



Punter Darragh O'Neill (left) and kicker Will Oliver (right) bring experience to the Buffs' special teams unit.
Photo Courtesy: CUBuffs.com



Brooks: O'Neill, Oliver Eye Stronger Seasons In 2012

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(Note: Third in a series previewing the Buffs position-by-position during training camp. Today: Special teams.)

BOULDER - Colorado special teams coach J.D. Brookhart eased into the 2011 football season on a wing - actually a couple of legs - and a prayer.

He was breaking in a pair of freshmen at punter and kicker, at best a dicey proposition to start any season. But by late November, first-year fatigue factors, aside, Brookhart's pair of young Buffs - punter Darragh O'Neill, kicker Will Oliver - had adjusted and performed pretty well.

And that reduces the number of sleepless nights Brookhart might endure during this August camp.

"You've got a couple of things that you like," he said. "You've got some freshmen that had experience and had some success that they can expand on. And you've got two talented kids behind them (punter Zach Grossnickle, kicker Justin Castor) that can challenge them."

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Elsewhere in Brookhart's realm, things seem just as solid. His No. 1 snapper (Ryan Iverson) and holder (Justin Gorman) are experienced and his punt coverage unit has the benefit of a season in his system.

"In a lot of ways our punt team did some good things against some good return people . . . we really did," Brookhart said. "We were multiple in what we did and held some guys in check. We had our issues, but I think we should be better throughout that unit. I like who we have on it, their backups. There are just a few little issues to iron out."

As for stocking his teams with front-line players, Brookhart's philosophy is clear: "I think this: when you look at your special teams, unless you know you're kicking it out of the end zone, you put your very best 11 kids on and I don't care where they're at - offense or defense, starters or not. I think you put your very best 11 on kickoff, first and foremost. Punt gets the next best crew, then the return units get it from there.

"Hopefully we'll be able to do that. Last year we were so limited . . . we could (Doug) Rippy on one thing, we could (Ray) Polk on one unit because we didn't feel great about where our depth was. We couldn't use Paul (Richardson) on any of the returns. It was very limiting last year, and I think if camp goes as we hope there are going to be a lot more options. You can spread the wealth."

Returners, both punt and kickoff, usually aren't identified until much further into camp, and given CU's glut of incoming skill players, don't expect any hasty announcements at either spot. But Brookhart said returning players who could see return duty include receiver Keenan Canty and safety Terrel Smith. Tailback D.D. Goodson also has been receiving some return attention.

Brookhart had specific areas of improvement for both of his kickers as they entered their second seasons. For O'Neill, he wanted better hang time and more accurate directional punting. For Oliver, it was consistency and getting the ball higher faster.

Both players believe those specific areas have been addressed in the off-season and over the summer. There also was a common goal for both: better conditioning that would take them through November without a noticeable loss of endurance or leg strength.

Trying to push his punts' hang time into the 4.4- to 4.6-second range, O'Neill spent a good portion of the summer working on his flexibility. That might seem incongruent, but O'Neill calls it a "huge" part of improving the height of his punts. While watching TV, he took to the floor and stretched and did yoga.

"That's something I never did before," he said. "I just realized the importance of it."

To improve leg strength, he also did "ballistic jumps" using boxes on the floor while wearing a weighted vest. And, of course, he punted - warming up with 20 consecutive punts, then hitting about 30 to his left (he's identified that as his problem direction), then hitting another 15 to his right.

"I did a ton of directional kicking," he said.

He also practiced rugby punting but noted, "That's all J.D.'s call . . . I worked on that, too, with five to ten each day just to keep in touch. But it wasn't my focus."

An accomplished punter's optimum hang time usually is in the 4.6- to 4.8-second range. O'Neill calls those times "like really, really good stuff. Probably 4.4 to 4.6 would be really good . . . I'd be happy with those. If your punts are going 40 to 45 yards with those times, they're never getting returned in college. I'd be talking more in that range; 4.6 to 4.8 is great but I think if I'd be hitting those (times) my punts would be under 40 yards. I don't think my leg strength is all the way up there yet; I've still got a lot of work to do."

He felt the need for more work was especially at the end of last season, when fatigue crept in.

"Absolutely, there's no doubt in my mind - and it was weird to feel that way because I didn't think that could come with punting," he said. "The practices at the end of the year, it was really hard to keep the leg strength and flexibility. And with the games getting colder and the wind coming up, those were things I hadn't experienced.

"In the Arizona game (in Folsom Field on Nov. 12), there was like 70 mile an hour wind . . . just horrible. And in Utah (at Salt Lake City on Nov. 25), it was freezing with a brisk wind coming across. Just being a part of those definitely adds experience. You can't replicate those things in practice. When it's 25 degrees and there's a wind blowing, you're not inclined to go out and kick, you know? In a game you just have to go out and do it. I think that mixed with the fatigue of my leg surprised me . . . this year, with the experience and the mental strength I've definitely improved and I'll be ready for it."

Oliver needed off-season surgery to repair a shoulder injury suffered against Southern California when he picked up a blocked field goal attempt and was crunched. "My shoulder popped out kind of badly," he said. "It was irritating and would come out from time to time and get sore for about a week and be on my mind. It's nice to be completely done."

Four of five of Oliver's misses in 2011 were blocked kicks, including two he drove low into the line in the 42-17 loss to USC. A lack of focus was part of the problem, but there also was the adjustment to kicking off the ground (high school kickers use tees) for an entire season.

"I think that's part of the transition from high school, going from a tee to the ground," Brookhart said. "For the most part he did a very nice job of it, but that's the area we talked about."

Oliver also played soccer, which he says helped him adjust to kicking off the ground. "But you have to be conscious of it," he added. "If you know you're doing it wrong you can almost always fix it. We have film now and we can all figure it out. We know each other and it's nice to have (Justin) Castor there and J.D. knows what he's doing. It's good to get feedback. And if you can watch yourself and hear it from others, that's pretty cool."

But until he gets more experienced at it, it will remain a mental challenge to be aware of. "Everyone says its difficult; I didn't find it too difficult (initially)," Oliver said. "It grew to be an issue as the season went on and I got tired and there was a lack of focus . . . it's a mind game."

Oliver also acknowledged his pair of low kicks against the Trojans "gave me food for thought . . . it was nice to have something to work on over the summer. I focused on the height of my kicks so I wouldn't have to think about it when camp came around."

Believe it or don't, but Oliver contends he feels more pressure during camp competition than in a filled-to-capacity, louder-than-a-runway stadium.

"It's interesting with the whole pressure stuff," he said of his first year kicking at the college level. "I learned there's almost a peak amount of pressure on you and when you pass that point you don't notice any more pressure. Once there are that many people there, it's almost like white noise, which is nice. I find there's more pressure in fall camp practice with competition than there is in games.

"I find myself - and I know it's taboo to say - but I find myself performing better in games under that pressure. I just find because of that white noise and there's so much going on, there's too much to take in really. You just kind of let it go, relax, smile and you're good. I obviously had bumps in the road (in 2011), but it's a game and that's going to happen.

"I find I put more pressure on myself in practices than I do in games. I know if it's game time and I'm there I'm ready. I trust the fact that my coaches wouldn't put me there if I wasn't ready. So there's a confidence in that. But in the getting ready process you're never sure exactly when you're ready. You feel ready all the time but you question it because you're not there yet . . . that's how I go about it. You're out on the field and there's no place you'd rather be. And there's no one you'd rather have doing it than you."

THE INSIDE LOOK AT ...

Special teams

Coach: J.D. Brookhart, second season on CU staff.

Returning starters: P Darragh O'Neill, Soph; PK Will Oliver, Soph; SN Ryan Iverson, Jr.

Returnees: PK Justin Castor, Soph.; P Zach Grossnickle, Jr.; H/KOR Justin Gorman, Soph.; SN Keegan LaMar, Fr.-RS; P D.J. Wilhelm, Soph.; PR Paul Richardson, Jr.; PR Keenan Canty, Soph.; KOR D.D. Goodson, Soph.; KOR Kyle Washington, Soph.; KOR Tony Jones, Soph.; KOR Josh Ford, Jr.; KOR Malcolm Creer, Soph.

Newcomers: New returners to be determined in camp.

Key losses: KOR/PR Rodney Stewart; PR Logan Gray; KOR Toney Clemons; KOR Brian Lockridge; KOR Arthur Jaffee; KOR Evan Harrington; P Mark Brundage.

Stat line: Oliver (11-of-16 FGs, 29-of-31 PATs) and O'Neill (38.8 punting average) accounted for themselves very well in their first seasons, but the Buffs were in the 100s in the NCAA stats in punt returns (No. 105) and kick returns (No. 115). In coverage stats, the top two special teams point men - Derrick Webb (33) and Terrel Smith (25) - return, which is good news for a punt coverage team that finished in the NCAA's top 50 (No. 45) in net punting.

Bottom line: With their first years behind them, Oliver and O'Neill should feel settled in and show improvement in their areas. But the Buffs need improvement in both return games. Finding a reliable kickoff return guy last season appeared to be an on-going quest - and there were plenty of opportunities to identify somebody. CU's 69 KOR were the second-most last season in the Pac-12, while its 13 PR were the second-lowest total in the league.

Next: Tight ends

BUFF BITS: If you weigh 325 pounds, it stands to reason that you've got a hearty appetite. Freshman defensive tackle Josh Tupou weighs that much, and Malcolm Blacken, CU's director of speed, strength and conditioning, understands why. "Never seen anybody eat like that," Blacken said. "He might be getting 3,000 calories a meal." An overstatement? Maybe not. Blacken said while the 6-3 Tupou is closer to 330 than 325, a couple of other of the new D-linemen could shed a few pounds of "baby fat" - but not Tupou: "He's pretty good where he is." . . . Junior center Gus Handler was in full pads Sunday morning for the first time this camp. Coach Jon Embree said Handler, who last month was named to the preseason Rimington Trophy watch list, has had pink eye and sweating would have irritated the condition. In Handler's absence, said Embree, the reps taken at center by sophomore Daniel Munyer, who also plays guard, and redshirt freshman Brad Cotner were beneficial. "You always want three guys ready to go at that position," Embree said . . . Coming off the first two-a-day work of camp that included some situational scrimmaging on Saturday afternoon, Embree wondered how his players would react to an 8 a.m. Sunday practice. He was pleasantly surprised. "It was good," he said. "They were pretty sharp, not a lot of mistakes . . . more technique stuff than anything. But the intensity was there, their 'want-to' was there." . . . CU's second day of two-a-day work is scheduled Monday. The week will culminate with the camp's first full scrimmage, which is expected to clarify competition at several positions.

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SHOW MENU



Football: CU Buffs counting on Pericak

By Brian Howell Buffzone.com Boulder Daily Camera

Posted:

Buffzone.com

Colorado coaches use a lot of adjectives to describe Will Pericak.

Words such as workmanlike, consistent and coachable. None of them are glitzy, but that's exactly how Pericak plays football.

"He's not a flashy type player, yet he consistently is around making plays," Buffs head coach Jon Embree said.

Now in his fifth season with the Buffs, the 6-foot-4, 285-pound Pericak has gotten better every year and he's been counted on to be a stout member of the defensive line.

"He has continued to improve his game and work on his game," defensive line coach Mike Tuiasosopo said. "That's the thing that stands out in my mind about Will Pericak."

A native of Boulder and a graduate of Boulder High School, Pericak is proud of how far he's come as a player since arriving on the CU campus.

"I'm pleased at the progress that I've made, coming in here as a tight end first and getting changed over to D-line the third day of camp," he said. "I had never played D-line before."

Pericak had been a tight end and linebacker at Boulder High, but figured out quickly that neither position would be in his future. So did CU coaches, who watched him as a tight end for two days before moving him to defense.

"I saw the handwriting on the wall," he said. "I came here at about 235-240 (pounds). First summer I gained 20 pounds and was up to 260 and I was about the heaviest tight end we had. I knew I wasn't going to play linebacker. I saw myself as either a blocking tight end or getting moved to D-line."

Pericak redshirted in 2008 and although he was new to the defense, he earned a team award for his work on the defensive scout team. He has started each of CU's 37 games since the start of the 2009 season.

In 2011, he received All-Pac 12 honorable mention is now receiving quite a bit of preseason recognition.

"Seeing myself develop as a leader and as a senior leader, it's been pretty cool to see," he said. "These younger guys really look up to you and I try to set a good example for them and set a culture so they can follow."

Establishing a winning attitude is important to Pericak, who grew up watching great CU teams of the past. CU hasn't been to a bowl game since the 2007 season -- the year before Pericak came to the Buffs. Even that team, however, had a losing record (6-7). CU's last winning season was 2005, when Pericak was a sophomore in high school.

"It hasn't been there in a while, too long," he said.

Because of that, Pericak doesn't care much for any recognition he's receiving right now. He's not concerned with any accolades he could get after the season. He has one goal.

"Go to a bowl game. We've got to go," he said. "If you perform well enough to get to a bowl game, you're going to get noticed by people. Who knows what happens? I'm just going to have the best season I can."

If the past is an indicator, this should be Pericak's best season. He has made progress every year he's been in Boulder. He was fourth on the team with 64 tackles a year ago and led the team with eight quarterback pressures. Already he's showing signs of being a better player this fall.

"Oh gosh, it's night and day," Tuiasosopo said. "Part of that for Will is that he is a very, very smart player. To be a

good football player, one of the things you have to be is very, very smart and that's what he is. He's just a very smart player, has a great feel for the game, has a great understanding for the game. That is at least half the battle."

Embree said Pericak is better at getting around the edge and he's improving at moving the pocket from the middle. The Buffs will need that type of effort from Pericak to be a better defense this season.

"You keep pushing yourself, keep getting better," Pericak said of his will to improve. "I see the stuff I've worked on in the past year really working, and I see myself on film. I've got all the fundamentals down now and I'm building off of those."

The way he's going, it's not out of the question that Pericak finds himself on an NFL roster in 2013.

"I do have NFL desires," he said. "That's why I have to have a really good season this year, put my best foot forward and see where it goes from there."

Tuiasosopo will miss having Pericak around next year, but has no doubt he will show up well in an NFL camp.

"I wish and hope that our younger guys that are coming in can look to him as a great example of a guy who comes to work every day with his hard hat and goes to work," Tuiasosopo said. "He doesn't say a word out here. He doesn't complain, nothing. He just leads by example."

"I've had a lot of guys over the years and he's just as good as a lot of guys that I've had. Honestly, I'm just honored to coach him."

Pericak has been honored to be a Buff, but can't believe his time in Boulder is almost up.

"I can remember being an 18-year-old on campus; it seems like it was yesterday," he said. "It was four-and-a-half long years ago, but it went by so fast."

His best memory as a Buff?

"There's a lot of good memories that I have, but I'll just say it hasn't happened yet," he said with a smile. "To be determined."

Follow Brian Howell on Twitter: @BrianHowell33.

Football: Embree likes CU Buffs' depth at linebacker

By Kyle Ringo Buffzone.com Boulder Daily Camera

Posted:

Buffzone.com

Jon Embree knows he's going to encounter players with "saucer eyes" on game days this fall. With such a young roster it's inevitable.

Embree surveys the field during Colorado practices and sees young players putting themselves in position to make significant contributions at almost every position. Some of them will be forced into action because there aren't many other options. Some are earning time despite the presence of veteran teammates.

For instance, the strength of the defense is the linebacker corps led by returning starters Jon Major, Douglas Rippy and Derrick Webb. Embree will obviously rely on that trio in his second season as head coach, but he said Sunday he also plans to get understudies such as Woodson Greer, Brady Daigh and Kyle Washington into games often to give the veterans needed rest and help them continue to develop.

"If we have six guys that can do some stuff, let's play them," he said. "Let's keep our guys fresh. It's a long year, as you guys saw last year. ...We've got to get them going and play them as much as we can so that they're comfortable if they're called on to be the guy."

Embree said he feels very good about the depth available to him at linebacker. He has praised Daigh, a sophomore, already several times in camp. He was asked about Greer following Sunday's morning practice. Embree said Greer had a rough day on the first day of two-a-days Saturday, but he rebounded well Sunday.

"I think Woodson has a chance to be a real good player for us," Embree said. "He is very physical. He's one of those guys, when he hits you, you go backwards. He can move the pile the other way. He just has to clean up some things, some technique stuff he does when he's in coverage, but he's starting to really understand concepts of what we're trying to do defensively and where he fits."

Line taking shape

Guards Daniel Munyer and Alexander Lewis are the least experienced members of the starting offensive line group, but Embree said both players have started camp well.

Munyer has practiced at both guard and center because starting center Gus Handler has missed time with a case of pink eye. Handler returned to practice Sunday allowing Munyer to spend more time at guard.

Embree said Handler missing time might be a blessing in disguise because it gave coaches an opportunity to give Munyer and Brad Cotner work at center with the first team offense. Embree said it's ideal to have three centers who are ready to play and he's beginning to feel like the Buffs are there.

"It's one of those things no one talks about until you're fumbling every snap," he said.

Embree said Lewis, who played tackle, guard and tight end as a true freshman last season, is developing good chemistry with left tackle David Bakhtiari.

"There seems to be a good comfort level with them," he said.

Senior Ryan Dannewitz missed all of spring and part of the first week dealing with chronic back pain. Dannewitz would likely be the first player called on to replace a starter at either guard position and right tackle if he can overcome the back problem.

Notable

Embree said he was pleased with his team's response Sunday to practicing early in the morning after its first

two-a-day on Saturday that involved some situational scrimmage work. "They were pretty sharp," Embree said. "Not a lot of mistakes."

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CU Position Breakdown: Quarterback still up for grabs

By **TOM KENSLE** |  No Comments

BOULDER — Regarding Colorado's battle for the starting quarterbacks job, in a word: undecided.

CU practices are closed to the public, including the media. But according to coaches and players, the three candidates are still sharing snaps with the first team.

Competing for the starting job are sophomore returnee Nick Hirschman, Texas transfer Connor Wood and Kansas transfer Jordan Webb. Wood is a sophomore with three remaining years of eligibility; Webb a junior with two years left.

Embree said "all three have had their moments, good and bad." He added that he would like to get down to at least two finalists soon, perhaps after Saturday's scrimmage "so the offense knows who will lead them Sept. 1 against Colorado State."

That leaves open the possibility that two quarterbacks may play against the Rams, with the battle for the starting job continuing on into the early part of the regular season.

Now that the players are in full pads, "We'll start doing some situational things, not just 7-on-7," Embree said Saturday during CU media-day activities. "I want to see who can bounce back when they make a poor decision. I want to see what happens when there is some pressure in their face. I want to see who moves the team, lead them down the field."

Here's what Embree said of each of the three:

Wood: "Connor has a big arm. Connor can make all the throws. He has a good grasp of the offense. He needs to be more consistent in his decision-making and continue to work on his accuracy. Sometimes he's erratic with his throws."

Hirschman: "The guys really like Nick. I'm not saying they don't like (the other two), but they seem to really gravitate to Nick. He's another guy with a big arm. What he needs to do is continue to improve from the mental aspect of the game. Sometimes when you have a big arm, you can throw your way through mistakes. I want him to be better about knowing where your issues might be and not throw through mistakes. With Nick, it's slowing the game down for him. Part of that is the mental preparation, feeling comfortable enough with what we're doing."

Webb: "Jordan's biggest attribute is, he's played in 19 games (as a starter at Kansas). Nick played some at Arizona State, but the other two haven't played any meaningful minutes. With Jordan, having played in some games, you can see that. He does a good job of working the pocket. He reminds me of Koy (1990s CU standout Koy Detmer) a little bit in (despite being listed at 6-foot-1) he has unique ways of getting the ball to the right guy. He doesn't have the biggest arm, but he generally gets it there on time. And it's a fairly catchable ball."

ARTICLE PRINTED FROM THE FIELD HOUSE