

Barringer's last run: CU Buff seeks one more title

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Jenny Barringer doesn't run because she enjoys the pain.

Colorado's celebrated track and cross country star competes in her lonely sport for the pride of crossing the finish line first and often times the glory of finishing a race faster than any female collegiate athlete has before.

"I love running partially because I'm good at it," the modest Barringer, an Olympian and four-time NCAA champion, admits. "I wouldn't be here doing all this and I wouldn't be as committed to it if I wasn't good at it."

Barringer might just be the first face chiseled on the Mount Rushmore of female CU athletes.

Over the summer -- a year after finishing 8th in the 3,000-meter steeplechase in Beijing -- Barringer finished fifth in her signature event at the World Championships, breaking her own American record with a time of 9:12.50.

During Barringer's storied CU career on the track everybody's All-American won three NCAA championships in the steeplechase and a fourth national title in the indoor 3,000-meter run. The senior owns six collegiate records and seven school records.

On Monday, Barringer will run her final race for the Buffs as she attempts to win the cross country title that has so far eluded her at the NCAA Championships in Terre Haute, Ind.

This is the only accomplishment left to cross off on her amateur to-do list. Barringer finished 43rd as a freshman and was the runner-up in 2006 and 2007.

At a recent press conference, Barringer was asked about her legacy at CU and her bright future as a professional athlete. Mark Wetmore jumped in and made a speech about his prize pupil.

The long-time CU coach pointed out that women's cross country is the most sponsored sport in the NCAA and every runner from every program gets an opportunity to compete in a regional meet to qualify for the national championships. Nearly 300 of the top female runners will be given an opportunity to compete for the championship on Monday.

"It isn't a poll, it isn't a ranking, there's no BCS," Wetmore said. "They all stand on the starting line with very little clothing in the howling winds of Terre Haute, Indiana, in the winter time and they shoot a gun and they run 3.75 miles and there's a winner. The Heisman is a vote for what people think is maybe the best football player, but you know no offensive tackle has ever been considered. This is a race that determines the very best runner in the whole NCAA.

"I think it's the most prestigious title in all of NCAA sports."

At this point, Wetmore pauses and asks Barringer if he's making her nervous yet. She says it's too late, please continue.

"She could be thinking about legacy, she could be thinking about professional contracts, she could be thinking about a Ferrari 590 GTV," Wetmore said. "But she's been hearing from me and (assistant coach) Heather Burroughs and herself, 'Stay on task, stay on task, stay on task.'"

The task at foot is to write the final chapter of her amazing CU story by crossing the finish line first. Barringer has won every race she has entered this season, including the Big 12 and NCAA Mountain Region championships.

True to form, the gracious champion tried to shift some of the attention to her teammates. CU's women are ranked sixth and have a chance to return to the podium after not even qualifying for the NCAA Championships last fall when Barringer was redshirting following the Olympics.

"Absolutely not," Barringer said when asked if she had thought about her place in CU history. "I am one of five women who will hopefully score on Monday. That's my most important job and it's a position I have a lot of respect for. Not every day is a good day. I plan on racing well and we have a plan for that, but what we do is very hard and I have a respect for that as well.

"The competition I'm going to be facing is very well prepared for this meet, just like I am. So I have a respect for that. I hope that I'm a better teammate now than some big awesome legacy. I hope that's what's resonating with the women is that I'll be one of five on Monday."

Not a material girl

After competing at such a high level in her first Olympics and then dominating her NCAA track events, Barringer could have easily turned professional and made a nice living while focusing on her craft full-time. She returned to CU this semester to finish her degree and chase the cross country title she was seemingly born to win for the Buffs.

Wetmore said Barringer will sign a much more lucrative professional contract in a couple weeks than she would have been offered after returning from Beijing.

"Words really can't describe what Jenny represents," CU athletic director Mike Bohn said. "Not only as a competitor but as a person, as a student-athlete, as a Buffalo. If there's a true representation of the finest student-athlete in the dictionary you would see a picture of Jenny Barringer. She will have a lasting impact not only on the coaching staff and this program, but on this entire university and community. She is an inspiration to all of us."

The Dal Ward Center is full of disappointment this fall due to the football team's woes in Dan Hawkins' fourth season. Bohn recently had a photograph of Barringer competing in the Olympics blown up and placed inside the elevator of the building where CU athletes spend much of their week studying, dining, working out or getting treatment.

"I think what Jenny coming back this year has done really inspires us to make some significant improvements in our overall enterprise," Bohn said. "It reinforces to all of us, from academic support to coaches to facilities to the institution as a whole, that we're doing some things right. To get an endorsement from someone like Jenny Barringer, it truly inspires you to the highest level."

CU has a rich running history. In cross country alone:

Kara Grgas-Wheeler won an individual title in 2000 to lead the women to their first championship.

The men followed up with a team championship in 2001.

Jorge Torres won the individual title in 2002.

Dathan Ritzenhein won the individual title in 2003.

Both the men and women took home hardware in 2004.

And the men won the title again in 2006.

But even at a program like Wetmore`s, which has no problem attracting running talent, Barringer`s accomplishments stand out.

"A coach always says to himself or herself, 'I know what I can do if I get the right materials,'" Wetmore said. "And it`s just a matter of waiting 37 years for getting the absolute right materials."

'A cool thing`

Barringer`s professional future is considered very bright because she will not have to specialize and has a chance to be great in a number of different events. Wetmore said she can be a world-class athlete in the 1,500-, 5,000- and 10,000-meter events, in addition to threatening the world record in the steeplechase.

Interestingly, Barringer believes her final race at CU will define her collegiate career.

"I think that this race, more so than any other race, is a lot about who I am and not just what I do," Barringer said. "It`s about putting myself in a very uncomfortable and difficult position to finish what I started and I feel very strongly about that; about being loyal to the group that has supported me the last four-and-a-half years.

"But the race is another race. So all of those emotions, I think it`s necessary to strip those away and see the task at hand and see it as another race and another job and another day at the office. That`s what I really hope for my mindset to be on the starting line."

Barringer is a heavy favorite, but the sport can be a cruel one -- the weather, an injury, a fall and many other unforeseen factors could crash the party.

"If we can pull it off it would be a cool thing," Wetmore said.

No matter what happens on the painful trail, Barringer will run into the sunset as one of the greatest athletes and teammates in CU history because of all the pride and glory she has experienced wearing the black and gold.

"The unique thing about this situation is being on the Colorado team. There`s a lot of emotions wrapped up into that," Barringer said. "I`m not sad, I`m really excited. I think the future has all good things."

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CU star Barringer has one more finish line to cross

By Justin Williams
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BOULDER — Jenny Barringer didn't need to come back.

The University of Colorado standout runner, who will go down as one of the greatest athletes to ever wear the black and gold, already has her legacy cemented. She has a professional contract waiting for her. She has already well established herself as a world-class runner.

But that stuff can wait. Barringer has one final goal to attain.

Barringer and the Buffs head to Terra Haute, Ind., on Monday for the NCAA cross country championships. It's the one accolade that's eluded her decorated career, an individual title that her coach deems "the most prestigious in all NCAA sports" — and it was worth coming back for.

"I think that this race, more than any other race, is about who I am, more than just what I do," Barringer said. "And it's about putting myself in a very uncomfortable and difficult position, to finish what I started."

Following the summer Olympics in Beijing, Barringer opted to sit out the 2008 cross country season, mostly because she wanted to have something left in the tank for the track season. So she redshirted and idly watched on the sidelines as her teammates struggled through an uncharacteristically down year.

This season, with Barringer leading the way with her undefeated record (four first-place finishes in four races), CU is projected to contend for a podium spot Monday. That, Barringer said, was another large factor in the decision to come back.

"I hope that I'm a better teammate now than some big, awesome legacy," Barringer said. "I really hope that's what's resonating with the women and that I can be one of five Monday."

To freshman runner Allie McLaughlin, that message was received loud and clear.

Not knowing what to expect from a runner of Barringer's caliber, McLaughlin entered this season with an uncertainty of how to act around the U.S. steeple-chase record holder. But soon after Barringer had the entire team over for dinner, McLaughlin realized she was different.

"When we're not running, she's totally one of us," McLaughlin said. "She's not off on doing her own thing."

Even still, Barringer's loyalty was hard to comprehend.

"I was running at the Big 12 championships, and Jenny had already finished the race in first," McLaughlin said. "I passed a girl and got into second, and I seriously remember thinking, 'I wonder if Jenny will be excited for me?'"

"I've never really had a thought like that before. You're so worried about your own race. But then I crossed the finish line, and she was so excited. It was awesome. She's been such a great teammate."

Talk about a coach's dream.

Mark Wetmore talks about hitting the lottery by landing a runner like Barringer, a Florida native who could have gone anywhere she wanted to out of high school.

"A college coach deals with people in a volatile period in their lives. The establishment of identity and the establishment of autonomy that takes place between 17 and 22 means that an athlete is different every year, different every season," Wetmore said. "It is a great comfort to a coach ... to win the lottery of an athlete who just says, 'How far? How much? How fast? How soon?'"

"I can't remember in four and half years Jenny ever saying to me, 'Why are we doing this?' which is pretty common with people in that age period."

Barringer said it's that trust she's built with Wetmore and assistant Heather Burroughs that will likely keep her in Boulder for her professional career.

But first things first.

"She could thinking about legacy. She could be thinking about professional contracts. She could be thinking about a Ferrari 599 GTB ... or a Tesla," Wetmore said. "But she's been hearing from me and she's been hearing from Heather Burroughs, 'Stay on task. This would be a really cool thing if we could do it, so let's focus on that.'"

"So legacies and Teslas are for Tuesday."

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