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sports

CU, CSU stars 1-2 in NCAA in women's steeplechase

By Natalie Meisler
The Denver Post

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CU's Emma Coburn, above, and CSU's Kristen Hemphill rank first and second nationally. (Karl Gehring, The Denver Post)

While often misunderstood by running fans around the world, the steeplechase has started to gain a foothold in Colorado.

On the heels of former University of Colorado star Jenny Barringer setting an American record, CU sophomore Emma Coburn of Crested Butte and Colorado State senior Kristen Hemphill of Los Alamos, N.M., have posted the top two NCAA times for women this season.

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"The steeplechase can be very intimidating," said Barringer, now training full time in Colorado Springs. "Those two seeing me race might say, 'If she can do it, it can't be that bad.' "

Coburn (9:56.29) and Hemphill (10:02.59) both set their fastest times this season April 15 at the Mount SAC Relays in Walnut, Calif., and they have held up as the event's No. 3 and No. 5 times in the world so far.

Few other disciplines are in such need of positive examples as the steeplechase, which only the track and field aficionado understands. The 3,000-meter (1.86 miles) event combines distance running, hurdling and long jumping over a water pit.

The hurdle (30 inches high for women, 36 for men) is as wide as the track and is a topple-proof barrier resembling a gymnastics balance beam. There are four barriers per lap, but one has a water pit. On each of the seven laps, the 12-foot-long water hazard comes right after the barrier. Runners can hurdle the barrier or step on the top to propel themselves as far over the water hazard as possible. The standard pit is just over 2 feet deep at the hurdle and gradually slopes up to track level at the far end.

"It's an event where no matter how fast I'm going, when I cross the line it feels like every bone in my body hurts," Coburn said. "A hard effort at elevation is painful. A hard effort at sea level is painful. I definitely can go faster at sea level, but I wouldn't say it's any easier."

What is it that makes a distance runner want to interrupt a good run with jumps and a water hazard?

"The goal

Running

[View slide show of women's steeplechase.](#)

is to not get too wet," said Hemphill, who will compete for CSU in the Mountain West Conference track and field championships, which begin today in Albuquerque.

CU track coach Mark Wetmore said the event's technical nature makes it one of the most challenging to coach. Distance running and steeplechasing, Wetmore said, are "connected but not wedded."

Auditions don't take long.

"We try everybody," Wetmore said. "Some people, in 10 minutes, we say, 'Never mind.' "

To ensure he has some athletes to coach, CSU distance coach Bryan Berryhill steers his runners clear of the YouTube collection of steeplechase crashes. Those clips are devoted to face plants, belly-flops and other mishaps. In one particularly gruesome accident during the 2007 world

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championships in Japan, a male runner tripped before a barrier and was clocked in the mouth as he fell to the track.

"I guess if you were just trying it, you would freak out," Coburn said. "I think it's fun."

Berryhill suggested it might just be coincidence for the first- and second-ranked women's college steeplechase runners in the country to be competing so close to each other. He suspects it has more to do with the distance-running foundations of the programs.

The venom that exists between the in-state rivals in other sports does not take place in track.

"She's a really great runner and very nice person," Hemphill said of Coburn. "It's exciting we're both from schools in Colorado; these are just two really great track and field programs."

Steeplechase isn't sanctioned at the high school level, except in New York. Coburn, who ran the event at national meets while in high school, was a rare experienced steeplechaser when she arrived in Boulder.

As good as Coburn is, Wetmore won't burden her with expectations of duplicating Barringer's feats, which include a career-best 9:12.5 performance.

"Jenny was and is an extremely rare if not unique athlete," Wetmore said. "Emma is a rare talent

who can be an exceptional steeplechaser."

The key is transitioning from the flat distance races.

"Some people are born with a little more disposition for it," Wetmore said. "Some people, they disqualify themselves immediately. We try some people, and they survive to try another day."

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Steeplechase history

No one seems sure if the event originated on foot or on horseback. The name comes from races from town to town in Europe. The tallest landmark in each village was a church steeple.

Today's steeplechase barriers and water pits are symbolic of obstacles of brush, fences and streams of yore.

University of Colorado track coach Mark Wetmore, a Yodalike student of the sport, said, "I don't know if humans or horses came first, but it was a race from town to town, over hill and dale, creek and fence."

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First men's race: 1920

First women's race: 2008

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The only American winner was Horace Ashenfelter in 1952.

NCAA

First men's race: 1948; continuously since 1959

First women's race: 2001

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Fast lane change of pace

By **NATALIE MEISLER** |  No Comments

This is usually my favorite time of the year and not just because vacation is around the corner. After freezing through spring football in Boulder and Fort Collins for most of April, I planned to spend last week and this week in the warm weather interviewing track athletes and golfers.

The weather still didn't cooperate but it was a welcomed change of pace to switch the spotlight.

After seeing all the facilities and benefits for area football players, I'm always amazed by the annual visit to the tracks. The outdoor facilities are fine except for location. CSU's is next to the railroad tracks. CU's crater filled parking lot is a broken axle waiting to happen.

The fieldhouses (both once served as basketball arenas) are antiquated.

CU's track office has been hidden behind the much cramped sports information office for decades. Buffs coach Mark Wetmore said his office was a closet before he moved in and he was told it was a bathroom before that.

"This is a 60-year-old temporary annex," he said.

CSU's indoor track surface has literally been around since The Flood. The 1997 flash flood in Fort Collins left watermarks along the walls of the field house.

CSU coach Bryan Berryhill said he hadn't even thought about using football's new indoor facility at CSU although he figured it would be a good surface for sprinters.

Unlike the "you, again?" tacit greetings at some football practices, track coaches and athletes are thrilled with any media attention. It was a pleasure last week having relaxed conversations with Wetmore, Berryhill, and the nation-leading women's steeplechasers, CU's Emma Coburn and CSU's Kristen Hemphill.

A group of CU male runners welcomed the sight of a still photographer and Channel 9 TV camera with "It's the paparazzi!"

You won't hear a single one complaint about facilities. To them, it's the charm of the sport and dedication of the athletes, most of whom are not on full scholarship.

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