

CU Buffs women's cross country team loaded for deep run

Whether Emma Coburn participates or not, Wetmore optimistic

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There was some excitement in Colorado track and cross country coach Mark Wetmore's voice Saturday morning as he reeled off the details of Emma Coburn's latest performance in the 3,000-meter steeplechase earlier in the day.

Competing at the Aviva London Grand Prix, the CU senior took eighth place against an elite international field. Her time of 9 minutes, 37.16 seconds was a three-second personal best and the seventh-best mark ever by an American. The NCAA and U.S. champ is ranked 20th in the world this year.

Whether the Buffs get to carry the excitement surrounding Coburn into the cross country season remains to be seen. The Crested Butte product might need time to recover from a rigorous summer of racing before she begins preparations for an Olympic push in 2012.

"Every decision we make with her this year has to be filtered through the Olympic Trials and Olympic Games," Wetmore said at CU's annual media day for its fall sports programs.

Not that the Buffs will be writing off their season if they don't have Coburn. Of the seven runners who led CU to a sixth-place finish at the NCAA championships last fall, only Laura Thweatt graduated. And Wetmore said Saturday that he expects his squad to be better than it was a year ago.

"We have most of the central cast back," Wetmore said.

After returning from London, Coburn will next head to Korea for one or two races before arriving back in Boulder on the eve of the Buffs' first meet of the season. Wetmore said he and Coburn would meet then to see if they think competing this fall would be beneficial. If she doesn't run this year, she would be able to use her final cross country season of eligibility next fall.

Coburn finished 53rd at the NCAA cross country meet last fall, third in line for the Buffs. While she is a dynamo on the track, the Buffs feel like they've got the firepower to soften the blow of her absence on the turf.

Junior Laura Tremblay is back after leading CU with a 23rd-place finish at NCAAs last fall, as is sophomore Shalaya Kipp, who took 40th. Camille Logan, Katie Cumming and Rachel Viger also competed at nationals for the Buffs last fall. And CU could get a boost from sophomore Allie McLaughlin if she returns to the freshman form that propelled her to a fifth-place finish in 2009 before she redshirted last year with injuries.

"There's eight or nine good women, so we can afford to have somebody stumble a little bit and there's another runner coming in a few seconds," Wetmore said.

Of course, the margin for error gets smaller for the Buffs as they try to get back into the mode of winning conference titles. That's because a move to the Pac-12 Conference means the Buffs will be facing the toughest competition in the country, even if the new league meet is the only real change on the team's schedule.

On the women's side, Washington, Oregon, Stanford and Arizona were all top-10 squads last year.

Wetmore said a bad day at the Big 12 Conference meet usually meant a second-place finish.

"Now we could have an off day and finish fifth," he said.

The CU men will be trying to rebound this fall from a disappointing 15th-place finish at nationals last year that was the program's lowest since missing the NCAA meet in 1991.

But they, too, have plenty of talent returning, with junior Joe Bosshard (26th), senior Andy Wacker (37th) and senior Christian Thompson (90th) having led the way for the Buffs at the NAAs. Richard Medina could also return after a year off to give them another top-60 NCAA performer.

"We have a good core of people going into this year, a little more experienced and a little hungrier," Wetmore said.

Aric Van Halen and Monarch High product Cameron Clayton also return from CU's NCAA team of a year ago.

That's not to mention some talented freshmen who could make their way into the lineup. Ammar Moussa from Arcadia, Calif., is a two-time state champ who was fourth at Nike Cross Country Nationals last fall and took 32nd at the IAAF world championships junior men's race in Spain in March. Arapahoe star Connor Winter, meanwhile, is also joining the Buffs after dominating this state's prep ranks in recent years.

But Wetmore suggested that he would want to be sure his freshmen could score for the team before he burned a year of their eligibility.

"All of those guys could help us," Wetmore said of his freshmen. "But we've just got to be smart about how soon we suit them up and count them."

2011 CU cross country schedule

Note: Home meets upper case and at CU South Campus.

Sept. 3 -- ALUMNI OPEN TIME TRIAL

Oct. 1 -- ROCKY MOUNTAIN SHOOTOUT

Oct. 16 -- at Pre-NCAA Invitational, Terre Haute, Ind.

Oct. 29 -- at Pac-12 Championships, Tempe, Ariz.

Nov. 12 -- at NCAA Mountain Region Championship, Provo, Utah

Nov. 21 -- at NCAA Championships, Terre Haute, Ind.

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