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Emma Coburn continues epic assault on NCAA track and field

Written by Than Acuff
Wednesday, 16 June 2010

Takes second at NCAA Championships

From the opening race of the 2010 track and field season it was obvious there was something different about former Crested Butte Titans star athlete and current University of Colorado (CU) Buffs track and field sophomore star Emma Coburn.

Coburn earned a full ride scholarship to the top-flight Division I school for her prowess in the steeplechase, and made an instant impact on the college scene qualifying for the 2009 NCAA Championships as a freshman in the 3,000-meter steeplechase.

She concluded her freshman campaign with an 11th-place finish at the big show, admitting that while she was happy with the outcome, her first experience at the NCAA championships was a bit unnerving. She also ranked seventh in the nation in the steeplechase among athletes returning for the 2010 collegiate season, and fourth among U.S. runners.

During the 2010 indoor season, Coburn made a turn in steeplechase witnessed by CU track and field head coach Mark Wetmore.

"In late January early February she was going a little more psycho," says Wetmore. "She opened her mind to the possibility of an extra gear."

Coburn carried that "extra gear," or kick into the 2010 outdoor track and field season establishing herself as one of the premier steeplechase athletes, or steepers, in the nation. She opened the season running a personal best time of 9:56.29 at the Mt. SAC Relays in April, the fastest time of the season among all collegiate steepers. Coburn was named the Big 12 athlete of the week and ranked number one in the nation in the steeplechase.

While it's tempting to jump on the wave of her momentum and keep Coburn churning out results throughout the season, Coburn and her coaches opted for a schedule that would keep her healthy and honed.

"She raced carefully and sparingly," says Wetmore.

Coburn carried her new found pace into the Big 12 conference meet on May 14 in Ames, Iowa and while she went into the event the top ranked stepler in the Big 12, the win was far from a sure thing.

"Our conference has some really good steepers in it so it was not a given," says Coburn.

To secure her spot at the top of the podium, Coburn ran a conference meet record time of 9:56.53, tied her personal record time and won the Big 12 conference title.

Still, there was one last major challenge for Coburn standing between her and a return trip to the NCAA Championships. Due to a change in the championship qualification rules, athletes could reach the national finals only if they placed in the top 12 overall at regionals. Therefore, despite being the top-seeded stepler in the region, a mishap at regionals on May 27 in the 96-degree Austin, Texas heat could cost Coburn dearly.

"The steeplechase is chaotic and bad things can happen," says Wetmore.

With that in mind, Coburn's coaching staff laid out a plan for the regional race and Coburn followed it exactly to finish second overall and punch her return ticket to the NCAA Championships.

"We told her to push a little bit early and thin the field out and she did," says Wetmore.

"Most of my nerves were hoping nothing crazy would happen," says Coburn. "Once the gun went off everything was going right."

Heading into the NCAA Championships in Eugene, Oregon on Saturday, June 12, one thing was for certain: Unless something dramatic happened to senior stepler Bridget Franek of Penn State, Coburn and the rest of the field would battle for second place.

Franek had a personal best time of 9:36, and to close in on a gap that big in one race would be impossible.

Franek took off from the starting gun immediately and Coburn let her go, focused on her own plan for the day.

"I was more doing my own game plan," says Coburn. "During the race I was mostly managing the traffic around me."

After a couple of laps Coburn and two other women pulled away from the rest of the pack

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and were dueling it out for second place.

One woman fell off the back, leaving Coburn and another runner neck-and-neck as they jumped over the final water barrier.

Coburn then turned to her "extra gear" to put the final push on to the finish, out-kicking her opponent in the final stretch to take second and post a new personal record time of 9:51.86.

It's also the second fastest time ever run by a sophomore in CU history.

"Second place is definitely a pretty big accomplishment for me," says Coburn. "A realistic goal was top four and to get second was really exciting. It was a good step for me."

"Emma's 9:51 as a sophomore is excellent," adds Wetmore. "Emma's is making great progress to being a national class steepler and eventually a world class steepler."

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