



Sophomore Emma Coburn has reached one personal goal -- eclipsing 10 minutes in the 3,000-meter steeplechase.
Photo Courtesy: CUBuffs.com



05/04/2010 B.G. Brooks, Contributing Editor

Brooks: Odd Start Put Coburn On Fast Track In Steeplechase

BOULDER - Mark Wetmore and Heather Burroughs - a coaching combo with four fairly good eyes for talent - first saw Emma Coburn run the steeplechase at out-of-state meets on separate occasions.

Didn't matter; their conclusions were identical: The kid from tiny, tucked away Crested Butte, where discovering a potential world-class steepler might be as rare as finding coral reefs and kelp, could be special. *Really* special.

A call just over three years ago from Wetmore, the University of Colorado's celebrated head coach in cross country/track since 1995, steered Coburn away from Michigan and Virginia and toward Boulder - not that it took one of Wetmore's most concentrated recruiting pitches to change her direction.

Remembered Coburn, now a CU sophomore: "I didn't think I was good enough to be on the team, so I kind of put it out of my head and started looking at other places. Then (Wetmore) called and I said, 'Oh, I guess I could go here.'

"It's pretty lucky for me that the town I want to live in, the team I want to run on and the team that my family loves is all in one place. Both running programs (Michigan, Virginia) are good, but nothing compared to CU's. Yeah, I'm pretty lucky."

AND THE BUFFS are pretty lucky to have her. Coburn's 2010 outdoor debut in mid-April at the Mt. SAC Relays produced the world's best time (9:56.29) this season in the 3,000-meter steeplechase. She entered her sophomore year

with a goal of breaking 10 minutes in the event and since has revised that to hitting 9:40 or below - times that both Wetmore and Burroughs believe are well within Coburn's range if her improvement continues.

"She's going to be one of the greatest collegiate steeplechasers ever, we feel," Wetmore said.

If she gets there (or perhaps when) an improbable journey that began in a picturesque Colorado ski town will have culminated in another of Wetmore's burgeoning track and field success stories.

Coburn's family tree is deeply rooted in CU; her parents and one set of grandparents are alums, as are a handful of aunts and uncles. An older sister and brother currently are CU students and a younger brother so relishes a glove given to him as a birthday present by Buffs receiver Scotty McKnight that he already wants to "sign up" for the Buffs football team.

"Like he can just sign up and get on the roster," Coburn said with a laugh.

COBURN SPENT HER first seven years in Boulder before her parents got the notion of moving the family to Crested Butte for a year. They had ties to the area - a cabin in Tin Cup had been in the family for years - and were familiar with the lifestyle. But they wanted to sample it for an extended period.

Turns out that a year wasn't nearly long enough; the family built a home in Crested Butte (Bill Coburn II is president of Coburn Development in Boulder) and settled in, comfortable with the idea of running his business long distance.

Emma loved the decision.

"We didn't come back . . . it was great growing up there (in Crested Butte)," she said. "There's so much trust in the community - you don't lock your bike and you leave the keys in your ignition on Main Street. It was really special.

"I tell stories of it and people are surprised . . . there were 20 kids in my graduating class, my sister had about 15. You go skiing with your teachers. We'd come to Boulder for football games. My parents still own a house (in Boulder) and they come back and forth."

If there was a drawback (and it turned out not to be one at all), it was the relative athletic obscurity in which Coburn competed. Crested Butte High School's athletic classification is 1A, or as Wetmore noted, "the smallest possible high school category in Colorado. She didn't have any national level performances that would grab the attention of any (college) coaches."

But Coburn had a coach who recognized her athleticism and potential. Trent Sanderson, director of the High Altitude Running Center in Crested Butte and a former college coach (head cross country coach at Maryland, assistant coach at Florida State), entered Coburn in the Nike Outdoor Nationals - a premier high school event held annually in Greensboro, N.C.

"She had a coach who had been out in the big world and knew of these national caliber competitions and entered her in her junior year," Wetmore recalled. "He put her in the steeplechase; I can't speak for logic in that. I'm sure she hadn't practiced the steeplechase, but he might have said she's athletic, a good basketball player, she's tall and has many skills - so let's try this."

ACTUALLY, IT WAS Coburn's father who introduced his daughter to steepling, which is part of high school competition in only one state (New York). The summer of her junior year in high school, Bill Coburn II drove Emma to a meet in New Mexico, where she would compete in the 800-meter run. Once there, though, he reasoned it was a long way to drive for one event, so why not enter the steeplechase?

"It was the only race on one day of the meet, so he said, 'Let's just try it, OK?'" Emma said. "It's really random how it all happened."

But it happened as if predestined. High school steeplechases, in the rare meets where they're contested, are 2,000 meters rather than 3,000. Running at elevation, Coburn clocked "about a 7:30" and won her first one ever despite not knowing "how many laps there were, how many barriers - knowing anything about it really."

That same summer, Sanderson, who had written Wetmore about his small-town prodigy, took her to the Nike national meet in North Carolina, where Wetmore first saw her. "They (CU) had never heard of me," Coburn said, adding that her fourth-place finish in an event whose fundamentals still were fuzzy quickly commandeered her future coach's attention.

"When the meet was over, we spoke briefly in the parking lot and I thought she looked good, ran a pretty fast time and had good structure - and that got my attention," Wetmore said. "Then she did it again a year later, and Heather was there. She came home saying the same thing."

Wetmore and Burroughs, a former Buffs standout now in her sixth season as a CU assistant (middle/long distance running), usually alternate summers attending the Nike meet. When Burroughs saw Coburn the summer of Coburn's senior year, Burroughs' scouting report mirrored Wetmore's. But by then the call to come to CU had been issued - and Coburn had accepted.

"Definitely without the steeple I don't think I'd be here," she said. "When I was in high school running miles and two miles, I didn't think I wanted to run in college. It was kind of stressful and not that much fun. Then I started steepling and I started getting better and better. By the time I rolled into my senior year and started getting recruited a little, I was really excited to go. Yeah, the steeple is probably the reason I'm here."

HER PARTICIPATION IN basketball and volleyball likely are major reasons she's taken so readily to the steeplechase. The event's distance and clearing barriers (four "dry" hurdles and a 10-foot water pit) put it among the most challenging and athletically demanding in track and field. Wetmore even calls the water jump "scary and weird when you start it."

But Coburn, who is 5-feet-8, professes to be "pretty good with jumping and handling obstacles . . . I might be a little more athletic than other people in the event. I think I have a different advantage from other girls when it comes to jumping.

"There are a lot of great runners who can win conference in the 5K or 1,500 and their times are far superior to mine. But I'd be able to beat them in the steeple just because they might not be athletic . . . it's not saying that if you're fast in the steeple you'll be fast in everything else. But it's definitely true that if you're fast in a 5K, it doesn't mean you'll do well in the steeple."

Burroughs agrees with Coburn's self-analysis of being "pretty good" in the technical aspects - the jumping and negotiating barriers - of the event. But Burroughs also bumped Coburn's self-critique up a notch: "When Mark saw her for the first time, she was very respectable - not technically excellent in it, but pretty good. She had a good coach (Sanderson) and he really brought her along gradually.

"She ran a 10:06 as a freshman (at CU), which is the U.S. junior record - a very impressive freshman performance. Technically now, she may be the best steeplechase runner we've coached - and she's all of 19."

Coburn is mature enough to grasp where the steeplechase might be taking her. While she now concedes it's "my best event," she said she also wants to "branch out and become good at other events, too. You can't be just a one-hit wonder."

Ah, that's really not a concern. In the Payton Jordan Cardinal Invitational on May 1 at Stanford, Coburn posted the third-best collegiate time (4:21.37) in the 1,500 meters. It was her first race of the season at that distance and she whittled 6.32 seconds off her previous personal best. She didn't enter the steeplechase; her next competition in her best event will be in the Big 12 Conference Outdoor Championships (May 14-16 in Columbia, Mo.).

BECAUSE OF ITS grueling nature, Wetmore and Burrough usually don't ask their steeplechase competitors to double up in other events. But Wetmore said it's a possibility in this year's conference meet: "Our rule of thumb is, 'How is the rest of the team doing?' We've bent our rule at the 2008 (Big 12) outdoor meet we hosted and won.

"We thought we could win and the guys wanted to do it. We said we'll rest for a week afterwards and so went bent our rule . . . we reserve the right to do it. If the sprinters and hurdlers and throwers and distance people are really have a great weekend, then Emma would be asked to carry a heavier load."

You know what Coburn's reply would be - the same resounding "let's do it" that former CU steeplechase legend Jenny Barringer offered whenever asked. Barringer, who completed her CU eligibility last fall, ran an American steeplechase record 9:12.50 at the IAAF World Championships last August in Berlin.

Although Wetmore calls Barringer "the Michael Jordan of collegiate steeplechasing," he doesn't undersell Coburn, who formed a lasting friendship with Barringer in their lone season of competing together and will be a bridesmaid in Barringer's wedding this fall.

"In the technical aspects of the steeplechase, which are hurdling and jumping over water, Emma is equal to Jenny," Wetmore said, adding that is a little surprising "because technically Jenny is good, very good. And for Emma as barely a sophomore - she has one steeplechase - to be that good at this point in her career is surprising.

"There's still a big difference in their engines, though. Emma is making wonderful progress; we're thrilled with her. (But) it's going to be a while before any collegiate runner runs a 9:12 (in the steeplechase)."

Added Burroughs: "Jenny is the U.S.'s best steeplechaser, and technically, as a water jumper, is very, very impressive. It's textbook; it's what you want to emulate. But you'd say Emma's dry barriers are what you'd want to emulate. I think Emma is the best over the dry barriers of anyone we've coached."

STILL, GIVEN BARRINGER'S myriad accomplishments during a stellar college career, it's an injustice for Coburn to be compared with her. But Wetmore and Burroughs recognize that comparisons probably are unavoidable, if unfair.

"No . . . it's really not (fair), but it's going to be inevitable," Burroughs said. "I'd like to be able to prevent it, but I think it's going to be inevitable because they're from the same program, have the same coaches. Jenny was to some degree a mentor and a friend. I think Emma and all subsequent steeplechasers we have are going to be compared to Jenny. It's not really fair, and we have different expectations of (Emma). But she's going to have to live with it to some degree.

"As a freshman it was good to have a teammate who was not only good at the event, but also even if Emma was hoping to be an All-American, the spotlight was never on her. That was a big benefit as a freshman. Now the constant comparisons aren't such a benefit. Unless she can break the school record (9:12.50) there will always be a time to aspire to."

That's fine with Coburn. If the bar has been set amazingly high, it was done so by a teammate, friend, mentor and former road roommate. In aspiring to best Barringer's best steeple time, Coburn's pursuit is fueled by respect, not envy.

"We're really close," Coburn said. "She's super sweet; she took me under her wing (last year) and made me. Mark and Heather are amazing teachers of steeple form, but it's also nice to have someone there to see who has perfect form.

"They can tell you a million times and you can slowly get better, but it definitely helps to be able to watch it and ingrain it in your head that way. That's how she (Barringer) learned it, too. She was watching Billy Nelson (former CU steepler) do it - and he was so good.

"She helped me with overall form and going over the water jumps. And just racing in general . . . going to meets, she was never a wreck. She was always having fun, she wasn't nervous. In high school, I was a little more of a wreck before races. She made racing fun for me; it was great to be around her last year."

IN A PERFECT WORLD, Coburn would earn her degree in marketing over the next two years and follow Barringer into professional racing.

"If I could I would," Coburn said of running professionally. "If I'm at a point where maybe financially I don't need to work a full time job, I'd do it.

"People have said if you have to work full time and run professionally, it's like, 'Good luck.' If I'm secure enough financially where I could run a couple of years professionally and have fun running, I'd love to.

"I really don't know what I'd do if I wasn't running . . . right now, running is my life. But I know all the stars would have

to be aligned."

That might not be so farfetched. Given where and how she started, and the distance she's already come, the stars seem to be in her corner.

Contact: BG.Brooks@Colorado.EDU

SHOW MENU

