

Football: CU Buffs' Darragh O'Neill aiming high

By Kyle Ringo Buffzone.com Boulder Daily Camera

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Buffzone.com

Darragh O'Neill set multiple single-season individual records in the Colorado football program in 2012.

Usually a player having that kind of success is a reason for celebration, but not in this case.

He's the punter.

"As long as I keep doing my job and doing the best I think I can, I'm fine with taking a few records," O'Neill said Monday. "But at the end of the day, some of those were just the law-of-averages records."

The Colorado offense wasn't very effective last season, which meant O'Neill was often pretty busy on game days. He almost couldn't help but set a few records with the number of times he was asked to give the ball to the other team.

O'Neill tied the record for most punts in a season with 76. He set a new record for punting yards in a season at 3,307, but even that wasn't anything to get excited over. He had set the previous record as a freshman in 2011 when he punted 74 times for 3,152 yards. He set the record for longest punt with the non-kicking foot when he booted a 61-yarder left-footed at Arizona. He kicks comfortably with either foot.

Perhaps his most notable achievement was setting the school record with 25 punts inside the 20-yard line. At least that helped give the CU defense a fighting chance. He finished third in the Pac-12 in punting and 18th nationally, averaging 43.5 yards per kick, and was named honorable mention all-conference.

It's actually a pretty solid start to a football career that began when he joined the team as a walk-on prior to the 2011 season. He had played the sport only briefly early in his high school career as a wide receiver.

"The records that would be the most fun would be to put up a few wins here in the last few years that I have left," O'Neill said.

There are some records O'Neill would be proud to own and he has a shot at them over the next two seasons. He would like to finish his career as the career leader in net-punting average and with the most punts inside the 20. He also wouldn't mind the single-season net-punting record.

O'Neill said those records are more representative of the positive way punters impact a football team and he would be honored to be mentioned along with former CU punters such as Barry Helton, Mark Mariscal, Tom Rouen and John Torp who hold some of those marks now.

With a new coaching staff in place, including special teams coordinator Tony Neinas, O'Neill says he is enjoying the new approach to the kicking game. He is hoping it helps him reach a higher level of performance.

Neinas spends the entire practice working with kickers, punters, snappers and holders because he doesn't coach another position. Special teams has never received that kind of priority status previously at CU.

"It's a huge difference having our own coach," O'Neill said. "We are working on smaller things now. Instead of just saying, 'Oh, I kicked bad or I kicked good' this day, we're kind of given reasons why. I think there is a lot

more refining of our kicking and punting that we're able to do with a special teams coach that we just didn't have the time to do under the last guys cause J.D. Brookhart was obviously our special teams coach but he was also the tight ends coach. We just have the time now that we didn't have before."

O'Neill is competing for the punting duties with D.J. Wilhelm, a transfer from Northern Iowa, who was on the roster last season but did not see any action. O'Neill said he doesn't spend time worrying about who he is competing against or the possibility of not being the starter.

"I compete against myself to be one of the best punters in the country next year, not just the best punter on this team."

O'Neill is also hoping to expand his responsibilities this year. He has been practicing as a holder for the field goal team all spring and would like to take the job over from wide receiver Justin Gorman, who has done most of the holding that past two seasons.

"He's been a really good holder for us the past two years, but I think coaches Neinas really puts an emphasis on kind of keeping the special duties within the special teams room," O'Neill said.

When he first gave the holder job a try last year, O'Neill said he wasn't real comfortable with it, but hundreds of repetitions later he likes it. He said he feels more confident with it each day.

So how would he expect to feel with 3 seconds remaining in the season opener against Colorado State with 70,000 fans screaming and the Buffs lining up for a game-winning 40-yard field goal attempt?

"I definitely think I'll feel fine," O'Neill said. "I don't think the amount of people has ever affected how I've done. I've always felt like the more people there are, the more pumped up you are and for me that just means more focus. I think I perform better in those situations than I do when nobody is watching."

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CU Buffs attempt to bolster thin linebacking corps with youth

By John Henderson The Denver Post The Denver Post

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BOULDER — Any coaching staff trying to resurrect a football program must withstand a little shock when sorting through the rubble. At Colorado, coming off a 1-11 season, few units must brush off more dust than the linebacker corps.

Colorado lost senior starters Jon Major and Doug Rippy, making its linebacking unit as thin as its margin for error. Left this spring to first-year coach Mike MacIntyre are three players — three — who had more than four tackles last year.

"Thank God we've got a lot of walk-ons to help us practice," new defensive coordinator Kent Baer said.

Baer has a solid reputation in salvation. Of the eight previous schools where he served as defensive coordinator, including four in the former Pac-10, he improved defenses at Notre Dame, Utah State, California, Arizona State and Stanford, as well as San Jose State, in his first year.

At San Jose State, which went 2-10 in 2009 the year before MacIntyre arrived, Baer started two true freshmen in 2010. One, Keith Smith, was a first-team freshman All-American. The other, Vince Buhariar, was a third-team freshman All-American. Both went on to become all-WAC players.

"He knows what he's doing," MacIntyre said of Baer. "He's coached a lot of great players. I feel we have a few linebackers that can play. We've just got to get them running the right way."

MacIntyre put an emphasis on signing linebackers in his first recruiting class after his predecessor, Jon Embree, failed to sign any a year ago. MacIntyre signed four, more than any position besides offensive line. Two are already enrolled and participating in spring practice: 6-foot-4, 220-pound Markeis Reed, a converted defensive end who had six sacks last year for Vintage High in Napa, Calif.; and 6-3, 225-pound Addison Gillam, an original San Jose State commitment from Foothill High in Palo Cedro, Calif., who followed MacIntyre to Colorado.

"That's some pretty good talent," said senior Derrick Webb, the lone returning starter. "They're pretty big guys and can move pretty well. They've got the tools."

Webb, an outside linebacker, led the team in tackles last year with 88. Also back is senior Paul Vigo, who had 46 tackles as a backup to Webb.

Junior Brady Daigh, who had 40 tackles, could replace Rippy at middle linebacker. Daigh (knee) hasn't practiced all spring but has been cleared to begin his spring ball Tuesday, when the Buffs resume drills.

Don't rule out true freshman Jimmie Gilbert, a PrepStar second-team all-state pick who had 25 tackles for losses last year at A&M Consolidated High in College Station, Texas. Junior Lowell Williams, a special-teams guy last year, has led the linebackers in two scrimmages with 13 tackles, two for loss.

"You can expect our linebacker corps to dominate," Webb said. "I'm going to take more of a leadership role. This is my third year with some decent playing time. As a veteran linebacker, it's my job to keep the linebacker

corps together. With the new guys coming in, I feel we'll have some pretty good depth."

Vigo doesn't look like a linebacker. At 6-1, 205 pounds, he looks more like a safety, which he was until last spring. The kind of blitzing 4-3 defense Baer wants to run won't help him beef up.

"He's a pretty strong kid," Baer said. "I like the way he runs. I think he has good speed. He plays in space well, so if you play a big, strong physical team, it may be a little different, but we play, what, seven or eight spread teams?"

Said Vigo: "I can move. I like that. People underestimate playing at the size I'm at. At the end of the day, I'm going to still bring it and I'm going to make plays."

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Colorado, WSU lead with returning starters

By Ted Miller

We already gave you a [rough idea of returning starters in the Pac-12](#), one of the most popular -- and often inaccurate -- ways to measure teams for the upcoming season. But Colorado's indefatigable SID David Plati decided to go deeper.

[You can see his chart here.](#)

Plati reviewed how many total career starts FBS teams had returning in 2013, as well as returning 2012 starts.

Here are the Pac-12 teams with more than 250 starts coming back.

8. **Washington State** 359 (149 offense, 166 defense, 44 K/P)
9. **Colorado** 345 (149 offense, 146 defense, 50 P/K)
11. **USC** 338 (166 offense, 147 defense, 25 P/K)
13. **Oregon State** 329 (155 offense, 136 defense, 38 P/K)
24. **UCLA 278** (144 offense, 120 defense, 14 P/K)
29. **Arizona State** (102 offense, 154 defense, 12 P/k)

Georgia Tech is No. 1 with 426 starts returning.

In terms of 2012 starts exclusively, Colorado is fourth (228), Washington State sixth (217) and Oregon State is seventh (216) in the nation. USC is 10th (205), Arizona State is 15th (199) and UCLA is 18th (195).

The take-away?

Well, you don't want to read into returning starters too much -- more often quality is far more valuable than quantity -- but this would suggest USC shouldn't be dismissed too quickly from the South Division race, though the numbers for UCLA and Arizona State are also good.

Further, this is some grounds for optimism among Washington State and Colorado fans. Lots of young guys who got pushed around last year are coming back a year older and, hopefully, a year stronger.

Finally, this could fuel the idea that Oregon State might be a legitimate challenger -- even more so than

Washington -- to the dynamic duo of Stanford and Oregon in the North Division.
