

Woelk: No guarantees this week for Buff Coburn

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In years past, Emma Coburn would be preparing for what would almost certainly be a trip to the NCAA Track and Field Championships.

But thanks to a change in the qualification procedure, the Colorado sophomore will be headed to the NCAA West Region meet this weekend in Texas with no guarantees -- even though she's already recorded the second-fastest time in the nation this year in the 3,000-meter steeplechase.

Thanks for nothing, NCAA.

"I'm a little nervous," Coburn said Monday before her practice session. "There are a lot of variables. You have to qualify at this meet. You get one chance, and everything has to be perfect. If you hit a barrier, trip and fall, get food poisoning -- that could be it. A lot can happen."

Prior to this year, the NCAA usually took the top five or six qualifiers from four regional meets, then added in the top qualifying times and distances from the regular season. That way, one bad day wouldn't erase an outstanding season.

This year, however, the top 12 finishers in the East and West regionals will qualify for the June 9-12 NCAA Championships in Eugene, Ore. Regular-season results need not apply -- or qualify.

As one CU official noted, "There's no safety net."

"It's a little nerve-wracking," Coburn admitted. "But I know what to expect and I'm ready to have a good race."

Coburn is one of only four collegiate runners in the nation to break the 10-minute barrier this season. She ran a season-best 9:56.29 at a meet in Stanford earlier this year, then clocked a Big 12 meet record 9:56.53 at the Big 12 Championships, breaking the conference meet mark held by former CU teammate Jenny Barringer (9:58.14).

Her time at the Stanford meet is second only to Penn State's Bridget Franek, who ran a 9:48.28 at the Big Ten Championships.

This weekend's West Regional will be held in Austin, with Coburn scheduled to run Friday evening (8:10 p.m.). The weather forecast calls for a high of 95 degrees on Friday, accompanied by the usual humidity normal to Austin for this time of year.

"At least my race is in the evening, so it should be a little cooler," Coburn said with a laugh.

The steeplechase is a unique event in the track and field world in that competitors can't practice the event every day. The effort involved in crossing the barriers and water jumps would be just too taxing.

Thus, steeplechasers usually work on event specifics once a week; with the rest of the week dedicated to track workouts.

"It takes a lot out of you," Coburn said of the steeple-specific workouts. "You just can't do it every day."

Coburn, who attended Crested Butte High School, happened upon the event by chance. She and her father (developer Bill Coburn) were headed to the Great Southwest meet in Albuquerque, N.M., when she was in high school. She was scheduled to run the 800 at the meet, but, "We just couldn't see driving all the way to Albuquerque for one event. So, we looked at the schedule, saw the steeplechase was the day after the 800 and I thought I'd give it a try."

She didn't go into the event as a complete newbie. Western State, in nearby Gunnison, does have a steeplechase setup on its track, and she practiced there.

Once.

Then, on the heels of that one practice, she won the meet and qualified for nationals.

Now she's a relative steeple veteran. Along with training under the tutelage of CU coaches Mark Wetmore and Heather Burroughs, she also had the benefit of training alongside Olympian Barringer for a year.

National-caliber steeplechasers are starting to become the norm at CU. Along with Barringer (an NCAA champion as well as Olympian), other Buffs of note in the event include Billy Nelson (Olympian, fourth in NCAAs) and Steve Slattery (third in the NCAAs).

"I think it's a combination of things," Coburn said. "Mark and Heather definitely know what they're doing. They lend a lot of expertise.

"But CU also just attracts a lot of good runners, and some of them gravitate to the steeple."

Coburn also competes in other events. She finished sixth in the 800 at the Big 12 meet, and is in the top 10 on CU's all-time performers list in the 800 and 1,500.

Although she broke Barringer's Big 12 meet record a couple of weeks ago, she's not counting on knocking off the former Buff great's NCAA mark anytime soon.

That mark -- 9:25.54 -- is probably safe for a while, as is Barringer's American record of 9:12.50.

"It's going to be a long time before someone hits those numbers," Coburn said. "Jenny is just a whole different animal. Her records are going to hold for a long, long time."

But that doesn't mean Coburn can't have her sights set on a high finish at this year's NCAA Championships.

"I'm confident because I've had some good times," she said. "We'll just have to see what happens."

Colorado will send 14 individuals to the West Regional, along with the men's 4x100 relay team.

The Buffs have four runners ranked in the top 40 in the nation in the men's 5,000, led by Richard Medina (20th); and sprinter Jeremy Dodson has the 12th-best time this year in the nation in the 200 (20.63).

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