

## Senior DL will make 48th career start against Washington on Saturday

By Brian Howell Buffzone.com Boulder Daily Camera

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Colorado head football coach Jon Embree is proud to see senior defensive end Will Pericak on the verge of breaking a school record.

On Saturday, Pericak is slated to make his 48th career start, which would break the school record set by former Buffs offensive lineman Ryan Miller (2007-11).

"It says two things: one, obviously playing at a high level and two, staying healthy," Embree said. "Especially the last piece, that's hard to do when you play like he plays. He's high motor, he's a physical guy and he plays every play out there like it's his last play. That's a testament to how he trains and takes care of himself in the offseason. At it's a testament to his heart."

Pericak's perspective on the record -- a milestone he was unaware of until being asked about it -- was quite different.

"It means I'm fortunate enough to stay healthy, and I guess it really means when I was a freshmen the upper classmen weren't really good enough and it made a freshman start," he said.

Or, maybe it means that Pericak was a really good freshman in 2009.

"That wasn't the case," he said. "As a freshman, I was terrible. I was a punk freshman and I didn't really deserve to be on the field, but we didn't have anybody else."

Whether he deserved to be on the field in 2009 or not, Pericak clearly belongs there now, and it's fitting that the Boulder High School graduate is in line to break this record. Pericak grew up following the Buffs and has been in the starting lineup for every game CU has played since the start of the 2009 season.

Pericak's streak of 47 consecutive starts is already a school record. He's also started more games than any other defensive player in CU history and on Saturday is slated to tie the record (held by four others) for total games played in a CU uniform -- a record he should break on Nov. 23 against Utah.

Breaking records doesn't mean much to Pericak, but being on the field for CU does.

"I feel fortunate to be able to play for the Buffs as long as I have and get as many starts as I have," he said. "That definitely means a lot, but the record doesn't really mean much."

"I'd rather have the record for wins than the record for starts and we definitely didn't get enough wins in those 48 starts, so obviously something wasn't right."

No, Pericak didn't get the amount of wins he wanted; CU is just 12-35 in Pericak's career. But, his time with the Buffaloes has hardly been a waste, and he's sure to be the favorite for the Buffalo Heart Award, presented annually by CU fans to a senior at the final home game.

Originally a tight end when he arrived as a redshirt in 2008, Pericak became a solid contributor at defensive tackle and, over the course of the past two seasons, has evolved into an exceptional defensive end with NFL ability. He credits defensive line coaches Kanavis McGhee and Mike Tuiasosopo, who were hired by Embree before the 2011 season, for making him the player he is today.

"I've grown quite a lot," said Pericak, who has 50 tackles and four forced fumbles this season. "The coaches are great coaches. I didn't have that coaching before. Seeing my growth from when they first came here to now, it definitely speaks well of them. And, it's good to see myself play better as the years go on.

"With these coaches, they've done a good job preparing me and teaching me how to play the right way. If that opens opportunities at the next level, that's great."

Junior center Gus Handler, who has engaged in countless battles with Pericak in practice over the years, has enjoyed seeing Pericak develop.

"From the time I got here as a freshman, I've always thought he was a force -- a big kid, strong kid," Handler said. "But, I feel like these past couple of years, he's really taken his game to the next level, with his fundamentals, his technique and how he works in the weight room. I think all of that work is really starting to show and pay off."

Handler also said Pericak has earned tremendous respect in the locker room for giving maximum effort at all times.

"You know that no matter what the situation, no matter what the score, he's going to give it his all," Handler said.

Pericak's non-stop attitude, combined with his ability to disrupt a play, has drawn attention from NFL scouts.

"They can't get over how hard he plays and that excites them," Embree said. "I've told Will he's made himself some money this year because of that. There's more talented people out there than him, but he'll play longer than those guys if he stays healthy just because of his motor and how he prepares and how he gets ready for the game of football."

With two games left in his career, Pericak is preparing just like he always has, and he wants the same thing he wanted out of all the other 47 games he played.

"Trying to get a win, get a couple of wins," he said. "That's all I'm really thinking about.

"It's meant a lot to me to be a Buff and play here for four years and get as many games as I've played in. I feel fortunate to have those opportunities. We have two more opportunities and we'd like to go out on a high note."

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## CU Buffs punter Darragh O'Neill getting leg up on shot at NFL gold

By Patrick Saunders *The Denver Post* *The Denver Post*

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BOULDER — There is an old Irish toast that says, "May the rocks in your field turn to gold."

That's quite apropos for Colorado punter Darragh O'Neill.

Despite the Buffs' woes this season, the Irish-born sophomore continues to plough toward his dream. Namely, to make it into the NFL.

"Every day when I go out to practice, I think, 'What can I do to get to the next level?' " O'Neill said. "That's definitely what I focus on every single day."

During CU's mostly cloudy season, his quest has evolved into a silver-lining story.

Yes, O'Neill and his teammates are suffering through one of the worst seasons in school history. The Buffs are 1-9 overall and 1-6 in the Pac-12 entering Saturday's game against Washington (6-4, 4-3) at Folsom Field. And, yes, CU's offense ranks 114th in the nation, averaging only 307.4 total yards per game.

Dour stats, to be sure, but the Buffs' inefficient offense has given O'Neill plenty of opportunity to practice his chosen craft. His 66 punts rank second in the FBS, trailing only the 80 boots by Wake Forest's Kinal Alexander. O'Neill ranks third in the Pac-12, and 18th nationally, with an average of 43.8 yards per punt.

"He's refined himself and gotten more consistent in what we want him to do," said CU special-teams coach J.D. Brookhart. "But there are still big areas where we need him to improve."

Distance, for one, and most especially, hang time. O'Neill's punts are usually in flight 4.0 to 4.25 seconds. To become an elite college punter and have a realistic chance at the NFL, his hang time needs to be 4.5 to 4.7 seconds on a consistent basis.

"He can definitely make strides in those areas with some strength and speed training," Brookhart said. "We are going to work on improving his leg speed during the offseason."

O'Neill already has shown skill with placement and directional kicking. He has placed 23 punts inside the opponent's 20-yard line this season, leaving him one short of the school record set by John Torp in 2005. He has placed eight punts inside the 10-yard line and needs one more to tie Mark Mariscal (2002) for the school record.

"I think I have seen some growth in those situations," O'Neill said. "I've been pleased by my progress. And I think I have been a lot better in terms of hang time, but I know that has to improve."

O'Neill, 20, was born in Cork, Ireland, and moved to America when he was 3 years old. He attended Fairview High School, where he earned all-state honors in soccer and basketball. His father, Colm, is the owner of Conor O'Neill's, an authentic Irish pub located on 13th Street just off Boulder's Pearl Street Mall.

O'Neill originally thought of punting as a way to acquire a college scholarship. After a successful 2011 season as a walk-on freshman — 42.6 yards per punt, fifth in the Pac-12 — he earned his scholarship.

"Last year was pretty rough," he said. "It was a big adjustment for me, coming from team sports like basketball and soccer when you are out there all the time and you are an integral part of the team.

"As a punter, you are more of a role player, going out there five or six or however many times a game."

But he's all in now.

"Punting is something I embrace now and I've been pretty encouraged this year," O'Neill said. "Next year, I would like to put myself into the next level to where I'm in the top five or top 10 punters in the country. That's what I'm working for."

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