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DE Chidera Uzo-Diribe (9) is working at becoming a better run defender.
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Brooks: Uzo-Diribe Takes Steps Toward Better Run 'D'

Release: 03/21/2012 Courtesy: B.G. Brooks, Contributing Editor

BOULDER - Chidera Uzo-Diribe's second spring in the Colorado football program finds him in a pretty good place, with his sights set on making it an even better place. He's healthy from head to toe - the latter being a problem area last spring - and defensive coordinator Greg Brown offers this snapshot of Uzo-Diribe during the first half of spring drills:

"He's looks great . . . he's shown some good versatility playing the run and the pass (and) he's been the best player on defense this spring, the hardest for our offense to contend with."

That's precisely what Uzo-Diribe, a defensive end/outside linebacker from Corona, Calif., went into spring practice hoping to accomplish - but particularly in the running game.

Uzo-Diribe can be (and has been) a ferocious pass rusher, a true force on the edge. He's 6-3, has a Boeving-variety wingspan, and has added about 15 pounds since last fall while retaining his speed. Now at 250, he's comfortable in either a stand-up or a hand-on-the-ground position on the line.

"They have me standing up some plays, sometimes I have my hand on the ground," he said. "I'm everything; it just depends on what coach Brown wants to call. I think I'm a versatile kind of player; I think I can do both and it's fun. I've kept my speed, and if anything, that's improved. I've got a good jump off the ball."

That jump was reduced to a feeble hop last March. Uzo-Diribe's participation was limited by a fractured big toe suffered during winter conditioning. It required surgery and resulted in him "being a little uncertain . . . I had the broken toe and didn't play the first week, then I was kind of on and off after that second week. But I definitely feel more certain this spring."

Coaches are counting on him being more of a defensive leader this fall, and Uzo-Diribe said he won't feel out of place in that role: "I definitely feel like I'm ready for it; I think it's natural for me. I was a captain in high school in my senior year in football and a leader on the basketball team when I played, so I think it's natural for me."

His 51/2 quarterback sacks in 2011 were second only to Josh Hartigan's eight among CU's defenders. Uzo-Diribe also was credited for three QB pressures and three forced fumbles. But his tackle total in 13 games was 18 (1.4 a game), well down the list. Using better run defense technique and getting himself into better position to make plays in the run game was a top spring priority.

And apparently he's getting there. "I definitely worked on my technique a lot and it's starting to show this spring against the run," Uzo-Diribe said. "I felt like I needed to come into spring showing I could play against the run; I didn't really do a good job of that last year so I wanted to show that."

A junior to be, Uzo-Diribe plays a position that will get a heavy infusion of young blood come August. CU signed a school-record nine defensive linemen (four ends) in its 2012 recruiting class, and head coach Jon Embree plans to give each more than a casual preseason look.

"The whole goal is to bring in guys better than what you have," Embree said. "It's never going to be 'it's my job no matter what happens' . . . you've got to earn (your position) every day."

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Other D-line players who have impressed Brown going into Thursday's second closed scrimmage - it's the last practice before spring break - include veteran senior tackle Will Pericak and sophomore end Juda Parker. Brown laments the absence of senior linebacker Doug Rippey (he's ahead of schedule in rehabbing his torn ACL), but says the Kyle Washington safety-to-linebacker experiment seems to be taking.

Said Brown of Washington: "He's done a good job. He brings a lot of good things to the table. He can run around, he's got quick feet and sees things. It's just a matter of time until he totally understands what's required in the position change."

Brown also acknowledged the work of linebackers Derrick Webb, a junior, and Brady Daigh, a sophomore.

In the secondary, another area that will see an August deluge of newcomers, Brown said sophomore corner Greg Henderson, who made 13 starts as a freshman "has gotten better from a year ago, but that's what you expect from your freshman to sophomore years."

Safety Terrel Smith is "getting more comfortable with the defense and understanding his reads," Brown added. "And he tackles well."

With five incoming defensive backs, Embree and Brown have let their current players know there should be a sense of daily urgency this spring to stake claims on depth chart spots. Sophomore DB Josh Moten, said Embree, seems to have gotten the message: "He's having a good spring; he's not going to let one of these guys just come in and take that job."

After losing safety Anthony Perkins and utility DB Travis Sandersfeld to graduation, Brown wanted to give junior Parker Orms a spring run at safety. But Orms suffered a hamstring injury last week that apparently will sideline him for the remainder of spring work.

"A lot will depend on the guys coming in (as far as determining secondary starters," Brown said. "Right now, as coach Embree has stated many, many times, this is a time for guys to show what they can do. There'll be some cavalry, some reinforcements, coming in this fall. This is your time to shine. If you want to make a move and haven't done it yet, this is the time. There are eight practices left."

In the seven following spring break (and that includes the April 14 spring game), Uzo-Diribe hopes to "improve on everything - my run technique on some days, then on days where we're working on the pass... I'd like to continue to improve in my all around game heading out of the spring. If it happens, I'll be fine with that."

The coaching staff won't be too disappointed either.

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