



Quarterback Connor Wood fires a pass at Thursday's second spring scrimmage.
Photo Courtesy: CUBuffs.com



Brooks: Buffs, 'ToJo' Run Hard Toward Spring Break

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BOULDER - Halfway through, halfway there? Yes and no for the Colorado Buffaloes' offense. But they might be well into rediscovering their run game and their next productive tailback.

Eight practices through their allotted 15, the Buffs are exhibiting more familiarity with the playbook and a firmer grasp of assignments. But as offensive coordinator/running backs coach Eric Bieniemy said after Thursday's second scrimmage, "We're right where we need to be - about halfway. Do we have room for improvement? Yes, we do. Are we satisfied with what we've seen? Yes, we are. There's still a long ways to go . . ."

That's not an unexpected spring critique from any coach in America at the mid-point of drills.

The Buffs broke for spring break - at least from a practice standpoint - after Thursday's near 30-play scrimmage, which featured a pair of touchdowns by sophomore tailback Tony "ToJo" Jones - one of the scores coming on long run, the other on a screen pass from sophomore quarterback Connor Wood.

Scrimmage statistics were kept but not released.

"We moved the ball pretty good and made some plays down the field," Bieniemy said. "Tony ran the ball well. (Wood) did a good job of managing the offense once he got his feet under him. The O-line has done a good job . . ."

we've got to keep them coming."

Bieniemy also pointed out the need to eliminate pre-snap penalties when the team returns to the field on April 3 to begin its final seven practices, culminating with the spring game on Saturday, April 14.

"We've got to give ourselves a chance to use snap count and take advantage of that," Bieniemy continued. "That's the only thing that's difficult for us now. We have to strive to keep improving at that."

Bieniemy said the running game - a point of emphasis when Jon Embree took over as head coach two Decembers ago - has been more efficient this spring and Jones' productivity Thursday was in line with his earlier spring work.

"Tony actually has been pretty consistent," Bieniemy said. "He's been running the ball exceptionally well. Obviously, it goes in conjunction with everybody. The O-line is coming off the ball, the tight ends are doing a great job. The thing I want to keep pointing out is that those big plays don't just happen by chance."

Jones, who played in all 13 games last season mostly as Rodney Stewart's backup, said his spring goals were to "pay attention to details like coach Bieniemy always says . . . I've tried to sharpen up on everything, stay focused, and take my game to another level since I'm trying to be a starter."

Last season, he rushed for 297 yards and two touchdowns, with his best performances coming against Oregon (19 carries, 71 yards) and Utah (12 carries, 72 yards).

Aside from the academic pause, Jones said spring break would almost be business as usual for him. "I'm staying around (Boulder)," he said. "I'll be in my playbook . . . I'm not taking any breaks, I can't afford to take any."

Also competing with Jones at running back this spring are junior Josh Ford, sophomore D.D. Goodson and sophomore Justin Gorman, who has been impressive at the position after stints at quarterback and defensive back.

Wood isn't getting the competition from the main source he expected this spring after sophomore Nick Hirschman suffered a broken bone in his right foot that will keep him sidelined until the summer. But Wood, noted Bieniemy, has enough to work on within the offense and within his game to keep him focused.

"We're trying to bring him along the right way (and) make sure he has a complete understanding of what we've installed," Bieniemy said. "He's still at baby steps offensively . . . we want to give him the ability to feel comfortable and go play. We're pleased with where he is."

In Hirschman's absence, redshirt freshman John Schrock is getting more looks at QB. Schrock, impressive from the outset last August as a walk-on, said Hirschman not being on the field hasn't altered his approach.

"I came into the spring expecting to compete," Schrock said. "Just because Nick's out doesn't mean I won't be competing with him when he comes back. I always put a lot of pressure on myself to perform well. Coach (Rip) Scherer says we're not competing with each other, but ourselves to make ourselves better. I've gone into it with that mindset. However many reps I get, I'm trying to do the best with those. Having Nick out doesn't really change how I went about it."

Schrock said the entire offense's familiarity with the playbook and concepts in Embree's and his staff's second spring was obvious. Plus, he said the offense "got pretty wordy last year . . . there was a lot of verbiage. The coaches have tried to make it easier on everybody. Now everyone is on the same page, which makes it great."

When practice resumes, Schrock said he hopes to improve on his accuracy and "take more ownership of the offense. I'd like to make more protection calls, too. I've felt good about that, but I need to get better."

Wood, who transferred from Texas last fall and sat out the 2011 season and directed the scout team, hasn't had this much work since his senior season in high school. "It's great experience," he said. "I haven't felt this 'in charge' of the team out on the field since that time when I was a senior. It's good to get back into it and get that experience."

Over CU's first eight practices, he said he continues to firm up his grasp of the offense and sharpen his ability to call audibles and quickly recognize defenses. Over the last seven practices, he said needs to "make quicker decisions when the defense gives a certain look."

Although the run game appeared more productive than the passing game on Thursday, Wood said there has been offensive balance through the first half of spring work: "I think there have been really great things in both . . . we showed a great running game (Thursday), but in our previous seven practices we've shown good things on both sides of the offense. But the running game and the offensive line showed up (Thursday) and did a good job."

Unlike Jones, Wood plans to take a break next week, returning to Texas with his family, then heading for Florida. Embree also was taking a break from football, leaving immediately after the scrimmage. He emphasized to the Buffs in their post-practice huddle that, wherever they went and whatever they did, to "remember who we represent and who we are," Wood said.

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Football: CU Buffs' Connor Wood taking all first-team snaps

Bieniemy, Brown happy with progress so far in spring ball

By Kyle Ringo Buffzone.com
Boulder Daily Camera

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When sophomore Nick Hirschman suffered a broken right foot a week before spring practices started for the Colorado football team, it effectively ended any real competition at the position until this summer.

Fellow sophomore Connor Wood, the frontrunner to earn the starting job in the fall, is receiving every first-team snap in practices. Redshirt freshmen John Schrock and Stevie Joe Dorman are splitting snaps with the second team.

The Buffs completed the eighth of 15 practices Thursday afternoon with a 30-play scrimmage in which Wood took half the snaps and Schrock and Dorman divided the other half. Wood threw a touchdown pass to running back Tony Jones, who also scored on a long run estimated to have covered 60-70 yards.

All practices and scrimmages this spring are closed to the media and public except for the April 14 spring game.

The Buffs are now off for 10 days before returning to work for the final seven sessions of spring ball early next month. Head coach Jon Embree did not speak with media members after the second scrimmage as planned because he had a short time to catch a plane for a short vacation.

Offensive coordinator Eric Bieniemy and defensive coordinator Greg Brown both addressed the progress on their respective sides of the ball, and each said he is pleased with what the Buffs have done so far.

"Do we have room for improvement? Yes we are," Bieniemy said. "Are we satisfied with what we've seen? Yes we are. There is still a long ways to go. There is still a lot of work to put in. But are we pleased? Yes we are."

Bieniemy said the positives were Wood managing the offense "once he got his feet underneath him." Jones is playing well and the offense is moving the ball. He said he feels good about the development of the offensive line, which has seven or eight players who can be counted on.

"Our O-line is probably our most cohesive unit," Bieniemy said. "These kids are doing a great job of leading. They're enjoying it. They're probably getting more work than anybody because of the lack of numbers."

Bieniemy said the offense is struggling with pre-snap procedure penalties.

Wood said the offensive started slowly Thursday but picked it up at the end. He said there are a lot of little things for the offense to improve in the second half of spring, but he feels good about where the group is so far.

Wood said it has been a big help to him to get so many first-team snaps.

"It's been very, very valuable," he said. "I haven't got this many reps since high school in terms of going with the ones. It is great experience. I haven't felt like really in charge of a team out on the field since that time when I was a senior really."

There is no doubt the CU offense has an advantage this spring over the defense, which has severely depleted numbers on the defensive line and key players such as linebacker Doug Rippey and defensive back Parker Orms out with injuries.

"You sure wish that you had more days of spring ball, but it is what it is and guys are on target, on schedule and making strides," Brown said. "Hey, we're a work in progress."

Brown is working with a defense that is really a shell of what it will be in August when the 2012 recruiting class arrives. CU will add eight defensive linemen in August and five defensive backs and those players are expected to make heavy contributions this fall.

So while Brown is pleased with what he has seen from the current players, he is waiting to for the reinforcements to arrive before really analyzing things publicly.

"There is no question it will be different," Brown said when asked if his starting group will look differently against Colorado State in the season opener than it does now. "There is huge opportunity for all those guys coming in the fall and we can't wait to get them here both up front and in the back half in the secondary. There is great opportunity and we think the great majority of those guys are going to play. They're not going to redshirt. Hey, the Calvary is coming. They'll be here soon."

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