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Colorado charges to commanding lead

Written by

Adam White
Free Press correspondent

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STOWE — With a stampede to the finish line that would have made Ralphie, their Buffalo mascot, proud, the University of Colorado's Nordic skiers helped the school take charge of the 2011 NCAA championships Friday at Trapp Family Lodge.

Colorado's Reid Fletcher and Eliska Hajkova topped the podium in the men's 20-kilometer and women's 15K classic races to help lift the Buffaloes to 647 points and a sizeable lead in the team competition. Colorado holds an 84.5-point cushion over second-place Utah with one event to go, today's slalom races at Stowe Mountain Resort's Spruce Peak.

"I have huge confidence in our teams, both guys and girls — I knew we would put up some big numbers," said Fletcher, whose late surge in an otherwise nip-and-tuck race helped him seize his first national crown in a time of 1 hour, 5 minutes, 31.4 seconds. "We don't want to start celebrating too early, but it should be pretty exciting (on Saturday)."

The host University of Vermont Catamounts continued struggling to deliver on the top ranking they carried into the NCAAs. UVM

placed only one skier in the top 10 of either classic race — Amy Glen, who took sixth in the women's 15K — and slipped from fourth to fifth in the team standings with 451.5 points.

"We just had bad luck today," said UVM's Caitlin Patterson, who settled for 23rd place after falling victim to one of two Catamount crashes on the first lap of the women's race.

Putting the hammer down

The men's 20K race saw a sizeable pack of frontrunners slowly shrink over its four laps, until the 39-skier field became a 10-man battle over the final 5 kilometers. A laska-Anchorage freshman Erik Bjornsen held the lead heading into the last lap, but Colorado's Fletcher and Vegard Kjoelhamar, and New Mexico's Tor-hakon Hellebostad stayed glued to the tails of the Seawolf's skis.

The pack motored along elbow-to-elbow

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until the final 1½ kilometers, when Hellebostad made his bid to pull away — and Fletcher recognized the race was going to be decided right there and then. Summoning every ounce of his reserve strength, the Buffalo shot in front and never looked back.

“I saw Tor-hakon put the hammer down, and when he pulled into the left lane, I made my move,” Fletcher said. “I got a gap, and was able to hold it all the way to the finish line.”

“When Reid made his kick, I decided to stay in the pack and save enough strength to out-sprint a couple of guys at the finish,” said Bjornsen, who placed second in 1:05:35.7. Kjoelhamar finished third in 1:05:37.0, ahead of Hellebostad (fourth) and Utah’s Didrik Smith (fifth) and Miles Havlick (sixth).

Vermont’s top finisher was Scott Patterson, who placed 20th in 1:07:54.3. The freshman fell behind early but made up a sizeable chunk of ground as the race progressed.

“The snow was really soft, so I had trouble keeping up when I was double-poling,” Patterson said. “And I just wasn’t kicking very well because I chose the wrong skis. Overall, it just wasn’t my day.”

Teammates Franz Bernstein (31st, 1:10:21.7) and Alex Howe (36th, 1:11:34.2) also failed to help UVM close the gap in the point standings.

Middlebury senior and Charlotte native

Chase Marston landed in 16th place with a time of 1:07:36.3.

Cat and mouse

The women’s race was a classic cat-and-mouse affair as the top two finishers from Wednesday’s freestyle event — winner Maria Graefnings of Utah and runner-up Hajkova — traded the lead several times. Hajkova didn’t shake free until the last 500-yard stretch.

“I think I’m a better sprinter than she is,” Hajkova said. “We’ve raced each other before, and I thought that if I waited until the end, I could jump (ahead).”

Hajkova’s first national crown was won in 53:33.3, while Graefnings crossed the line just behind her in 53:37.5.

“Eliska was just super strong at the end,” Graefnings said. “But to win (Wednesday) and get second today, I’m satisfied.”

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Alaska-Anchorage's Jaime Bronga rounded out the podium with a third-place finish in 54:09.6, ahead of Utah's Zoe Roy (fourth), Colorado's Joanne Reid (fifth) and UVM's Glen.

The Catamount junior — who was the recipient of the NCAA's Elite 88 Award on Tuesday in recognition of her perfect 4.0 grade point average — made steady progress throughout the race, moving from 20th at the 5K mark to 12th at 10K before finishing with a steam-engine kick on the final ascent.

Glen credited several factors for her strong 54:39.1 showing in spite of steady rain.

"It was definitely a crazy day, but I had a lot of fun," Glen said. "I had good skis and solid kick the whole race. I was able to stay right with the pack, and on the final lap I had a lot of energy left and really went for it."

Things didn't go nearly so smoothly for UVM teammates Caitlin Patterson and Lucy Garrec, both of whom crashed on the race's first lap. Garrec saw Patterson (23rd, 57:13.0) go down ahead of her and, after clearing that scene, fell while trying to avoid still another crash victim.

"A girl went down ahead of me and I thought I could get by, but I got sucked into the deep, wet snow on the side and ended up flat on my back," said Garrec, who ended up 25th in 57:30.2. "I probably lost about a minute there, but what can you do? You can't give up."

Dartmouth cashed in another seventh-place finish in the women's race, thanks to Rosie Brennan (54:50.2). Big Green teammates Erika Flowers and Sophie Caldwell formed a mini-grouping in 17th and 18th place.

H.S. sports blog

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