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A Brief Chat With Emma Coburn

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By Peter Gambaccini

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Emma Coburn of the University of Colorado won the 3000-meter steeplechase at the recent NCAA Championships in 9:41.14; Stephanie Garcia of the University of Virginia was second in 9:47.29 and Coburn's CU teammate Shayla Kipp was third in 9:56.37. Coburn had been the NCAA runner-up in 2010. She's been the Big 12 Conference steeplechase champion twice and ran her best time of 9:40.51 as she won at the Payton Jordan Cardinal Invitational at Stanford on May 1.

Coburn, a business major, will compete in the steeplechase at the USATF Championships in Eugene, Oregon. Her semifinal is on June 24. In Crested Butte, Colorado, she set school records for 400, 800, 1600, and 3200 meters and the high jump, and in 2008, she was second at the 2008 Nike Outdoor Nationals in the 2000-meter steeplechase.

Was going to the USATF Championships in the plans all along for you? It's a long college season with Big 12s and Regionals and NCAAs. Were you playing this by ear or did you and the coaches have it in mind all along that you would be doing the USA meet?

Emma Coburn: This year it was definitely something that we wanted to do all along. The season had been going pretty well and after the Payton Jordan meet, we figured that I should go to USAs. I'm excited to try it out for the first time and test the waters a little bit there. I think it's going to be fun.

Some people who've excelled in the recent past, like Jenny Simpson and Anna Pierce, aren't going to be doing the steeple. Maybe you thought you might have a chance of going to Daegu for the World Championships, but now it appears we could almost expect you to be in the top three and make it Daegu. Is that your estimation of the situation?

EC: (Laughs shyly) Not totally. I'd say I have the third fastest time coming in so far this year, so I think it's going to be a fight for those top three spots. I think there are four or five girls who will be able to fight for those spots. I don't think it's an expectation that I make it, but being seeded third going in there, I have a little better hope that I'll make it through (according to an USATF list of 2011 marks through June 8, Coburn actually ranks second behind Sara Hall). I've been obviously racing a little bit more than all these girls so far so on paper, I might be a little more fatigued, but I feel great and I'm ready to roll.

The usual route for someone who makes the U.S. team would be to go over to Europe and do some races and then show up at Worlds. But having raced as much as you have, would you try and sustain a racing peak all through that period or would you back off and rest a little here?

EC: I think if I were to make it, I would take a little bit of rest, just a little short break and not go to Europe right away and maybe go right before Daegu maybe just for some little tune-up races. But I have a fall cross country season to be peaking for as well so it would be a little crazy for me to be training hard all summer and then just go right into cross country. I think it would ruin my cross country season. Still being in college, you still have your loyalty to you teammates in the fall.

You were the favorite going into the NCAA steeplechase, but for quite a bit of the race you got a pretty good challenge from Stephanie Garcia of Virginia, who was just a bit behind you. But your cadence was very regular. Your form seemed very relaxed in the steeplechase. It doesn't seem like you tense up because you have somebody on your shoulder. Are you very aware of that, thinking "let's not blow my cool here?"

EC: Yeah, definitely. Thanks for saying that. That feels good, that someone else thinks that. In a championships race, I'd never been in the position of being the favorite coming in. So I talked a lot with my coaches, not even about race strategy but just about staying calm. In my college running career, I've always had people racing right around me, but the steeples this year so far had been kind of solo efforts. So I hadn't had someone next to me in the steeplechase for that long in a while, so that was a little different. But it was just all about not freaking out and realizing that it's a 3000-meter race and that if it came down to it in the last 150, I was confident in myself to be able to close well. It definitely was a little weird feeling but I think I managed the stress of that pretty well and stayed calm.

So at USATFs, with Sara Hall and Bridget Franek and Lisa Aguilera, who ran 9:24 last year, you could have a lot of company in the last 800 of the race. Do you talk to your coaches about psychological preparedness for that?

EC: We haven't really talked about that yet. Maybe we will. But so far, I managed the stress well at NCAAs. Going into USAs, the mindset's just a little different. I know that I'm going to have that company. People stress out in races when

they're surprised or things go not according to plan. Nothing's going to surprise me at USAs. I'm not going to be surprised if there are six of us (close together) with 1K to go or 800 to go or 400 to go. That will help, just knowing that that's going to happen and being mentally prepared for that.

I know Mark Wetmore is the Colorado head coach, but is there a women's coach or steeplechase coach whom you work with?

EC: There's Mark and then there's Heather Burroughs. She's the assistant for both men and women. She's great, and both Mark and Heather know so much about the steeplechase and have had so much success at it. Both of them are experts, and it's really nice to have such confidence in my coaches and feel like I'm in the best hands there are. And then we have an assistant this year, Billy Nelson, a former Olympian, and he obviously is pretty great at the steeple. It's good to be able to see his form and watch him go over the water barriers and the dry barriers. It's one thing to have Coach Wetmore and Coach Burroughs explain it but then to see it, through Billy, helps a lot. So I've got a pretty good set-up here.



Is there something specific you can remember that Billy or one of the coaches has pointed out to you about the way you were steepling that has made a big difference to you—maybe the way you were handling the water barrier? Can you remember a specific instruction they gave which made you think "oh yeah, right?"

EC: I can't remember back to my freshman year any specific advice but now it's evolved to be pretty natural so there aren't any more "a-ha" moments about it. Shayla Kipp and I are just told to try and be like Billy on the water jumps, to try and emulate him and we try our best to do that. That's probably the biggest "a-ha" moment of this year. Billy's really efficient and really relaxed and he doesn't let the water jump impede his pace or his effort level. We just try and be like Billy and make it as smooth as possible and as easy as possible.

At Crested Butte in high school, you were the school record-holder at distances ranging down as low as 400 meters, but you did do the 2000-meter steeplechase at Nike Outdoor Nationals. Despite the range you had, were you already thinking by your senior year in high school "the steeplechase could be my event."

EC: Yeah. I should tell you that I'm from a school that has 80 kids in the whole entire high school, so those school records are kind of laughable now. I didn't even know I wanted to run in college until I started doing well in the steeplechase and I realized "oh, this is fun, this is a cool event." That was my number one goal after junior year at nationals; I placed fourth. It was just kind of in the back of my head "oh, I could maybe be a college steeplechaser." So that was definitely the event that propelled me into college running.

And Jenny Barringer, at Colorado, had already won an NCAA steeplechase championships as a freshman, so you knew you were going to be in that kind of company.

EC: CU just has such a storied distance program and its such an honor to be part of it. The success in the steeplechase has just been incredible. I didn't think I'd ever be good enough to go to CU so I started looking at other schools and taking a couple of visits and then Coach Wetmore and Coach Burroughs called and told me I could come on a visit and it was a dream come true. When I got here, the icing on the cake was that they have this incredible steeple program and Jenny and Billy had done so well at it.

Like a lot of people, when I hear 'Crested Butte,' I think of skiing. Did you ski a lot?

EC: In elementary school in Crested Butte, once a week you have a ski day and in high school, one of our gym classes was just to go skiing. I skied three times a week growing up, and it was just incredible, and I snowboarded. Crested Butte is just a really special place and skiing there growing up was great, but then my junior year in high school I had a couple of injuries, mainly from trying to run cross country and play volleyball at the same time. That's kind of difficult on your body. I was also playing basketball at the time (in the winter) and had to make my priorities. I didn't ski my whole junior year and my senior year I was just a little nervous about it. I've been skiing just once or twice since I've been in college.

So you were on cross country and volleyball teams in the same season in high school.

EC: Yeah, I did four sports a year in high school. In the fall, I did cross country and volleyball, where we'd have our volleyball end-of-the-year tournament the night before the state cross country meet. I'd play volleyball games and then have to go run state. In one game, I sprained my ankle and had to run cross country the next day. It was dramatic.

I've seen you on Flotrack, and now we're interviewing you. Are you being besieged by media opportunities and photo shoots at this point?

EC: No, not too bad. People are really sweet around Boulder and in my hometown and they get excited about every little thing I do. The local (Boulder) paper and Crested Butte paper always call and do a little story or take a picture but it's not too bad. The sportswriter in Crested Butte, Than Acuff, was writing about my middle school track races and middle school basketball games when I was 11 or 12, so I always have time for him; he's a great guy. No, it hasn't been too overwhelming. It's mostly people that I know about and care about.

So will you have all three seasons of collegiate eligibility left in the coming academic year?

EC: Yeah, I do. Depending on how this summer goes, hopefully I won't be too tired for cross country and I can perform well in that. And then we'll see what makes sense for the rest of the year.

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