



Track coach Mark Wetmore believes Buffs can fare well in Pac-12 meet.
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Brooks: Wetmore Eyeing A Different Trip To Eugene

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BOULDER - Given his background, Mark Wetmore is nearly as familiar with Eugene, Ore., as he is with his living room. Colorado's veteran track and cross country coach might think something was missing from his life if he didn't spend some spring/summer time in Eugene, which likes to think of itself - and few will argue - as the cradle of American running.

All (or most) is well in Wetmore's world; he will travel to Eugene again this spring, but under different circumstances. CU has been in the Pac-12 Conference since last July, and, fittingly, Eugene trumped Southern California as the site of the expanded league's first outdoor track and field championships.

Wetmore can list "multiple reasons" to be excited about taking the Buffaloes to Eugene for the inaugural Pac-12 outdoor meet. One is the city's history: "They've done a few track meets; they know how to put one on. They've done almost as big as there are." Another reason: The weather. Mid-May track stops in the Big 12 Conference were rarely as agreeable or temperate as what Eugene promises. Or as Wetmore said: "For the first time in a long time it's not likely to be 95 degrees."

Boulder's spring weather and CU's facilities sometimes don't collaborate for optimal training. When the calendar flips to about March 15, Wetmore says, "It's very hard for track coaches, particularly coaches of distance runners, to not be impatient for spring. We make our livings outside and we make our livings running around in circles on a track that can't be covered in ice and can't be windblown."

Despite the obstacles, Wetmore & Co. usually fare better than merely getting by. He has a feeling the Pac-12's first outdoor meet will find the Buffs "coming away with points in events that have been rare for us lately. Unfortunately, we may come away from this meet with fewer points in the events we usually are strongest - the middle and long distances.

"The Pac-12 is a different conference in multiple ways from the Big 12 . . . in some ways, not great for us, in some ways better for us. It's an excellent conference at the front of every event. There's no soft event in the Pac-12, but in many events it's a little less deep than the Big 12."

Wetmore is buoyed by the recent performances of Shalaya Kipp in the steeplechase and Jessica Tebo in the 5,000 meters. At last weekend's Payton Jordan Cardinal Invitational at Stanford, Kipp turned in the best collegiate time this year, the fastest by an American and second-fastest in the world - 9:43.09 - in the 3,000-meter steeplechase. Meanwhile, Tebo's time of 15:19.43 in the 5,000 meters was the fastest in the NCAA this season and the second-fastest ever at CU.

Last weekend's competition marked Kipp's first steeplechase in 10 months and Tebo's second race in a year and fourth race in two years, and Wetmore said of both runners: "We'd like to think they've begun the peaking process but certainly haven't peaked in the process."

Other CU athletes who appear capable of producing points in Eugene include Joe Morris in the sprints, Eileen Gehring in the 400 meters, Brianne Beemer and Kyle MacIntosh in the 400m hurdles, Alex Kizirian in the hammer throw, and Kelsey English and Mark Jones in the high jump.

Those Buffs, indicated Wetmore, might find themselves in a more favorable position to score in the Pac-12 than they would have in the school's former conference. Morris, he said, "would be a much darker horse in the Big 12 in the sprint events," while Gehring, a freshman, "is a dark horse here (Pac-12) in the 400, but would be a furlong back in the Big 12. She's going to be a great runner for us and if she can start her career with a couple of points on the conference level, it bodes well for the future. (Beemer and MacIntosh) have a chance to score in the 400 hurdles - and it's been awhile since that happened. Kizirian has thrown well in the hammer and in the high jump if (English and Jones) can have a good weekend, they can be very hot. That's an 'eventful event;' they can go 7-1 one day, 6-9 the next or the other way around."

Combined events in the Pac-12 will be run this Saturday and Sunday, with the championships continuing the following weekend (May 12-13). Wetmore believes CU's women heptathletes and male decathletes could open this weekend "with a handful of points . . . maybe more than a handful."

Realistically, he added, the Buffs will trek to Oregon "with mostly individual aspirations and some secondary team aspirations. With the potential to score in some of these other events and then maybe a good weekend in the middle and long distance events, we could be in the top half (of the conference) maybe. I feel good about our many individual opportunities."

Not that formal introductions were necessary, but the Pac-12 said its official hellos to Wetmore's Buffs last fall at the league's cross country championships in Tempe, Ariz. CU won both the men's and women's titles - a pair of accomplishments Wetmore believed might have stunned "casual track fans in the Pac-12 and around the country," but not too many Pac-12 coaches.

"I don't think we opened many eyes among coaches," he said. "If you ask Oregon, Stanford, Arizona, Washington, Washington State . . . we've all been dealing with each other one way or another for the past 20 years. I guess we disappointed them a little bit going in ranked where we were and winning, but I doubt they were greatly surprised."

Winning their first championship(s) in their new league was accomplished at a pivotal time in Buffs athletics. Until the XC men/women celebrated in the desert, not too many party favors had been handed out until the men's basketball team made its surprising four-day run in L.A. to win the conference's postseason tournament.

Still, Wetmore downplayed any potential fall-to-spring confidence carryover for this and next weekend in Eugene. "These men and women are pretty fire-tempered, battle-tempered; they've been in a lot of big meets," he said. "They went into the Pac-12 cross meet knowing it was possible to win. As I said about our opponents, they weren't shocked and in tears to find out we had 'accidentally' won. So, (winning both titles) lasted a couple of days and then it was back to business as usual - hard training.

"If anything, maybe it reinforced in them that this new set of (Pac-12) opponents is strong, but not unbeatable. Without speaking out of school, we go in with reasonable expectations. With our climate, our indoor facility and our outdoor facility . . . it's going to be awhile before we go in there dreaming of gold."

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