

Bufs' Shalaya Kipp hopes to carry on CU steeplechase tradition

By Brian Howell Buffzone.com Boulder Daily Camera

Posted:

Buffzone.com

The way Colorado has dominated the women's steeplechase of late, it would seem all Shalaya Kipp has to do to win is just show up in black and gold.

Well, maybe it's not that easy.

"Zero," Bufs head coach Mark Wetmore said when asked how much CU's tradition can help Kipp Wednesday night at the NCAA outdoor track and field championships at Drake Stadium in Des Moines, Iowa. "Whatever our tradition is doesn't affect what other people run."

The Bufs have three athletes competing in the nationals this week. Kipp will run in the women's steeplechase semifinals Wednesday night (the finals are scheduled for Friday); Aric Van Halen will run in the men's steeplechase semifinals on Thursday night (finals on Saturday); and Jessica Tebo will compete in the women's 5,000-meter finals on Saturday.

While it won't matter much Wednesday night, CU's tradition in the women's steeplechase is remarkable, as Bufs have won four of the past six national titles.

Jenny (Barringer) Simpson won three national titles, in 2006, 2008 and 2009. A year ago, Emma Coburn, who was second in 2010, won her first national title. Coburn also won the USA championship last year.

"Oh yeah, when you wear a Colorado jersey on the steeple line, you're definitely more noticed," Kipp, a junior, said.

Plenty of eyes will be on Kipp, as she aims to give CU yet another title in this event. Third a year ago, she has the best time in the country this season, at 9 minutes, 43.09 seconds.

"My freshman year I was fifth and last year I was third," she said. "Hopefully if that pattern continues, good things can happen this year again. I feel like I can definitely be competitive. I know I'm in better shape than last year.

"Maybe I can have a good day."

The two women who finished ahead of Kipp last year -- Coburn and Virginia's Stephanie Garcia -- are both redshirting, opening the door for Kipp.

The past two years, Kipp went into nationals with a "get on the podium mentality." She's had a target on her back this year.

"This whole year has kind of been different," she said. "I've had more pressure on my shoulders, people know who I am a little bit more. The whole season has been new and exciting."

She has responded all year. Kipp's season-best time came at the Payton Jordan Cardinal Invite on April 29. Last month, she won the Pac-12 title and the NCAA West Prelim title.

"It's already been a successful season," she said. "If I don't (win), I know I've already improved upon last year and I'm still a young runner. There's still a lot more to come."

Winning the national title would be quite an achievement, however.

"That would be really exciting," she said. "I haven't tried to think too much about it. I don't want to get overly cocky or anything."

Van Halen doesn't have quite the pressure Kipp does, but he, too, is going in hoping for a stellar performance.

"I just want to go out there and make the final and compete with them, and hopefully get All-American," the junior said. "That's my goal."

Van Halen comes in with the 10th-best time in the country (8:42.79). He was second at the Pac-12 meet and third at the West prelims.

"Our reasonable aspiration for him is to get through to the final," Wetmore said. "He's made enormous progress in a year and we're thrilled with everything that's happened so far, but definitely not done yet."

Should Van Halen reach the finals, it'll be the first time he will have to run two meaningful steeplechase races in a weekend.

"It's going to be tough," he said.

It's an experience Van Halen is looking forward to, however.

"I think I'm in the best shape I've ever been in in my entire life," he said. "I still need a lot of work before I'm really competing with the top three, but I think right now this is the best I can hope for."

"This year is just for experience and getting used to it."