



*Greg Brown calls defensive backs Parker Orms (13) and Greg Henderson (20) 'natural tacklers' but the whole unit needs to strive for*  
Photo Courtesy: Asher Vandevort



## Brooks: Buffs' Goal - Catch The Ones That Got Away

Release: 10/03/2012 Courtesy: B.G. Brooks, Contributing Editor

**BOULDER** - Defensive coordinator Greg Brown doesn't believe tackling is a lost art, but he and Colorado coach Jon Embree are certain of this: Tackling fundamentals were lost on the CU defense last weekend against UCLA.

Brown and Embree have been around enough college and NFL teams to know when tackling is done by the book - and they didn't see the book opened that often in the Buffs' 42-14 beat-down by the Bruins.

As a result, the Buffs began their bye week with two heavy contact days - Tuesday, Wednesday - featuring tackling drills and other live work. The plan was to get those exercises on tape, and after a two-day weekend break, return for a Sunday afternoon practice preceded by meetings and a revealing film session.

Embree didn't map out the open week practices without taking the possibility of new injuries into account. "Guys can get hurt . . . there's a fine line" with heavy contact, he said. "But having the bye week, we just threw caution to the wind and said let's go . . . in normal periods where we usually (hold up), we went ahead and tackled."

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Against UCLA, he said a glaring deficiency on defense was players not running to the ball. The Bruins' spread offense can isolate players, making pursuit critical. "We have to have more than one guy at the ball," Embree said. "That's a big part of tackling . . . UCLA's running game made us a little thin on the perimeter. They hurt us on the bubble screens, where we weren't able to make the tackle. It's the difference between a one-yard gain and a touchdown or a 20-yard gain and a two-yard gain.

"We have to keep working at that and keep emphasizing that, actually doing it in practice."

UCLA used three tailbacks, with all three recording runs of 23 yards or longer, topped by Johnathan Franklin's 28-yarder. He finished with 111 yards rushing and had 48 yards receiving, including a 28-yard catch/run that was high among UCLA's 10 receptions for 11 yards or more.

"If we tackle and don't have the two (third-quarter) turnovers, we win that game," Embree told his team.

Coaches' "ifs" in the aftermath of lopsided losses usually are debatable, but here's Embree's point: These Buffs have a minuscule margin for error. Allowing big gainers that should be stopped for small (or no) gains sabotages most expectations of winning.

Brown said his secondary missed 10 tackles against UCLA and pointed to "a combination of things" for his defense's sub-par tackling. He said his defenders "were stopping moving their feet, not closing the distance between themselves and the ball carrier . . . a lot of guys are natural tacklers to begin with, some are not. The ones that aren't, they have to strive to continue to improve and become fundamentally sound. You've got to figure out what to do with your feet, your hips, your 'face up' . . . it's all about technique."

Players in the secondary - the position Brown coaches - he mentioned as being "natural tacklers" included juniors Parker Orms and Terrel Smith, sophomore Greg Henderson and freshman Yuri Wright. But Brown added that even Smith and Henderson weren't their reliable selves against UCLA.

"I was very fortunate to be a part of Bill McCartney's staff - Jon Embree was, too - back in the early '90s," Brown said. "There were some outstanding tacklers on those teams. A lot of it had to do with so many guys having a strong desire to get to the ball. And when they got there they brought the wood."

He mentioned 1991's safeties, Greg Thomas and Eric Hamilton, the pair that succeeded them in '92, Chris Hudson and Dwayne Davis, as "fun groups to be around. But all of those guys on defense were tremendous players, really. In the D-line and linebacker spots you had guys like Chad Brown, Greg Biekert, Ted Johnson, Matt Russell . . . I mean, on and on. You're talking about some pretty good tacklers there."

Freshman cornerback Kenneth Crawley was credited with a game-high eight solo tackles against the Bruins, which usually is a sign that too many plays are being made too far behind the line of scrimmage. Moreover, Crawley doesn't characterize himself as a sure-tackler: "In high school (H.D. Woodson in Washington, D.C.) I didn't really have to tackle," he said.

"It was high school, and everything was being stopped up in the backfield because we had (fellow CU signee) De'Jon Wilson, at the time one of the best defensive ends in the country. So everything was being stopped up. All I had to do was cover people and get interceptions."

But, Crawley added, "If I had to tackle somebody, I would . . . coming to college I knew I would have to tackle and I knew I would have to get better."

Brown didn't include senior safety Ray Polk among his "natural tacklers" primarily because Polk hadn't played that much defense before switching from offense to defense after his freshman season at CU. One of the Buffs' defensive leaders, Polk hasn't played since the first quarter of the opener against Colorado State due to a high ankle sprain.

Polk, who hopes to return against Arizona State next week at Folsom Field (Thursday, Oct. 11, 7 p.m., ESPN), admitted that he initially "struggled with (tackling) coming from offense. It's a different thing, completely different. But tackling is pretty simple in that the more you do it, the better you get at it. You're going to figure it out eventually.

"If you start to get away from it and just fly around and try to make plays, that's when you get yourself in a bind. Like in a lot of spots on defense, you have to be a football player and you have to think while you're making a play. You actually have to think, 'OK, break it down . . . what's he (ball carrier) going to do? Watch his hips. All those different steps are a crucial part in just doing your job in specific areas on the field."

Assessing what plagued CU's defense in September - the Buffs are last in the Pac-12 Conference in total defense (474.4 yards allowed) and scoring defense (39.4 points) - Polk obviously pointed to poor tackling vs. UCLA.

"Besides that, it's just getting 11 guys to do their individual jobs and not try to do anything special," he said. "It's all about doing your job. The defense is going to work like it's drawn up on paper if everybody does his job. That's the biggest thing. We need more discipline, and this bye week really should help us because we can get back to fundamentals and more discipline."

DBs Crawley, Wright, Marques Mosley, Jeffrey Hall and CU's host of other true freshmen who saw significant playing time in September now have five college games on their resumes. Their coaches aren't considering them veterans yet, but neither are they being viewed as unschooled, unprepared rookies.

"I'm still learning, but I know I need to step it more," Crawley said. "I just have to get back and watch more film. I think all of us as a secondary need to do more to pick it up. We know we've got the talent here; we should be playing at a higher level."

**BUFF BITS:** Polk called the light work he did Tuesday "the first break I've had since I got the boot off. It's been what, 4 1/2 or 5 weeks? It's been a nightmare pretty much. I've been going to bed and seeing if I wake up and we're still in camp . . . it happens." . . . Embree said on Wednesday he liked Polk's chances to play next week, adding Polk would bring leadership and improved communication to the secondary . . . About a dozen first- or second-team players were held out of Tuesday's and Wednesday's practices to allow more healing time. Embree said if a game was scheduled this Saturday, those players would be "50-50" in terms of availability. "I think we'll be as healthy (for ASU) as we were for the first game of the season," he added . . . The Buff Bowl - a short controlled scrimmage matching players who are redshirting or are lower on the depth chart - was held Wednesday afternoon rather than Thursday as initially scheduled. Embree said after two days of intense tackling work and other contact, he wanted to reward those players . . . Redshirt freshman offensive tackle Stephane Nembot continues to improve in pass protection and is "a brute in the run game," Embree said. "I expect a lot of good things out of him as he gets more comfortable playing at this level." Nembot has started the past two games but continues to split time with junior Ryan Dannewitz . . . Thursday's practice has been called off in lieu of weight room work and running. Friday and Saturday are days off, with many players scheduled to take trips home . . . The Buffs will resume work for the Sun Devils on Sunday afternoon, with that workout being a normal Tuesday practice because the game is on Thursday night.

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SHOW MENU



## Four high-scoring offenses coming up on schedule

By Kyle Ringo Buffzone.com Boulder Daily Camera

Posted:

Buffzone.com

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No one could sum up what it's like to play defense in major college football in 2012 better than Colorado linebacker Jon Major did after Wednesday's practice.

"It sucks to be a defender. That's the truth," Major said.

Major's candid admission came with a smile on his face near the end of a conversation about what it's like for defenders in the Pac-12 Conference and around the nation to face offenses week in and week out that spread defenses out and attack them with an ever-evolving bag of tricks and new wrinkles often in no-huddle, hurry-up fashion.

While the NFL has taken a few steps in recent years toward being more wide open, much of what those pro defenses see from week to week is the same or similar. Every now and then a team has to worry about a running quarterback like Michael Vick or Robert Griffin III, but it's nowhere near as diverse and creative as what Major and his teammates have to prepare for each week, while also taking college courses at a school without any physical education or general studies degrees.

"I'm sure every defensive player hates it cause it's so difficult and it's smart," Major said of the approach offenses take. "It's one-on-ones in 10 yards of space and if you can't have that technique and fundamentals to fall back on... Pretty much in the open field now you have to break down and just hold on and wait for everyone else to come, and that's hard for some guys cause their whole life they haven't played teams like that and they haven't played athletes that are here now."

It might be charitable to say the Buffs are struggling defensively.

CU is last in the Pac-12 and 111th in the nation in scoring defense, allowing 39.4 points per game. CU is last in the conference in total defense and 10th in both rushing and passing defense.

In the first 18 games under coach Jon Embree and defensive coordinator Greg Brown, CU has allowed opponents to score at least 30 points 14 times, including their most recent outing last week at home against UCLA.

Embree is quick to point out the defense can't be held completely responsible for those results because the offense has put the defense in difficult positions with turnovers, three-and-outs and inconsistency in moving the ball.

It doesn't get easier any time soon. The Buffs will face four of the six highest scoring teams in the conference over the next four games, beginning a week from today when Arizona State comes to town for what could be another nationally televised embarrassment for black and gold.

Embree and his coaches went back to basics in practices this week focusing on tackling, running to the ball and trying to force turnovers. CU is also last in the conference in that category with a minus-4 turnover ratio.

"The unique thing about football is sometimes you can't practice the things you need to do without actually doing it. But then there is that part of you when you start getting guys hurt you try to protect them a little bit. It's that bottom line at times. So with us having a bye week, just throw caution to the wind and let's go."

CU obviously has had personnel issues since Embree took over on defense. Last season the defense was decimated

by injuries and that was compounded when four defensive backs were suspended at midseason for violating team rules.

This season the Buffs have played without two of their most experienced defenders in linebacker Doug Rippy and free safety Ray Polk. Those losses hurt with so many young players logging time around them and in their place.

While those are legitimate excuses for some of the Buffs' struggles, it doesn't explain why progress doesn't seem to be coming on the scoreboard or in the statistics. Embree and Brown were both annoyed last week by the number of missed tackles. Embree said he believes his defense played well and gave the offense a chance through most of the 42-14 loss to the Bruins, but a few key breakdowns and missed tackles turned the game into another blowout.

Embree and Brown said Wednesday that there are areas where the Buffs can make immediate improvements such as tackling and being sound with assignments and techniques. Major said practices this week have definitely emphasized that.

Like many defensive coordinators around the nation, Brown would love to have a stable of athletes and playmakers like those that populate the Alabama defense. And like others in his business he is always looking for better ways to defend the myriad looks offenses give the Buffs in the Pac-12.

He has tried to be creative at times this season by dropping nine players into coverage, blitzing on occasion and offering different pre-snap looks that quarterbacks haven't previously seen. But another problem for defenses in keeping with offenses that have become adept at playing fast and severely limiting the amount of time defenses have to substitute and read what they're seeing.

Brown said he recently had a conversation with former Arizona State and NFL defensive back Adam Archuleta, who worked the UCLA game as a member of the television crew.

"Adam said, 'You know what? I look at college football and I don't even recognize it,'" Brown said. "It has become so different so fast. A lot of the old school rules don't apply any more. It's a different game."

The one thing everyone at CU agrees on is the best defenses at any level of football are still those with players who play with great fundamentals, which is why the Buffs have focused on the simple things this week.

"It's all about fundamentals," Major said. "It's the stuff you learn when you're a kid and stuff that carries over. It's what makes pros able to play so long in the NFL just what they can fall back on. So the fundamentals like tackling and angles and using your leverage properly and all that.

"...It takes one bad angle or one missed tackle and you pay the price."

Notable

Embree called redshirt freshman tackle Stephane Nembot "a brute" in the run game. "I expect a lot of good things out of him as he continues to get more comfortable with playing this level of football and this speed." Embree said 12 players have been held out of practice this week to give them a chance to get healthy in time for the ASU game. He said if the Buffs had a game this week, many of those players would not have played. ...Embree canceled Thursday's practice so players could have an extra day to focus on academics. The Buffs won't practice again until Sunday, but coaches will be on the road recruiting.

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OCTOBER 4, 2012, 9:09 AM

## Colorado gets today off from practice “as a reward”

By **TOM KENSLE** |  No Comments

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BOULDER — As a reward for hard work earlier in the week, Colorado coach Jon Embree cancelled Thursday’s practice. CU has an open date this weekend and will play next on Oct. 11 — an ESPN-televised, Thursday night home game against Arizona State.

Players will only go through conditioning and weight-training work Thursday and then will be excused until returning for a practice Sunday.

“The early part of practice (Wednesday), we got a lot more hitting and tackling in,” Embree said. “I just wanted to reward those guys. There are some academic things that need to get done, and with a couple of kids leaving for home (for the weekend), I thought we can really get after it running and in the weight room and focus on school and those kinds of things and then be ready to go Sunday.”

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OCTOBER 4, 2012, 8:56 AM

## Colorado's Embree "likes chances" that safety Ray Polk can play vs. ASU

By **TOM KENSLER** |  No Comments

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BOULDER — Colorado senior safety Ray Polk hasn't suited up since suffering a serious high-ankle sprain 25 plays into the season opener against Colorado State. But CU coach Jon Embree said he "likes the chances" of Polk playing Oct. 11 in the ESPN-televised Thursday night home game against Arizona State.

"Ray was running around pretty good," Embree said following Wednesday's practice.

Polk said he is just taking it day-by-day and not putting any undue pressure on himself to be back for a specific game, although he sure hopes to play against the Sun Devils.

"This week has been great," Polk said. "I had kind of reached a plateau, where it didn't seem to get any better. But we taped it up, put a brace on it to run down the field, and it went a lot better than I expected.

"At first it was a little stiff. But then it started to loosen up and finally I was able to start running. It was a great feeling."

Polk is the only senior among CU defensive backs, and his absence has been felt. As the free safety, he was being counted on to call the signals and basically direct traffic for a young secondary that at times includes as many as three true freshmen when in a nickel package.

"Ray brings leadership back there, a different element of communication," Embree said. "He's a guy that can diagnose plays maybe a little quicker than some of the young guys, so that can help."

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Wednesday, October 3, 2012

## Young Buffs finally catch a breather

By Kevin Gemmell

There aren't many firsts left for Jon Embree at Colorado. When you are 18 games into your coaching career, most of the firsts have come and gone. But playing after a bye week? That's a first.

After 13 straight weeks in 2011 and five so far this year, the Buffs are finally getting a breather. And it comes at a pretty good time. The bye week gives Colorado a chance for some much-needed reflection, gets them healthy at a few key positions and it allows the many, many freshmen who are playing the opportunity to stop their heads from spinning, if only for a brief period.



And that's key. Colorado (1-4, 1-1) has played 21 freshmen in the first five games -- including 13 true freshmen. On defense, true freshmen have accounted for 1,031 snaps -- slightly more than 25 percent of all plays on defense. By contrast, seniors have accounted for 602 snaps -- or 14.8 percent of the defensive plays. And as you'd expect with so many young starters, getting back to some defensive basics will be a priority in the bye week.

"We need better tackling," Embree said. "That led to a few big plays [against UCLA] and then turnovers, protecting the football. Those are the things we need to address more with us being in the bye week. As coaches, we talked about some things that I want us to continue to do better and help our players continue to be in positions where they can compete and win."

Wins have been scarce -- but considering many were predicting a winless season following close losses to Colorado State and Sacramento State, encored by a blowout to Fresno State, the fact that they were able to pull one out against Washington State shows some promise.

Colorado should also get several players back from injury for next week's Thursday night home game against Arizona State. Players like linebacker [Doug Rippy](#), safety [Ray Polk](#) and center [Gus Handler](#) -- barring setbacks -- are expected to be ready for next week. Also, some of the day-to-day guys like linebacker [Jon Major](#), defensive end [Chidera Uzo-Diribe](#) and running back [Christian Powell](#) will get some rest to heal up.

"We'll be as healthy as we would have been before Colorado State," Embree said. "Just about everybody will be back. This week, if we would have played this week, it wouldn't have looked too good."

The rest of the schedule looks like a tough road. ASU is on the verge of being a ranked team, then the Buffs have three straight games against ranked opponents: at No. 13 USC, at No. 2 Oregon and home to No. 18 Stanford. That's followed by a trip to Tucson to face previously ranked Arizona, home to No. 23 Washington before closing out the year at home against Utah.

Embree said his youngsters have been "holding their own physically," but they could certainly use this time to rest, learn and grow from some of the rookie mistakes of the first five weeks.

"Right now, it's all about self-evaluation," Embree said.