

CU hopes to honor fallen skier Nelson

Bufs will attempt to end DU's 3-year NCAA title reign

By Chris Shelton Camera Sports Writer
Boulder Daily Camera

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Spencer Nelson grew up a Buff fan, dreaming about leading the Colorado ski team to a national title.

But his accidental death last August cut short his vision.

So the Buffs are going to honor him the best way they know how, and their quest begins today when the ski team kicks off the winter season at the Utah Invitational with -- appropriately enough -- a giant slalom race (Nelson's best event last year).

"It's absolutely how we're going to honor his presence with us," head coach Richard Rokos said. "We're going to try to honor him by winning a (national) title.

"He was dreaming about it, and hopefully we'll complete that goal."

The Buffs have been a runner-up at the NAAs for the past three years.

Nelson was a key component to last year's title bid when he took seventh in the giant slalom at the RMISA championships. His finish helped the Buffs qualify a full 12-skier team for the NCAA championships.

As a true freshman last year, Nelson captured 21st in the giant slalom at the NCAA championships. But after his promising freshman season, Nelson died in a hiking accident in the Maroon Bells near Aspen.

In trying to achieve their goal of winning one for Nelson, the Buffs will need a more balanced team this year.

Last year's strength of the team was in its Nordic skiers, and it could be again this year. But Rokos is encouraged by preseason results from several of his Alpine skiers who competed this fall in FIS-sanctioned and Nor-Am Cup races.

"The Nordic team is the cornerstone of our operation," Rokos said. "We have to build around our Nordic team. But the Alpine team is doing well. Their confidence level is pretty high this year."

Senior Alexa Turzian is coming off a second-place finish in the 15K Freestyle at last winter's NCAA championships. Also back are junior Eliska Hajkova (third in freestyle, seventh in 5K Classic) and sophomore Joanne Reid (fifth in Classic, 10th in Freestyle).

The men's Nordic team looks to be led by senior Vegard Kjoelhamar, who took fourth at the NAAs last year in the 10K Classic.

The women's alpine team returns two of its top three slalom racers from a year ago in senior Katie Hartman (seventh at NAAs) and sophomore Erika Ghent (sixth). The men's top returning alpine skier is expected to be senior Gabriel Rivas (16th in giant slalom).

Rokos enters his 21st season trying to guide the Buffs to their 17th NCAA championship and trying to knock off three-peat national champs, Denver.

"It doesn't change too much," Rokos said of the team's national title aspirations. "It's the same every year. We'll try to do our best."

Notable

CU will compete in slalom races Sunday, while the Nordic events of the Utah Invitational won't be held until Jan. 21-22 because the U.S. National Championships in Nordic races are being held this weekend in Maine. ... Rivas heads into the season having won a slalom race on the Nor-Am Cup circuit in Val St. Come, Quebec, earlier this month. ... Hartman also enjoyed some success in the college offseason, winning both an FIS and Nor-Am Cup Super-G race this winter. ... Colorado's roster includes two racers from the Boulder Nordic Junior Racing Team -- junior Katie Stege of Leadville and freshman Spencer Lacy of Boulder. ... Reid won a U.S. Cross Country national championship Friday when she took first in the 5K junior freestyle in Rumford, Maine. Reid also won a spot on the U.S. ski team's World Junior Championships. She will compete in the Junior World Cross Country Championships in Estonia on Jan. 25-31.

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