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Senior linebacker Derrick Webb is one of two captains playing his position.

Brooks: Vigo, Buffs LBs Hope To Hit The Accelerator

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(Third in a series of position-by-position previews of the 2013 Buffs to be posted on CUBuffs.com during preseason camp. Today: Linebackers)

BOULDER – The constant in Paul Vigo’s football career has been his speed, which is at the forefront of new Colorado defensive coordinator/linebackers coach Kent Baer’s scheme. If a player can run, Baer will notice; Vigo caught his coach’s eye almost immediately last spring.

With speed, experience and his teammates’ trust pushing him, Vigo believes he’s primed to make his fifth season at CU his best. Not to add any pressure, but Baer’s linebacking corps needs Vigo at his very best, not to mention his fastest.

The Buffs were badly outrun, out-schemed and out-scored last season, allowing an avalanche of yards (489 a game) and points (46) en route to a 1-11 finish. Not much more motivation than that should be needed for 2013, but Vigo has found some anyway; he was elected one of CU’s six captains and the position’s responsibility has both refocused and humbled him.

“To be honest, I was definitely surprised . . . but I knew I was up there in leadership and getting respect from my teammates,” he said. “I’m very honored that they selected me to be a leader and the coaches allowed it to happen. They gave me that much respect as well.

“It’s a learning process and there’s been more responsibility put on me to lead by example and not mess up and bring guys up to that level also. I’m just very excited about it and very thankful also. You’re put in a position where you’re representing a lot of people and a lot of guys look up to you. They hold me accountable and I just try to do all that I can to respect my teammates, the coaches and this university.”

During his previous four seasons at CU, Vigo bounced around on defense, playing cornerback, nickelback and safety before settling last season at linebacker. But he bounced a little there too, playing both the “mike” and “will” positions.

Did we mention the 6-1, 205-pound Vigo can run? Against the well-documented and blurring team speed of Oregon last season, Vigo made a career-high 13 tackles (10 solo) in only 32 plays from scrimmage. Making five starts and playing in 11 games, he finished the season with 46 tackles (32 solo) and added three broken up passes and three touchdown saves.

Baer is counting on Vigo, of New Brunswick, N.J., and fellow senior and captain Derrick Webb to be the cornerstones of his linebacking group if not the defense. Vigo and Webb, said Baer, are

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"tremendously hard workers; they want to do well . . . I put those guys in a little different category because they're older and more mature, they've been around.

"I really like their attitude; they're tough guys and I like that in linebackers. And they've bought in to what we're doing. Sometimes that's hard when you have a (coaching) change because they just don't want to listen. But those guys are in my office all the time. Paul certainly can help us, but he's got things to work on – all of them do.

"What we're doing defensively is totally different from what they've done in the past. Scheme-wise it's different. Playing linebacker is playing linebacker fundamentally, but our run fits are different, how we drop in zones . . ."

For Vigo, it's *viva la difference*. Even in a new scheme, his fifth year finds him "with a better understanding of the position – that's the most important thing," he said. "I've always believed I had the skill to play and make tackles in the open field and do certain things that they wanted me to do. I have a clearer understanding now; there's a lot more preparation being put into it and now I can just go."

Vigo believes his fellow linebackers "can just go" as well. His assessment of the position: "It can always be better, but I think we're learning and playing with a lot more confidence. And we're talking a lot more. We might not have the big names or the highest stars coming in, but I believe we're getting the job done. (Baer) coaches us all hard and that's always a good sign. He's allowing us to do what we do. We have high expectations."

Early in camp, Baer's first three linebackers have been Vigo (outside), Webb (inside) and Addison Gillam (middle). Gillam is a freshman who benefitted greatly from January enrollment and spring practice. Another possible benefit: Unlike his new teammates, he didn't have to "unlearn" a defensive system that was being tossed out by Baer & Co.

"Everybody has habits, everybody in anything," Baer said. "Sometimes the habits are good, sometimes bad. You have to teach them to get away from the bad ones and do the good ones better. Whatever (Gillam) learned in high school, I don't know what that was. But him getting in here early, getting in the off-season work, the 15 spring practices and the player (run) practices this summer – that put him miles ahead of those other freshmen."

Gillam (6-3, 225) was recruited by Baer and head coach Mike MacIntyre when both were at San Jose State last season. Gillam elected to sit out last football season and enroll at CU. He said the season off, as well as taking up Baer's scheme fresh, were huge benefits: "I think it was definitely a lot easier. It was a lot less stress just having to learn one defense, then six months later having to learn another one. So yeah, it definitely helped a lot."

As for taking last fall off, "It was nice to get a break," he said. "But it made me want to get out here that much more. Being in football shape is a lot different from just being in shape from running or what not. I noticed that a lot."

Baer called Gillam "a good player for a true freshman. He needs to get a little stronger, bigger in the upper body. But he's smart, tough and can run. He's going to be a heck of a player someday."

Baer also is counting on continued improvement from junior Woodson Greer, an outside linebacker who was the coaches' choice for last spring most improved player at his position. Baer called Greer "extremely talented . . . but he has things to work on and if he walked into this office right now, he'd tell you what he needs to work on. I'm not totally convinced he's a starter, but he's very talented and we'll get him there."

Junior returnees Brady Daigh (middle), Lowell Williams (inside) and K.T. Tu'umalo (inside) could provide depth at their positions. Daigh has been on the field (22 games, one start, in two years) but was sidelined for much of the spring with a knee sprain. Baer wants to see more of Daigh in camp, as well as a freshman contingent that includes a second January enrollee – Markeis Reed.

Of the freshmen, Baer said, "They have talent and couple of them can really run. We'll come out of fall camp with the three best playing. If it's one or two freshmen, they'll play. I think those guys can help us and probably one of them will. I couldn't tell you who that is, but when guys can run like they can I'm sure they can help on special teams."

Many freshmen, Baer noted, "are better now physically coming out of high school. But the closer you line up to the football it's a little tougher to play early. The further away it's a little easier if you have the athletic ability, speed and quickness – and that's true on both sides of the ball.

"Most kids coming out now have their workout gurus and all that. A lot of times guys are physically ready to play, but it's that mental part of it. They have no idea of what will hit them until we start

practicing in terms of how fast we're going, how many reps. They have no idea. That's always the case. Then there's the mental aspect – how fast can they pick up the details of what we're going to ask them to do defensively.”

In MacIntyre's first season at San Jose State three years ago, Baer started a pair of true freshman linebackers out of sheer necessity. His first group of CU linebackers “is probably better than first one” at San Jose State. “But overall, this group might be a little more talented (and) we won't have to count on the freshmen. There's a little more depth here, but it's hard to measure.”

THE INSIDE LOOK AT . . .

Linebackers

Coach: Kent Baer, first year on CU staff; also is defensive coordinator

Returning starters: ILB Derrick Webb, Sr.

Returnees: ILB Brady Daigh, Jr.; ILB Clay Norgard, Fr.-RS; ILB Jesse Hiss, Fr.-RS; ILB Lowell Williams, Jr.; ILB K.T. Tu'uamolo, Jr.; ILB Thor Eaton, So.; OLB Woodson Greer, Jr.; OLB Paul Vigo, Sr.; OLB Hunter Shaw, So.

Newcomers: ILB Addison Gillam, Fr.; ILB Tim McLaughlin, Fr.; OLB Markeis Reid, Fr.; ILB George Frazier, Fr.; OLB Kenneth Olugbode, Fr.

Key losses: SLB Jon Major, MLB Doug Rippy, WLB Kyle Washington

Stat line: Webb, the only returning starter, led the Buffs in tackles in 2012 (88, 61 solo). His total was 18 more than the pair of teammates who tied for second.

Bottom line: Linebacker could become a position of strength for the Buffs defense – if Webb has another stellar season, the players around him adjust to Baer's new scheme and provide the consistency that Baer wants throughout his unit. Vigo will provide leadership and is aiming at a standout final season. Greer needs to play to his talent level, which is considerable, and a lighter, quicker Daigh – he's lost 16 pounds – needs to stay healthy. Gillam has benefitted from his early enrollment and is a rising star.

Next: Wide receivers

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