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cu track and field

CU fares well in 3,000 steeplechase at NCAA

By Daniel Petty

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University of Colorado sophomore Emma Coburn competes in the 3,000-meter steeplechase final at the NCAA Division I Track and Field Championships at the University of Oregon's Hayward Field on Saturday, June 12, 2010. She finished second in 9 minutes, 51.86 seconds. (Daniel Petty, The Denver Post)

EUGENE, Ore. — Before their 3,000-meter steeplechase final, Emma Coburn and Shalaya

Kipp knew would they would likely be chasing first place, not leading.

Not that the University of Colorado runners considered themselves racing for second, but pursuing Penn State's Bridget Franek — a clear favorite before Saturday's final at the NCAA Division I Outdoor Track and Field Championships — meant they would have to rigidly adhere to running their own paces and race the field.

"You think maybe if something happens, you can close hard," Coburn, a sophomore, said of her chances of winning. "You don't put it out of your mind."

In the end, the women solidified themselves as the nation's best collegiate

steeplechasing teammates, with Coburn finishing second in 9 minutes, 51.86 seconds and Kipp — only a freshman — crossing fifth in 9:59.37 behind Franek's 9:38.86 win. Both performances by the CU women were lifetime bests and earned them All-American status.

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University of Colorado freshman Shalaya Kipp lands in the water pit during the 3,000-meter steeplechase final at the NCAA Division I Track Championships at the University of Oregon's Hayward Field in Eugene, Ore. (Daniel Petty, The Denver Post)

"That's the pace I was hoping it would go out at," Coburn said of the fast start. "It got us a little less traffic with girls falling off earlier. I thought it was perfect."

Coburn spent much of the race near the front of the pack and managed at the finish to hold off Princeton's Ashley Higginson, who finished less than a second behind in third.

Coburn and Kipp qualified for the 3K steeple final along with Colorado State University senior Kristen Hemphill, who concluded her collegiate career with an All-American title and a seventh-place finish in 10:07.40. Hemphill plans to pursue a graduate degree in nutrition at CSU this fall and continue training.

"I was just going to do the best I could," said Hemphill, who will compete in the U.S. Track in Field Championships in Des Moines, Iowa, in two weeks. "It's a big accomplishment for me to make the final. I'm really happy with seventh."

The steeplechase is among the oddest and most technically challenging events on the track, combining long distance running, hurdling barriers and leaping over — and often into — a water pit. That Kipp was racing in just her fifth steeple competition ever makes her performance even more impressive.

"I'm still kind of amazed I'm here," Kipp said. "I don't know how to treat it. It's all very new to me."

As legendary coach Mark Wetmore does with most of his freshman distance athletes, he asked Kipp to jump over a few hurdles early in the outdoor season to evaluate her potential. He originally retreated from the idea of making her a steeplechaser, but resurrected it a month later.

Kipp's first steeplechase on May 8 indicates how far she's come. She ran 10:53.14 at Colorado

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State University and wore socks with her racing shoes, she said, a costly amateur mistake that added weight to her feet each time she dipped in the water pit. Now, just one month later, she can call herself an All-American.

"She's going to be an excellent steeplechaser," Wetmore said, adding that her talent comes from a combination of aerobic and anaerobic fitness. In other words, her strength running long distances while possessing speed over shorter distances.

Also Saturday, CU senior sprinter Jeremy Dodson finished fifth in the men's 200-meter dash in 20.65 after jumping quickly out of the starting blocks in the first 100 meters.

"It was a brilliant overall performance," Wetmore said. "He might have run the first 100 too hard. But he's in against the best in the country. He should be proud."

CU Sophomore Richard Medina raced to ninth place in the men's 5K in 13:55.66 on Saturday, missing the podium by one place.

All five individual athletes competing at the championships for CU earned All-American titles, and four of them — Coburn, Kipp, Medina and Joe Bosshard, who finished sixth in the 10K on Thursday night — are sophomores or younger.

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