

CU's Nelson back where he belongs

Former Buff returns to help team, himself

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Balch Fieldhouse on the University of Colorado campus is nearly empty this late December afternoon. CU is on its winter break; the students have left, the football-game hot dog and nachos carts stored away until another season. At a far end of the track, Colorado track coaches Mark Wetmore and Heather Burroughs watch a fit and fast athlete skimming over hurdles like a water bug scurrying across a pond.

"Good job, Billy," Wetmore says quietly as the runner, Olympic steeplechaser Billy Nelson, the Colorado assistant track coach and recruiting coordinator, finishes up a series of hurdle drills.

Burroughs then unlocks one of the doors overlooking Folsom Field, and Nelson goes down the steps until he is near the field.

"Start here, coach?" he yells. Nelson then bounds up the steps, driving and pumping his arms, until he stops in front of Burroughs and Wetmore, deep in oxygen debt. The drills finished, Nelson returns to the fieldhouse to help store the hurdles.

If Nelson, 26, looks comfortable in the fieldhouse, it is likely because he spent five years as an undergraduate at CU. Then, after making the 2008 Olympic team a month after his senior year, he signed a professional contract and moved to Eugene, Ore., in the fall of 2008 to compete for the Oregon Track Club.

Now, Nelson has returned home, to raise his family in Longmont; help CU get the best prep runners here as the track team's recruiting coordinator; and to see how much faster he can run in the 3,000 meter steeplechase. He and wife, Alisa, have two children, Arabella, 3, and a new son, Noah.

"At the time it was the best move for me to make financially for my family," Nelson said of his move to Oregon. "With my contract and the perks of running for the club, we were able to live a comfortable life. But in two years my running suffered, and I needed to get back to what was working in the past."

What worked for Nelson is what has worked for many other top collegians in Wetmore's 16 years at Colorado, from Adam and Kara Goucher to Dathan Ritzenhein to Sara Slattery and Renee Metivier. It is a simple, patient approach to training that emphasizes building a strong aerobic base, based in part on principles developed by the late, famed New Zealand coach, Arthur Lydiard, one of Wetmore's mentors.

After contacting Burroughs and Wetmore during the summer, Nelson accepted the assistant coach/recruiting coordinator position. The job allows him to train with the team, and highlights Nelson's effusive personality, one that made him a team favorite during his undergraduate years.

"I was really excited to be working with coach Wetmore and Burroughs again for my own individual running, but helping out with the team that made me an Olympian is "icing on the cake," said Nelson. "I love this job and I hope to be a part of the program for years to come."

According to Wetmore, Nelson has already made an impact. "We expect to have our best recruiting class in years," Wetmore said.

Perhaps the presumptive Buffs are impressed by Nelson's own development at CU. He had a very good high school senior year in Taft, Calif., winning the California state cross-country championship. His freshman year at Colorado, Nelson won the U.S. junior cross-country title and competed at the World Championships in Switzerland. He capped his first year of college by winning the U.S. junior 5,000 meter title.

Nelson made steady progress at CU, capped by a steeplechase best of 8 minutes, 21 seconds, a second place in the

NCAA championships, and racing in the Olympic Games. Locals will remember his steeple win in the Big 12 outdoor track championships at Potts Field, helping the Buffs win the conference crown.

Then the money came, and Nelson left. Now he is back, in large part because of Wetmore and Burroughs.

"I trust them completely with my success, and I believe that they are the best coaches in the business," said Nelson, who is still sponsored by Nike. "They have made me into the runner I am today, and they really want me to succeed. For steeplechase alone, coach Wetmore is the best steeple coach in the country.

"I wanted to show them that I am 100-percent committed."

One sign of Nelson's maturity and commitment is how he now views the weekly 8 a.m. Sunday morning long runs, a staple of Wetmore's program.

Often, these runs are done up on Magnolia Road west of town, where biting winds, rolling hills and a solid pace can sometimes sap the enthusiasm of even the most dedicated runner.

"I love the long run now. It is one of my favorites," said Nelson. "I definitely feel like I have come home. I moved here at the age of 17 and I feel like this could be my settling place. It is a great town to raise a family and obviously has great schools.

"The running in Boulder is unmatched by any other place in the nation and most of my friends live here as well. I am glad to be back."

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