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Toby Neinas' lone duty is coaching special teams - but that's plenty of responsibility.

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Brooks: Neinas Views New Job As Something Special

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BOULDER – The new head coach took his time in hiring a special teams coach, which nearly drove his eventual hire not only nuts but in a direction other than Boulder. No worries; it worked out OK. It's very early in Colorado football's Mike MacIntyre Era, but both guys are convinced the process, even all that angst, will pay off.

The backstory on new CU special teams coach Toby Neinas always begins with his last name. If you've been tuned in to college athletics for the last four decades or so you'll recognize it.

Toby's dad, Chuck, has been an administrator, general mover-and-shaker, conference commissioner (full-time and interim) and more recently, yes, a headhunter, in the college sports world. If university officials across the U.S. at the AD level and up only have two names on speed dial, one of them usually is Chuck Neinas.

And for Toby, that has meant "literally probably 40 – or close – courtesy interviews. You know my father. You can imagine how many courtesy interviews I've had in my career . . . I usually knew in the first five minutes of me going there, after doing my prep, that it wasn't a real interview. It was just that they had to talk to me. You know."

A courtesy interview is one thing, but on college football staffs there aren't many courtesy hires. The nature of the business won't permit it. Still, given the time that passed between MacIntyre's first contact with Toby and

actually bringing him on made Toby believe that MacIntyre might indeed have been running the old courtesy route.

"As terrible as this sounds, often times in my career I've been conditioned to go into almost every interview that way," Toby said before quickly adding, "If I live in my father's shadow for the rest of my life I'm a lucky guy. As great an administrator as he is, as huge an impact as he's had on major college football, he's been an even better dad . . . I'm a totally lucky guy. I'm good with that."

But Toby apparently would have done pretty well minus his last name and his pop's far flung connections. He's serious about coaching, apparently comfortable with the nomadic lifestyle, and plans to stay with it. Only 41, he is about to enter his 18th season as a full-time college assistant. He's been at Temple, Alabama-Birmingham, San Diego State, New Mexico and most recently at Montana State, where MacIntyre found him before almost losing him.

MacIntyre's final hire was a special teams coach, but that was by design. With finishing out CU's 2013 recruiting class taking precedence over filling out his coaching staff, MacIntyre let about three weeks elapse between his first contact with Toby Neinas and finally getting him. During that time, Neinas naturally began to wonder, and MacIntyre confessed, "I'm sure he thought I wasn't going to hire him."

Indeed, Neinas believed MacIntyre had moved on. On a recruiting trip, Neinas crossed paths with newly hired CU assistant Andy LaRussa (cornerbacks) and asked, "What's taking your guy so long?" LaRussa could only shrug.

When another coaching offer appeared, Neinas was close to taking it. "I was on my way to work for one of my buddies," he said. "But when I went in to tell my head coach (Rob Ash, Montana State), he said, 'Toby, don't take that job just yet. Somebody just called for you and I think you might be more interested in this one.'"

"I went in to tell my coordinator that he needed another secondary coach. From the time it took me to walk out of the head coach's office and into the coordinator's office, my phone was ringing and it was Coach MacIntyre."

CU's new coach told Neinas to hold tight once more, but added, "Give me 'X' amount of days." Neinas was more than happy to go on hold a little longer. He had grown up in Boulder, even working as a Boulder High School kid in the Folsom Field press box as a game-day "runner." And upon entering the business, he dreamily looked at a CU coaching position as a long-term goal.

So, after his initial one-on-one interview with MacIntyre that Neinas thought "went pretty well," why not wait it out? When MacIntyre finally got back to him, Neinas came to Boulder for another interview – but this one was with the entire staff. MacIntyre also had two other candidates lined up to do the same thing.

After all three special teams candidates had "auditioned" before their peers, MacIntyre asked for the staff's input because "a special teams coach has to be able to work with the entire staff all the time – both sides of the ball, help them, get them involved," he said.

MacIntyre had used the same hiring approach at San Jose State and it worked. Another idea that worked: Make special teams one assistant's only responsibility; don't make him coach another position. MacIntyre has done it both ways with former staffs but eventually settled on the "special teams only" approach. Neinas had been a special teams coach, but never had that as his only job.

Neinas impressed MacIntyre, the CU staffers and was hired. Although comfortable in his first meeting with the boss, Neinas admitted to being "uptight" for the staff interview. "I wanted to hit a home run," he said. "I wanted to do the very best I could because I still see this thing (Ralphie and the CU logo) in the mirror and now I almost laugh because I get to wear it. I'd always hoped, but I never really thought, that it would happen."

It did, but the special teams only role, he admitted, "is certainly different. I think it's an enormous statement by Coach MacIntyre to make that kind of investment – taking one of his nine boys (full-time assistants) and have their sole focus be on 'teams.'"

"Being a 'teams' guy, you get to be around the whole team a bunch, which is really cool. I always tell my players,

'I'm like the Statue of Liberty, I want them all.' But I miss being able to really sit in the staff room with the other coaches . . . as the 'teams' guy, you're always kind of the witch doctor at the edge of the village. These guys here are great, just unbelievable. I'd love to be with them a little bit more, too, but with the volume of tasks that I have it's just impossible."

MacIntyre believes the altered job description will allow Neinas to spend more individual time with the kickers, punters, snappers and holders, as well as devote more time to team (return/coverage) responsibilities. Of the special teams coaches MacIntyre talked to, he said most had "very good specialist expertise – how to long snap, hold, kick, kickoff, punt (and) how to correct things and help things . . .

"Toby has those qualities; he's done that. I wasn't just looking for a guy who could line up the kickoff team, the punt team, the punt return team and do schemes. I wanted someone who understood how to teach the specialists. I wanted him with them all the time.

"Certain people can do that, certain people can't. Some guys I talked to said, 'I definitely want to coach a position.' Some understand how important special teams are and he was one of those guys. It's a well-rounded spot . . . it's *special* teams."

And special teams as a whole are just that to MacIntyre: In daily practices, blocks of 25 minutes or more are devoted to 'teams' work. Also, MacIntyre told his staff to be on the lookout for someone who had "a passion" to recruit Colorado and for Colorado – "And Toby had that. He loves Colorado. Everybody (on the staff) came up with Toby Neinas as the guy. It was the best fit for the staff, team and university."

Neinas inherits a capable punter (Darragh O'Neill) and placekicker (Will Oliver), as well as players behind both that he says have promise (punter D.J. Wilhelm, placement specialist Justin Castor). But Neinas would like to create more across-the-board competition not only among his "legs" but in snapping, holding and obviously on return and coverage teams.

O'Neill, said Neinas, is "a really athletic young man who can do a lot of different things. I want to help him expand his role . . . he really can be a weapon for us; my responsibility to help him be a weapon, a changer of momentum."

Through the first half of spring drills, Neinas termed Oliver's kicking "steady." Still, Oliver's fundamentals are being refined, which Neinas says is "taking him out of his comfort zone. Our hope is that we help him use more natural power. But it's very uncomfortable as a specialist to change your technique and tweak it . . .

"Stepping out of that comfort zone is tough. What we're trying to do this spring is widen (the zone); we're trying to make everybody uncomfortable. That way, when we get to the fall and isolate what we're doing, your comfort zone exceeds your boundary by a great distance.

"So even if we fall out of our technique just a little, we're still within that (larger) comfort zone. But it's a work in progress. The good thing is that my unit has been very coachable, as far as specialists go. They've been really, really receptive; they're hard-working young people. I'm excited about them."

Almost as excited as he is about his new job – regardless of the nerve-wracking wait required to get it.

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