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Written by Than Acuff

Wednesday, 11 April 2012

"Only last year did I think it was a reality"

The Olympic seed was planted in Crested Butte's Emma Coburn's mind back when she was running track in high school, though she admits the idea seemed ridiculous at the time.

"Trent Sanderson mentioned it and I thought he was crazy and insane," says Coburn.

Now, that idea is well within reason after the past year brought a list of staggering accomplishments. Coburn has turned the corner and is preparing for a spot on the United States track and field team at the 2012 Summer Olympic Games in London, England.

"Only in the last year did I really think it was a reality," says Coburn.

Coburn is on a full-ride scholarship at the University of Colorado and has been tearing up the collegiate scene in the 3,000-meter steeplechase, including racking up a national title as a junior.

The Olympic idea took one huge step to becoming a reality last spring at the annual Payton Jordan Invitational in May, where Coburn ran a personal record time of 9:40 to win the event. More important, Coburn's time was two seconds faster than the Olympic "A" standard of 9:42. There are two requirements for steeplers to reach the Olympics, the first of which is running an Olympic "A" standard.

On May 15, 2011 Coburn defended her Big 12 title and then won her first NCAA collegiate national title in June, winning the steeplechase in a time of 9:41.

The next test for Coburn came June 23-25, 2011 when she headed to Oregon for the United States Track and Field (USTAF) national championships.

A top-three finish at the U.S. national championships would punch her ticket to the IAAF World Championships in Daegu, South Korea. She secured her trip to the world championships when she won the USTAF 3,000-meter steeplechase. Then, in a lead-up race to the world championships, Coburn set a new personal record time of 9:37.16 at the London Grand Prix.

Facing the top steeplers in the World in South Korea, Coburn took fourth place in her qualifying heat and finished 13th overall in the finals.

Now, it's the countdown to the Olympics. In an effort to focus her training on her Olympic dream, Coburn will not run as a CU Buffalo this year.

"I'm red-shirting the NCAA so I can prepare for the Olympics," says Coburn. "The training is all the same, the main difference is I'm just racing a lot less."

Coburn admits that she'll miss the racing aspect this spring and that, at times, the workouts tend to wear on her.

"I've probably been running more than ever before, just racing less," says Coburn. "If there's a really hard workout, I just think of the Olympics. I'm feeling good and the training is going really well."

And while the thought of the Olympics crosses her mind once, maybe twice, a week, she's taking it all in stride.

"It's not an overwhelming or daunting feeling," says Coburn. "It's excitement."

Coburn will open her race schedule in May back at the Payton Jordan Invitational and then follow up with a race in Occidental, Calif., but she will be running the 1,500 meters at those rather than the steeplechase.

"I want to get some speed in me and get race ready," says Coburn.

Her first steeplechase race will be at the Prefontaine Classic in Oregon in June.

"That will be a good gauge of where I'm at," says Coburn. "Hopefully I can open up fast, run 9:35 or under."

Three weeks later, Coburn will need to pass the second requirement to make the Olympics. With her Olympic "A" standard time already in the bag, she then needs to finish top three at the USTAF championships June 22-July 1 in Hayward, Oregon. The same race she won last year.

"I'm really glad I went last year," says Coburn. "The hype is much more this year because it's the Olympic qualifier but the athletes are the same. Had I not gone last year I expect I would be more overwhelmed. Now that I've done it once, I'm a little more confident."

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