

CU Buffs' Stephane Nembot is a mountain of potential

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

Posted:

DenverPost.com

BOULDER — There are times, Stephane Nembot admits, when the whole notion seems too far-fetched even for him: a Cameroonian on a Pac-12 offensive line. That revelation usually hits him when the awkward footwork required of an offensive tackle seems like dancing with cape buffaloes, when he's too proud to show his frustration to perplexed line coach Gary Bernardi.

Yes, Nembot gets it. Five years after coming to America without knowing a word of English, after sleeping on the floor in a cramped room in Maine, after four high schools in three months, after one year of prep football, trying to protect Colorado quarterback Connor Wood is a lot to ask.

"I thought about quitting so many times," Nembot says.

Then he thought back to his childhood in Cameroon. His mother, Esther, is a princess in the Bafoussam tribe in the mountainous northwest. Her stepbrother is the tribal king. That makes Nembot a prince, meaning on the right side of Colorado's line, Wood is protected by royalty.

Nembot's father, Richard, is from the Bangoua, a fiercely male-dominated tribe for whom hardships are opportunities, not excuses. Combine perseverance with machismo and royalty and you have a 6-foot-7, 305-pound sophomore offensive tackle with a nasty streak.

"My mom's and dad's tribes, they teach you how to be a man," Nembot says. "Never give up. They teach you after darkness, there is light."

Nembot is sitting in a conference room in the Dal Ward Center. His curly hair and massive, chiseled frame have all the trappings of your basic major-college lineman. But his fluent English drips with graceful French lilt and the heavy accents of his parents' widely different dialects.

He laughs when talking about his royal blood. He doesn't have a crown. In fact, growing up he barely had clothes. His parents moved out of their tribal towns to Douala, Cameroon's largest city of 1.3 million people and where they were far from the privileges afforded tribal royalty.

His mother was a seamstress, his father a tax collector. On Christmas, Esther went to her royal family's plantations and fed the homeless.

It's why the homeless on Boulder's Pearl Street Mall know Nembot. He once invited a homeless person to dine with him at IHOP.

In Cameroon, they gave instead of received.

"We had to pay for everything," he says. "We had to struggle for everything we got."

Pure athleticism What Nembot did have was major athleticism. He didn't start playing basketball until he was 15. But even then he could elevate his 6-foot-3, 215-pound frame so high, his elbows were over the basket.

At the time, UCLA had a star from Cameroon named Luc Richard Mbah a Moute. He convinced UCLA's staff he wasn't the only star in his country. Then-assistant coach Scott Garson came to Cameroon and found Nembot standing out among 500 kids trying to be discovered.

It wasn't only because he showed up in only his underwear. Garson told Nembot to dunk.

"I took my one step and when I dunk it, I broke the (rim) in my hand," he says. "We had to stop and switch gyms. He look at me and said, 'I'm taking you with me.' "

Then came a cross-country odyssey that made Nembot wonder about this Land of Opportunity hype. UCLA put him at Maine Central Institute, where the chilly August disturbed him nearly as much as the foul-ups over physicals and tuition.

After Nembot slept for a month and a half on the floor of two Cameroonian players for the University of Maine, Garson brought him to Los Angeles with money cobbled together in Cameroon.

Nembot started at Oxnard High School, but public schools couldn't take his I-20 student visa and he wound up at Brehm Prep School in Illinois. He loved the coach but hated the weather, so Garson brought him back to California, placing him in tiny Montclair Prep in Van Nuys.

He had two problems. His English was limited to the menu at In-N-Out Burger, about the only place he liked after sampling American food.

"It has no flavor, man," he said. "I'm used to food in Africa where you have to put 17 different spices for it to make sense."

He was a junior and played hoops as though his father's tribe were watching.

"I made tons of people bleed on the basketball court," he says. "When I catch my rebounds, you'd better not be there. When I'm coming down with my rebounds, your mouth, your nose, something is going to pay for it."

"Always be the strongest" This naturally attracted the football coaches at Montclair Prep, which was moving up from 8-man to 11-man. Assistant coach Reggie Smith Jr. saw this hulking presence walking the hallways.

He gave Nembot some simple advice about football: Never be the one who takes the blow. Deliver first. Funny, that's one of the mantras of his father's tribe.

"The main thing is don't give up and always be the strongest one," Nembot said. "There is no No. 2. There is only No. 1. May the strong survive."

Smith saw Nembot's survival instincts in his first practice. He told Nembot to grab a blocking pad. A 250-pound fullback was going to hit him.

"This fullback hit (Nembot) and knocked the snot out of his nose," Smith said. "I thought he didn't want to play anymore. He shook it off and said, 'Let's go again.' The next play, (Nembot) knocked this kid's helmet so sideways, he was throwing up."

He played defensive end and Smith had him do everything from jumping rope to running tires to help his footwork. What he didn't have to teach him was manic aggressiveness.

If you take the man out of Africa, you take the mentality too.

To get him riled up, Smith would fabricate stories of opponents making fun of his English.

"He's a warrior," Smith says.

In Nembot's one full year at Montclair, SuperPrep named him all-Far West and the USCs and UCLAs came calling. One problem: Nembot didn't know USC from USD.

Instead, he fell in love with Colorado. He didn't care that Jon Embree was taking over. What Nembot cared about was that CU assistant Mike Tuiasosopo was the only coach who bothered to get a French translator to talk to Nembot's parents in Cameroon.

Nembot is three years into his college career, two years after switching from defense to offense. He gave up two sacks against Central Arkansas, but he has what Bernardi calls "an NFL body" and upside he hopes parallels Mike MacIntyre's first-year program.

"Considering when you look at the big picture of where he's come from, he's come light-years," Bernardi says. "But there's also light-years yet to achieve. It's a work in progress every day."

That progress will lead to an ultimate goal. Yes, he wants to right Colorado's ship. Yes, he wants to put his NFL body in the NFL. But he wants the NFL for one reason.

"That's the only reason I play football," he says. "It's the only reason I haven't quit. I don't want to lead that fancy life, being rich, fancy cars and stuff. If I ever get blessed enough to go to the NFL and make money, I just want to build my orphanage and go home and help people."

After so many years trying to find a home, Stephane Nembot is going home to help the homeless. Risk getting in his way.

John Henderson: jhenderson@denverpost.com or twitter.com/johnhendersondp

Colorado football: Buffs' Mike MacIntyre starting his own traditions

By Kyle Ringo Buffzone.com Boulder Daily Camera

Posted:

Buffzone.com

Late in the autumn of 2010 with another losing season torturing their pride, a group of nearly 100 former Colorado football players gathered in a downtown Denver sports bar to talk about the future of their program with former athletic director Mike Bohn.

They complained about the state of a program that had won a national title in 1990 and ranked as one of the nation's powerhouses throughout the 1990s and into the early 2000s.

But there was more than losing on their minds.

They felt shut out and discarded by what they had helped build in Boulder. And they were hurt -- offended is more accurate for some -- that traditions they took part in or helped establish had been abandoned or painted over in the previous five years.

The Buffs wanted a Buff back in the Dal Ward Center office overlooking the north end zone at Folsom Field because they knew a Buff would restore those things they held dear and a Buff would know how to win in Boulder.

Only half of that proved to be true.

If former CU tight end Jon Embree succeeded at anything in his brief tenure as head coach of the Buffs, it was in restoring traditions that had been lost in the years since Gary Barnett was fired in December 2005 and teaching those traditions to players from this era.

"When I first got here, I didn't really pay attention to that," said senior defensive end Chidera Uzo-Diribe, who was recruited by former coach Dan Hawkins. "I didn't really know who Alfred Williams, Kanavis McGhee or any of these guys were. I didn't know about the traditions of this place.

"Then when Embree came here, I feel like that's when he really brought out the traditions of this place and a lot of us started realizing it."

One of Embree's priorities was to bring back the wall of wins outside the CU locker room and adding to it. The wall of wins is where the scores of significant wins from the past have been painted on cinder blocks in the hallway. The blocks are gold with scores painted in black except for one. The first brick the program earned under Embree was a victory over Colorado State in September 2011. It is in the middle of the wall painted black with gold writing. It's also a win that seems relatively insignificant now.

But now that Embree has been replaced by coach Mike MacIntyre, the program is once again at a crossroads with how some of its traditions will be cared for and passed down to future Buffs.

Mike MacIntyre has respect for Colorado football traditions -- old and new. But he readily admits he doesn't understand the significance of some, though he is trying to educate himself.

"I don't know what earns a spot and I need to find out," MacIntyre said when asked about the wall of wins. "I guess I need to ask David Plati and some other people around here that have been around for a while what earns a spot on that wall because that's a special wall. To me, all victories are special so in my mind all victories are on that wall. I have to figure out what the criteria is to go on the wall because I think the wall is a special wall and of course I'd like to have some up there and I know we will but I don't know the exact criteria for that."

While he's getting a feel for those things held dear by former CU players, MacIntyre also is trying to establish new traditions for the players he is coaching and will coach in years to come.

"I feel like coach Mac is a great blend of both," Uzo-Diribe said. "He's about today and the players that he has here but also still having traditions of the past. All the trophies are still up here. There was a practice in the fall where he had a bunch of former Buffs come out to practice and talk to us. I feel like coach Mac is a great blend of both."

MacIntyre brought with him a tradition he instituted at San Jose State where one player carries a sledgehammer and another player carries a toolbox when the team takes the field before each game.

The sledgehammer is carried by the player who had the biggest hit in the previous game and is voted on by the team. The toolbox contains commitment cards from each player.

There is nothing special about the look of the cards. In fact, they're just ordinary sheets of paper on which players write something they are committed to doing for their teammates in that game.

It can be anything and most are often as simple as holding on to the ball, not committing a penalty or leaving it all on the field. The cards are never revisited after the game and players don't put their names on them. But each man knows whether he has lived up to his commitment after each game.

"I think they've immediately embraced it," MacIntyre said. "They're excited about us doing it. They want to do all the things we do with it. They seem like they're having fun with all of it and they like doing the commitment situation so to me I think they've embraced it."

Senior linebacker Derrick Webb is another player who has now played for three coaches at CU and he's seen three different ways of handling the program's rituals and rights of passage.

"It's always important to remember the great traditions that we have here in Colorado, but I'm not afraid to go in a new direction, and kind of take this program to a new place," Webb said. "We've obviously moved conferences. A lot of those traditions were with Big Eight and

Big 12 and all those schools. Now we're in a new environment. We've got new ideas and we're doing new things and we can take this program to a whole new level.

"The overall tradition here is winning. So as long as we can keep that tradition going, that's all I care about."

Contact staff writer Kyle Ringo at ringok@dailycamera.com or twitter.com/kyleringo.