



*CU's Shalaya Kipp (right) negotiates a water barrier in the 3,000 steeplechase.
Photo Courtesy: Casey Malone, CU Athletics*



Brooks: Trio Of Buffs Awaits NCAA Track Nationals

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BOULDER - After her initial experience with the 3,000 meter steeplechase, Shalaya Kipp's wildest dreams wouldn't have included what the future held in that new and frequently formidable event.

Late in her freshmen year at the University of Colorado, track coach Mark Wetmore approached her at a practice and asked her to stick around afterwards and "try some hurdles," speculating that "maybe the steeplechase would be right for you."

Kipp complied, but the hurdles didn't.

Recalled Kipp with a laugh: "He told me not to stay after again . . . it wasn't good, wasn't pretty. But about a month later, he said let's resurrect this steeplechase idea - and this time we stuck with it."

And, yes, the steeplechase was indeed right for her. Was it ever. For the third consecutive year, Kipp has qualified for the NCAA nationals, to be held next week in Des Moines, Iowa. In the past two years, she's finished fifth and third, respectively, and now is hoping trip No. 3 takes her to the top.

"It really makes me trust my coaches every year that you qualify and improve. It's exciting; it never gets old," said Kipp, a junior from Salt Lake City who qualified for the nationals by winning her section of the NCAA West

regional steeplechase competition last weekend in Austin, Texas. Her time was 9:53.38.

She'll be joined in Des Moines by another pair of CU athletes. Graduate student Jessica Tebo, a multiple NCAA champ at the Division II level when she was at Seattle Pacific, will compete in the 5,000 meters, while junior Aric Van Halen will make his NCAA nationals debut in the men's 3,000 meter steeplechase.

Van Halen also won his steeplechase section in Austin - his time was 8:53.04 - while Tebo qualified with a third-place 5k finish clocked at 15:54.12. Kipp's and Tebo's top times - 9:43.09 and 15:19.43, respectively - also are NCAA bests this season in their events.

"Two (Kipp, Tebo) are ranked No. 1 presently, Aric is about 10th or 11th on the NCAA finals list," Wetmore said. "But everybody ran in different conditions and circumstances to get those performances. So really it's now a matter of putting them all in the conditions on the same track on the same day.

"Jessica faces four or five very formidable people, Shalaya has a handful of seconds ahead of most everybody else. But the steeplechase is an eventful event, as I often say. You never know what might happen. And then Aric is a guy whose first goal is to get to the final final - there's two rounds in the steeplechase - and then see what scalps he can get."

Unlike Kipp, who calls the steeplechase "kind of a last-minute decision that's worked out very well for me," Van Halen didn't have to be coaxed into the event. He enrolled at CU with competing in the steeplechase foremost in his mind because he "thought it would be a lot of fun and would sort of break things up . . . it's definitely lived up to what I thought it would be."

But both Kipp and Van Halen point to the physical toll their event takes. Its distance demands endurance, its hurdles and barriers require agility and athleticism. "Your body gets beat up . . . I'd only done 5ks before; after a steeple you feel like you've done six 5ks or something," said Kipp, an accomplished cross country participant. "I knew CU was this steeplechase powerhouse, but I never saw myself doing it until it was suggested to me."

Kipp believes she's in the best shape of her life: "I don't think I felt this fresh last year (before the NCAAs). I've just worked harder; I feel fitter and can handle the pounding of the steeple and the demand on my body."

For the first time, Van Halen faces the double challenge of running a qualifying race to reach the finals. "I tried doubling at conference (Pac-12 championships) and it hurt a lot," he said. "At nationals, I have to run a prelim and a final. I've never had to do that . . . it's going to be tough."

But he, too, is buoyed by his physical condition: "I think I'm in the best shape I've ever been in . . . I still need a lot of work to compete with the top three. But that's what I'm hoping for."

Realistically, Van Halen called a win in his event "far away. One of the guys from the East is like 30 seconds faster than I am. I just want to go out there, make it to the finals and compete. Hopefully, I'll make All-American - that's my goal."

Tebo has ample reason to aim higher. Having won a dozen Division II titles at Seattle Pacific, she's experienced at competing in championship races - although this is her first at the Division I level. But she's hoping that prior experience kicks in. Also, she goes to Des Moines mindful that next week is why she settled on CU for graduate work and the next step in her track career.

"It's definitely a step up . . . that's why I came here," she said. "I came (to CU) to reach that next level. I'm thankful that next Saturday is going to be competitive and hopefully it'll help me grow as a runner and reach the next level of competition."

Wetmore is Tebo's kind of coach (demanding) and Tebo is Wetmore's kind of runner (all-out and gritty). Recalling NCAA titles won as an undergraduate at SPU, Tebo said "a couple of championships were won with just

guts, just wanting it more and working harder than everyone else out there . . . that's something I would say I'm good at as a runner. That should help."

Competing last week in the Texas heat might help, too, although Wetmore says "only from the eyeballs up." Still, it was probably a climatic preview of what the trio of Buffs will encounter in Iowa. Noted Kipp: "If we can respond to the heat in Austin, I'm sure we can in Des Moines. Added Tebo on the Texas weather: "It should make Iowa feel a little less uncomfortable. But everyone is racing in the same conditions."

That's the answer that suits Wetmore. An advance forecast shows Des Moines' mid-week weather to be "pretty good," he said, but Saturday's final day temperatures are likely to turn "Austin-like."

Still, as Tebo said, everyone runs, jumps and throws in the same environment and venue: "A track's a track . . . it's an oval and you run around it."

Wetmore downplays any physiological carryover from competing in Austin to a couple of weekends later in Des Moines, but adds, "Having warmed up in 90 degrees and gone to the starting line drenched and tired, maybe there's some form of mental adaptation.

"In fairness, everybody else did it. And in the other region (East), that was conducted in Jacksonville, Florida, which is not known for cool breezes at this time of the year. But few teams are coming from where we're coming from, so it's harder for us."

Maybe harder, but by no means insurmountable - or as Tebo noted, "If I bring my best race I'll have as good a chance as anyone. I'm fine running in any conditions really. I try not to let that ever bother me."

The NCAA nationals run June 6-9 (Wednesday through Saturday) at Des Moines' Drake Stadium.

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