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New O-line coach Gary Bernardi (above) is a close friend with former coach Steve Marshall.

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'Tough Love' Not A New Concept For Bernardi's O-Line

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BOULDER – Colorado offensive line coach Gary Bernardi is not one to sugarcoat his words.

Bernardi, who made the move from San Jose State University alongside new head coach Mike MacIntyre and will enter his first season at CU this fall, sees no need for the fluff.

"He'll give it to you how it is," said senior center Gus Handler on his first impressions of Bernardi. "He's not going to beat around the bush, so if you're doing it right he'll tell you, but if you're doing it wrong he'll definitely tell you the same way."

The CU offensive linemen, though, are used to being coached with "tough love." Steve Marshall, the former O-line coach from 2010-12 under Jon Embree, operated under a similar outlook.

In fact, Marshall and Bernardi have been friends for years. The two met shortly before working on the same coaching staff at UCLA in the '90s; Marshall was the offensive line coach there in 1996, and Bernardi coached the tight ends and worked with the offensive line from 1993-2003. The two have remained close ever since.

At ages 56 (Marshall) and 58 (Bernardi), both have a wealth of coaching experience. Marshall entered his 33rd season of coaching at the collegiate and professional ranks last year with Colorado, and Bernardi enters his

32nd season in the FBS this fall, having spent his past three seasons on MacIntyre's staff at SJSU.

Junior offensive guard Daniel Munyer had even described the two as "pretty much the same person," and Bernardi agreed that the similarities were there.

"We're probably similar in age and somewhat demanding," Bernardi said. "I call it 'enthusiastically demanding' or 'enthusiastically intense.' Steve was trying to get the best out of them, too, and that's what I'm trying to do. I'm fortunate that they're probably going to be a year older now."

Bernardi's group returns probable starters in Handler, Munyer, senior tackle Jack Harris, sophomore tackle Stephane Nembot and junior left guard Alex Lewis.

Munyer and Lewis are both sidelined for the spring, recovering from lower leg (Munyer) and shoulder (Lewis) injuries. Bernardi recruited both and is familiar with their play, but he said it was a challenge to have them sidelined for spring drills.

The Buffs also enter the spring without standout left tackle David Bakhtiari, who declared early to the NFL draft after his junior season.

Both Bernardi and Handler mentioned Jack Harris as the most likely to start in Bakhtiari's spot. "I think that Jack has played the most, and you can tell he's played the most," Bernardi said. "He's a solid guy."

Bernardi also noted the improvement of junior Kaiwi Crabb, who did not play last season due to a strained lower back. Handler named Nembot as another possible candidate as he continues to learn the nuances of the position.

"Stephane, being the younger guy, has really picked it up quickly," Handler said. "This spring he's hit a lot of strides, so that's very promising."

Redshirt freshman tackle Marc Mustoe said he's also in the running — and that the competition for a starting role would likely continue into the fall.

"As far as the fall goes it'll probably be the exact same, except we'll be playing against (other teams), so it will be more of a team effort," Mustoe said. "Right now we're just trying to learn football, learn the scheme."

Bernardi also entered the spring with just 10 healthy offensive linemen on the roster, something that poses a challenge in terms of avoiding further injury.

"It's a small group," Bernardi said, "So (injury) is always a concern. There is a group of guys that have played a considerable amount, and there are a lot of guys that haven't played that much. So obviously everybody has to rise. The guys that have played have to take a step better, and the guys that haven't played have to be ready to go. And I think for the most part they've done that."

Bernardi said he and Marshall had discussed the players as a group earlier in the year, but had not talked specifics or watched much film before Bernardi could see them play in person — a deliberate move on Bernardi's part.

"I didn't want to have preconceived things," he said. "Steve and I never really talked about the players in that sense. We talked about, 'They're good guys,' and this and that, they're good kids, but we didn't really talk particulars. I wanted to assess it myself."

But as spring drills wind down, Bernardi has wasted no time in assessing his players and improving on fundamentals — something Handler said has been a focus of practice so far.

"You're always working towards something," Handler said. "So the spring is the time to get better at little things, where you go against your teammates, and you don't have to rush because it's a game. You can kind of take each day and focus on one or two things for practice."

The Buffs have four of their 15 practices remaining, with the spring game set for Saturday, April 13 at 10:30

a.m. A "wrap-up, review" is scheduled for the following Tuesday, April 16.

Until then, Bernardi's "tough love" will keep on coming.

"We've got another three or four days to get better and to keep working," Bernardi said. "It's not a matter of adding a lot of things, it's a matter of growing on things that we're doing and just trying to get better at that . . . There's still a lot to be done."

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