

Former Buffs make lifelong connection with former CU linebackers coach

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Listen to the men he coached and it quickly becomes clear Brian Cabral always wanted the best for his players at the University of Colorado and would go to great lengths to help any of them.

He once broke into a Boulder home by climbing through a window with that purpose in mind.

It was the beginning of Cabral's now legendary CU career, the summer of 1989. Freshman linebacker Chad Brown had missed several classes the previous week and on this Monday morning, he opted to stay in bed instead of going to class.

He woke to find Cabral standing over his bed telling him it was time to reassess. It took Brown a few moments to realize that Cabral, at a burly 6-foot, 240 pounds and only a few years removed from a nine-year NFL career, had crawled through a window to make his point to Brown in person.

"Obviously he was a younger coach and I'm sure coach (Bill McCartney) said make sure your guys go to class," Brown said. "So part of that was just him doing his job. But somebody who didn't see something in you or didn't have that same amount of caring for you wouldn't have gone to the same lengths that he went to to break in my house to have me go to school.

"From that point on, I knew coach Cabral was always going to try to do the best thing for Chad Brown."

When Ralphie V runs on to the field for the first time next fall when the Buffs open the 2013 season against Colorado State, it will be the first time in 24 years Cabral won't be somewhere in the herd of Buffaloes behind her.

When CU fired coach Jon Embree at the end of the 2012 season, Cabral decided that 24 years coaching at his alma mater under five different head coaches was enough. He decided to retire from CU.

A coach of Cabral's caliber didn't figure to stay unemployed for long and it was no surprise earlier this week when Cabral was named assistant head coach and defensive coordinator at Indiana State.

Some might view it as a step down because of the level of competition, but when considering the increased responsibility, many others would say the opportunity to be a defensive coordinator is long overdue for a man with Cabral's track record.

Regardless of what he might do in the future, Cabral left CU as its most accomplished assistant coach and one of the greatest coaches in school history.

"He had a blessed career and that is directly related to how good of a person and how good of a coach he is," former CU linebacker Sean Tufts said.

Tufts played for Cabral at CU 2000-03 and became one of 13 NFL draft picks and numerous other free agents who were coached by Cabral during their careers in Boulder. Tufts still remembers the day when Cabral first visited him at his home when he was being recruited.

Cabral took off his shoes at the front door walked into Tufts' room and looked inside his CD player where he found a Jimi Hendrix disc.

"He wanted to see what was important in my life and who my influences were," Tufts said. "He wanted to know what it meant to me."

Cabral's players describe him as being more emotionally in tune with them than the other football coaches they encountered. They say he truly cared for them and their families and it often made them want to play that much harder for him and the CU program.

Cabral seemed to have a knack for connecting with his players and finding what motivated them. Tufts was no different. He responded to a challenge.

Tufts easily recalled the day he knew Cabral had figured him out. Tufts and some of the others linebackers on the team had been caught goofing off during study table during the season. The next day after practice he had them turning cartwheels, doing somersaults and barrel rolls the length of the field until some of them were sick and tapping out.

"I remember when we were done, he looked at me and said, 'I bet you can't do three more,'" Tufts said. "That turned my motor like nothing ever. I can't understand it, but right now I want to go roll around."

Tufts said whenever he sees fellow former CU linebackers Cabral's name always comes up early in the conversation. He said Cabral had a lasting impact on him greater than any of his professors or advisers. Like many of Cabral's players, Tufts still gets the occasional phone call or text message from Cabral, who is just checking in on him.

"In my life I've had many positive male role models," Tufts said. "It's pretty rare that I've gotten that opportunity. Brian was the voice of wisdom. He was patient. He was kind. He allowed that wisdom to percolate in a different manner. He had a different delivery. A lot of coaches feel like they need to yell and scream and there is some belittling that happens too often. I think the worst thing Brian ever told me was he was disappointed in me. That had more affect on me than any other comments any other coach has ever made. ... You wanted to make him proud because he invested in you as a person."

Cabral helped two former Buffs win the Butkus Award, given annually to the nation's best linebacker. Alfred Williams won it in 1990 and Matt Russell won it in 1996. Russell finished fourth in voting for the award in 1995 and two other CU linebackers coached by Cabral finished as the runner-up, Ted Johnson in 1994 and Jordon Dizon in 2007.

Dizon shares a special bond with Cabral being that both grew up in Hawaii. Cabral served as Dizon's only recruiting contact from the Colorado program. The same can be said of numerous other players who have chosen to leave paradise to play beneath the Flatirons over the past quarter century.

Cabral embraced his Polynesian roots by volunteering to coach all-Polynesian camps on the mainland and in Hawaii in the offseason. He first wore a traditional Polynesian lava lava wrap on the sideline for the 1993 Aloha Bowl and led the team on to the field that day being that Ralphie couldn't be there to do it.

He wore the lava lavas approximately a dozen times, mostly for important home games, over the years.

Many of the Polynesian players he recruited became homesick and needed a longer adjustment period than a typical recruit from other states on the mainland because of cultural differences. Cabral was instrumental in helping them through it.

"He was my dad away from home and one of the greatest men I've ever met," Dizon said. "There is really no words to describe Cabral. In a nutshell it would be incredible, an incredible man, an incredible person and what an incredible coach."

Longtime CU sports information director and assistant athletic director Dave Plati said he will miss Cabral on team photo days.

"He would bring up to a dozen lava wraps and always coordinated all the players on the team with Polynesian roots to take a group photo," Plati said. "One year, he even had (Dan Hawkins) wear one and pose with the group. It became the highlight of photo day in his later years with the team."

Dizon said he noticed early in his career how Cabral coached each player differently. He appreciated that approach. Like Tufts, Dizon said Cabral eventually figured out exactly what buttons to push to maximize his performance.

In his sophomore season, the Buffs played Texas in Houston in the Big 12 Conference championship game. Dizon said he was "super" nervous before the game. He said he was always the type of player who would dwell on his mistakes, especially the first one he made in a game. Dizon said his first mistake might lead to others.

"Before the game, he smiled at me and said, 'You're allowed one mistake where I won't say a single word to you.'" Dizon recalled. "At that moment I was like, 'This guy is a hell of a coach. He understands me.' Just by him saying something small like that and knowing I had one play to make a mistake, it kind of just eased me through the whole game."

The school and the Colorado program runs in the blood of the men who played for Cabral. They love it as they love him, but some admit while it will always be dear to them, it won't be quite the same knowing Cabral isn't in his Dal Ward office or on the practice fields teaching others as he taught them. Perhaps their eyes will wander to the Indiana State website or box score on Saturday afternoons in the future.

Still, they know Cabral will always be there for them, no matter where he might be.

Brown recalled one offseason early in his NFL career. He had suffered an ugly ankle injury during the previous season. He went into the offseason knowing he had to start from the beginning to return to play at high level. He called Cabral who spent parts of about 10 days in the offseason working with Brown on Folsom Field on the fundamentals of playing linebacker.

"Even after I was gone and no longer one of his guys, he was still coaching me up," Brown said. "...Even now 20 years later, he's still coaching me up. He will be missed at the University of Colorado."

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