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Western schools have the depth to test UVM

There's a Buffalo standing in the University of Vermont's path to an ski championship this week.

There's also a Ute, a Pioneer, a Lobo and maybe even a Seawolf.

Colorado, second to UVM in skiracing.com's latest power rankings, has been the best of the West for most of the season. The Buffaloes won the Rocky Mountain Intercollegiate Association title last weekend, defeating Utah and New Mexico.

Colorado has extra motivation as the team has dedicated the season to the memory of Spencer Nelson, who died in a hiking accident last summer.

A promising Alpine , Nelson qualified for the NCAAs as a freshman last year and his death has galvanized the Buffaloes.

"He was a big talent, an exciting skier," said longtime Colorado coach Richard Rokos. "His loss was a big motivation for the team. It shows how fragile life can be, and reminds us to enjoy life day-by-day."

Colorado has won five NCAA titles under Rokos since the co-ed format began in 1983. The Buffs last won in 2006 at Steamboat Springs, Colo.

One of Colorado's NCAA qualifiers, Eric Davis, is out with a concussion and will be replaced by Max Lamb, Rokos said. The women's Alpine team is led by All-American Caroline Nordh, who finished fourth in slalom at the regionals. The women's GS race was canceled due to heavy snow.

Colorado's Nordic team is deep, led by All-American Eliska Hajkova, who won the 5-

kilometer freestyle and 15K classic races at the regionals in Park City, Utah.

Rokos expects a tight race for the team title with the final event — Saturday's slalom runs — likely to decide the winner.

"It's very unpredictable," he said of the slalom. "You could fall or miss a gate and lose everything."

The Western wildcard is Denver, the three-time defending NCAA champion. The Pioneers are built for the season's final meet — having won only one regular-season event during their three-championship run.

"We're never a favorite," said Denver Nordic coach David Stewart, a 2000 UVM graduate. "Our goal is always to qualify a full team, and have our skiers improve each year and during each season."

Denver's road to a four-peat will be tougher as GS standout Leif Kristian Haugen did not return to school this year, and Alpine racers Grant Jampolsky and A.J. Abrams are out with injuries.

"We lost a lot of points (when Haugen left)," Alpine coach Andy Leroy said. "But we hope the (late-season) magic works again."

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Those losses leave the men's team counting on Andreas Kilde, also recovering from injury, and Seppi Stiegler. The women's Alpine team is led by Sterling Grant, winner of the regional slalom race, Ida Dillingoen, and Killington's Lindsay Cone.

A look at the other leading Western teams:

UTAH: Finished second in the regionals, getting wins from Jeremy Elliot in the GS and Miles Havlick in the 10K freestyle. Alpine skier Eva Huckova won four races this season and Nordic competitor Maria Graefnings won seven of eight regular-season races. Ranked third by skiracing.com. Ten-time NCAA champion.

NEW MEXICO: Peter Brenna beat Denver's Stiegler to win the men's slalom in Park City last week. Tor-Haken Hellebostad finished second in the men's 10K freestyle at the Western regionals at the 2002 Olympic venue at Soldier Hollow.

ALASKA-ANCHORAGE: Qualified only 11 of a possible 12 skiers but ended the season strong, finishing fifth last weekend. Alex Parker took third in the women's slalom and Halfdan Falkum-Hansen placed second in the men's GS at Park City.

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