doesn't yet have a good read on Bieniemy and his motivational style, let's just say that guy will struggle with the playbook, too. Bieniemy is an open book, some pages more purple than others. He gets his points across the first time, which is a big reason why he's enjoying his second spring, even if he's keeping the volume turned up.

"We're a year better than what we were last season," said Bieniemy, who also coaches the Buffs running backs. "We as a staff have grown tremendously, grown in the system together. There's a better understanding from each other of what we want and how to do it. And communication is so much better with our players in getting what we want out of them."

Bieniemy and his offensive staff went into spring drills with the goal of having the Buffs emerge with a "complete understanding about our offense in the second year, understanding concepts in the run game and what our goals are. And right now, it's so far, so good. Our kids are much better, but we have a long ways to go. But we're playing with more confidence, playing faster because they know what to do.

"Now we're teaching and coaching football, rather than having to worry about a lot of different aspects of taking over a program. From that standpoint it's been fun. The developmental process has been good, but we've got to keep grinding, keep working on the little things to help take this team to another level."

Offensively, the Buffs were at or near basement level in the Pac-12 in three vital categories. They were last in scoring (19.8 points), next-to-last in total offense (346.3 yards) and last in passing efficiency (123.7 rating). The rushing and passing offenses were ninth in the league (108.6 yards rushing, 237.6 passing).

Upgrades are in order, and that process appears to be underway. Bieniemy likes what he's seen so far at several positions. At receiver, Paul Richardson has carried a strong off-season commitment to the field. He continues to make eye-popping catches, but he's also impressed Bieniemy with his blocking. "I've stopped drills, pointed to 'P-Rich' after a block and said, 'That's what I'm talkin' about,'" Bieniemy said in a voice dying for a spring break. (And it's coming on fast; after the Buffs practice Thursday, they'll be off until April 3, with the spring game on Saturday, April 14.)

At Richardson's position, Bieniemy also singled out redshirt freshman Nelson Spruce and sophomore Tyler McCulloch, and at running back he said sophomore Tony Jones is "growing into the offense." Reinforcements are on the way at tight end, but a trio already here - senior Nick Kasa, sophomore Kyle Slavin, junior Scott Fernandez - is showing that same development, and the offensive line - without naming names - "is becoming cohesive," Bieniemy said.

Quarterback, of course, is the most critical and scrutinized position, and Bieniemy and everyone else with a whistle would have liked to have seen spring competition develop between sophomores Nick Hirschman and Connor Wood. But Hirschman (broken bone in foot) is watching Wood, a fall transfer from Texas, compete with redshirt freshman John Schrock, a former walk-on who excelled last August and quickly climbed the depth chart to No. 3.

Wood, said Bieniemy, "has his good moments and when he has a bad moment, he learns from that and doesn't repeat it. That's what I appreciate about him. It's been fun watching the growth process with him - that's what you get excited about."

Bieniemy wasn't sure how Hirschman's absence is affecting Wood: "I don't know if it's affected him or not. More than anything, you'd love for both of those kids to be out there for the competition . . . from that standpoint, we lose just a little bit. I will say this: Schrock has taken on a tremendous role and accepted it as the backup. He's done a great job. I do know that we're growing more together as an offensive unit. Obviously you want all hands on deck. That's the unfair part about this business; injuries do happen."

CU entered spring drills with the objective of refining what was already in place offensively rather than replace a lot of what already had been installed. There's enough to use effectively, provided it's done efficiently.

"Have we expanded the playbook?" Bieniemy asked. "No. We're right where we need to be in the spring. The whole objective is, we've got 15 practices that will help us prepare for the season. Everything doesn't need to be in for the spring. We need to make sure our guys are getting prepared to play Week One.

"Our biggest goal coming out of spring is giving our guys the confidence to go out and perform at a high level and

play consistent. Our No. 1 objective is making sure they truly have a complete understanding of what we're doing. Are we there? No, not at all. But it always comes back to those little things and our kids are seeing it on tape and they're learning from their mistakes."

BUFF BITS: One practice short of the halfway mark of spring drills, Embree's overall grade for his second spring is a B+. But that mark comes with a qualifier; he notes that it could go up or down based on Thursday afternoon's second scrimmage and the ability for players to stay healthy. "The kids are a lot better at details; I'm sure they'll tell you their comfort level and knowledge of what we're trying to do is just so much farther ahead than it was last year," Embree said. He added that the players were working hard but also having fun and developing camaraderie. "We didn't have that last year; we were just 85 guys." . . . Thursday's closed scrimmage will consist of 30 plays. "It's like half of a practice, it's so short," Embree said. "It's not like the old-school 'Mac' (Bill McCartney) 100-play scrimmages." Some seven-on-seven work will precede the scrimmage. A third scrimmage prior to the spring game also is scheduled . . . Identifying a starting quarterback - when it can be done, given Hirschman's status - remains the top priority. Wood and Schrock, Embree said, "have both had their moments," with Wood needing to continue grasping the offense and make timely decisions . . . The search also goes on for a No. 2 receiver, and more consistency is needed from the running backs, Embree said, noting "When you have guys behind you, that sometimes helps you find your consistency." . . . The defensive backs should take advantage of the spring, he added, because of the five freshmen that will join them in preseason camp. Ditto for the defensive line, which will get nine newcomers. None of the incoming freshmen, said Embree, "were signed to stand next to me on the sideline. Having said that, they have to have the skill level and be good enough to play . . . and I think all those guys (in spring ball) know that."

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SHOW MENU



Jon Embree gives CU Buffs a B+ so far this spring

But coach warns that incoming freshmen will compete for playing time

By Kyle Ringo Buffzone.com
Boulder Daily Camera

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Colorado football coach Jon Embree walked off the practice field Tuesday following the seventh session of spring football - an unofficial halfway point -- feeling good about what he is seeing from a limited roster, but also looking forward to adding his recruiting class to the mix in August.

Embree said to this point it has been a "B-plus spring," but that grade is contingent upon the Buffs getting through the final practice before spring break on Thursday healthy. The Buffs will also have a 30-play scrimmage Thursday.



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"The kids are a lot better at details," Embree said. "I'm sure they will tell you their comfort level and their knowledge of what we're trying to do is just so much further ahead than it was last year. And they're working."

"You didn't hear this last year, kids talking and laughing and having fun. I think last year they were so worried about showing us what they could do you missed that element of having some kind of fun out there. It also shows they like each other and they're comfortable around each other."

While Embree is happy with the results to this point, he is far from comfortable with the current makeup of his roster.

In February, he estimated that as much as 75 percent of his recruiting class of 28 prospects could play as true freshmen in 2012.

Embree has seen nothing this spring that has changed his mind or has him back tracking from that statement.

Time and time again in interviews over the past three weeks, Embree has emphasized that he is telling his current players they have to make an impression now because they will have less of an opportunity to do so in fall camp.

Embree says the first part of August will be about determining which freshmen are definitely ready to play and then moving them into first- and second-team repetitions.

"They will have an opportunity to compete for a job," Embree said. "Obviously we signed five DBs and nine D-linemen, and I didn't sign them to stand next to me on the sideline."

"Now having said that, they have to have the skill level and they have to be good enough to play and do the things we want to do to be out there."

Embree said he believes current players are taking his warnings seriously.

Perhaps they learned from last year when Embree issued a similar challenge in spring and when fall camp arrived it took relatively little time for a handful of true freshmen to earn spots on the two-deep depth chart.

Defensive back Josh Moten and defensive lineman Will Pericak and Chidera Uzo-Diribe have answered Embree's call.

"It's going to be like that every year," Embree said. "The whole goal is to try to bring in players that are better than what

you have and I tell that to the players. I said, 'If they're not, then you're doing your job.' But it's never going to be this, 'OK, it's my job and no matter what happens, it's my job.'"

Embree said the only position this spring where he believes there is heated competition is quarterback.

He said with the exception of offensive line, every other position group will be impacted by the arrival of the freshmen reinforcements.

"A lot of guys aren't on campus yet," Embree said.

Notable

Following Thursday's practice, the Buffs will have 10 days off for spring break before resuming practices in April. ... Embree is taking a vacation during part of spring break and will leave immediately after Thursday's practice. He did not say where he will be going. "Destination unknown," he said. "I'm gone. I'm wheels up about 6:30." ... Embree said coaches have done a lot of good teaching this spring on defending the zone-read and zone-option attacks.

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