

O'Neill brothers Shane, Darragh get their kicks with Rapids, CU Buffs

By John Henderson *The Denver Post* *The Denver Post*

Posted:

DenverPost.com

BOULDER — If the futures were any brighter for Darragh and Shane O'Neill, their native Ireland in winter would look like sunny Spain in spring. The Fairview High School graduates are young and inexperienced, yet are ascending in their sports so fast, their heads should be spinning as quick as the balls they're kicking.

Darragh is getting more preseason hype with the Colorado football team than any other Buffaloes player. The junior is the unanimous choice for first-team preseason all-conference punter on a team expected to struggle again in the Pac-12.

Shane is one year removed from taking free kicks against Boulder High. Now he's a starting defender for the Rapids of Major League Soccer and was one of the few bright spots for Team USA in the under-20 World Cup last week.

No need to insert a luck-of-the-Irish cliché here. Their father, Colm O'Neill, has no real four-leaf clovers in Conor O'Neill's, his Irish pub off Boulder's Pearl Street Mall.

A childhood mix of manic rivalry and mutual prodding has propelled the Louisville products into the spotlight of their sports, however dim they may shine on Boulder and Commerce City.

Colm remembers when Darragh was 13 and his baseball team needed an extra player. They called up Shane as an 11-year-old emergency plug-in.

"Lo and behold, he comes up and hits a home run," said Colm, an acclaimed Gaelic football player in Ireland. "Of course, there was steam coming out Darragh's ears. The next day he nearly pulled a muscle to make sure he hit a home run himself."

Lo and behold, he did. It didn't take long for them to realize their rivalry would benefit them and others around them once they joined forces. At Fairview, they led the Knights to the 2010 state basketball title game when Shane was a sophomore and Darragh a senior all-state point guard.

"That was really awesome," Darragh said. "A lot of guys go out there and give only 70, 80 percent, but we knew we'd give 100 percent each time."

Among the nation's best punters

From Fairview, their futures split off. Darragh didn't get many nibbles for a basketball scholarship and he soured on club soccer long ago.

He enrolled at CU, fell in love with college football watching the 2010 season from the Folsom Field stands and walked on in 2011. By last year he turned into one of the season's few sparks of competence. His net average of 39.3 yards and gross of 43.5 were both third in the Pac-12 behind two seniors, earning him All-America honorable mention from Sports Illustrated.

Lindy's College Football yearbook ranks him the No. 7 punter in the country.

"You hear about it, but it's kind of a case where it really has to go in one ear and out the other," he said. "Who's going to remember preseason first team? If that list holds at the end of the season, I'll definitely be pretty pumped up."

Of course, as CU's punter, he hears many rimshots as the punch line of the inevitable bad joke. Lindy's ranking carried the caveat, "Well, he did get a lot of practice."

Ba-dum-*tsh*.

"It is what it is," Darragh said. "From my point of view, I can't be looking at the scoreboard. I have to do my job no matter what because I know guys are looking at me."

"It was always my goal to turn pro"

In his quest to up his net to 40 or 41 yards this year, Darragh flew to Detroit last Friday to kick with Ball State punter Scott Kovanda, a Ray Guy Award finalist. Kovanda attended high school with the son of Colm O'Neill's business partner in the O'Neill's pub in Ann Arbor, Mich.

Meanwhile, Shane returned from Turkey — where he scored a goal and was named man of the match in last Thursday's 4-1 loss to Ghana, eliminating the U.S. team. Still, the experience galvanized his decision to eschew college for MLS.

Not that his parents were against the decision, but when Shane received a scholarship offer from Virginia his dad went on the Internet and got him a Virginia sweat shirt and two T-shirts. It didn't work.

"It was always my goal to turn pro," Shane said from Turkey. "I saw the opportunity. For a lot of people college may be the best choice. So far it has worked out."

On his way to Fairview records of 48 goals and 27 assists, Shane joined the Rapids' youth academy in 2009. He made the pro team's roster July 14 last year and debuted Sept. 5.

In the nine games he has started this season, the Rapids (7-7-5) are 5-0-4.

"When it became evident after a while that his heart and soul were set on giving it a go," Colm said, "that's when we felt, 'Listen, there's no reason to ship him off to Virginia when the first hour of the first day he's looking out the window saying: What am I doing here?' "

Shane, with dual citizenship, could play for Ireland's national team but he eyes the 2018 World Cup in Russia with the American squad. Darragh is aiming toward an accounting degree and the NFL.

Those would be futures definitely better than their pasts.

John Henderson: 303-954-1299, jhenderson@denverpost.com or twitter.com/johnhendersondp

This article has been corrected in the online archive to denote the 2018 World Cup will be played in Russia. The 2022 World Cup will be played in Qatar.

- The Field House - <http://blogs.denverpost.com/colleges> -

Darragh O'Neill points to film work in his off-season improvement

Posted By [John Henderson](#) On July 5, 2013 @ 12:50 pm In [College Sports, Football, University of Colorado](#) | [No Comments](#)



Darragh O'Neill, the CU Buffs' punter and the Pac 12's top-returner at that position in this April 2012 file photo. (*Karl Gehring, The Denver Post*)

BOULDER — [My story on the O'Neill brothers Friday left out Darragh's explanation](#) ^[1] of how he prepares in the off season. When I talked to him last week he was about to fly to Detroit to work out with former Ball State punter Scott Kovanda.

Darragh O'Neill, the top returning punter in the Pac-12, says, just like the position players, he watches a lot of film.

"I watch film of guys who are good," he said. "I study what they do, and everybody's a little different in terms of their technique but you just take little things from people and try to incorporate it in your style. It's just repetition, really. It's almost muscle memory.

"It's important to get your workout, strength training for your legs — squats and stuff. That plays a crucial role. Just like quickness training with (elastic) bands. You can definitely improve your hang time."

It's not just physical.

"A big part of it is the mental aspect," he said. "I've seen a lot of punters and kickers who come out in pre-game warmup and absolutely hammer the ball. I'm like, 'Oh, my God, this is going to be embarrassing.' Because my warmups, they're not the best. I'm not pumped up yet. It's not game time. When the lights come on, how do you feel about the pressure? That plays a huge part in your numbers throughout your career."

Article printed from The Field House: <http://blogs.denverpost.com/colleges>