

Mike Sandrock: 'Synergy' helps CU cross country team heading into NCAA championships

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The aspen leaves shimmered a brilliant yellow beneath a deep blue sky up on the Switzerland Trail early one Sunday morning last month as the University of Colorado men's cross country team, all leanness and abs, ran easily west up the old railroad grade.

A few minutes later, a second group, the CU women's team, followed, stepping lightly over the stones as a group of older runners moved to one side to let them pass.

As the Buffs glided by, seeming to skim over the rocky terrain, one of the older runners heading the opposite way shook his head and said, "Man, they were moving, but it looked like they were just jogging."

Well, the Buffs were jogging, even at a 7-minute mile pace or so, up at 8,200 feet of altitude, a place where pines twist defiantly into krummholz formations in the face of harsh winds whipping down from the Continental Divide.

Such is the fitness of the Colorado harriers, that they can run what would be race pace for many, at high altitude, and still recover from a hard effort. (The Buffs had raced at the pre-national meet in Terre Haute, Ind., the previous day).

Turns out that the camaraderie of the group, the easy running and chatter seen that day up on the Switzerland Trail are genuine, and a key reason Colorado swept the Pac 12 Championships on Oct. 29, then advanced through regionals over the weekend -- good signs as the Buffs put in their final preparations for Monday's NCAA championships back in Terre Haute.

"Cross country is different than track," head coach Mark Wetmore said Monday morning when I stopped by the track offices on my morning run. "Everyone is doing the same thing at the same time, but doing it individually. There is a different chemistry on meet day."

The chemistry has percolated well for the Buffs this fall, something the rest of us, with our own teams and running groups and training partners, can learn from. CU's 2011 runners are "very humble," the coach said, which fosters "a mutually supportive culture."

"We believe in the concept of synergy," he said.

For long-time assistant coach Heather Burroughs and Wetmore, ever the sesquipedalian, the Greek idea of working together to produce a sum greater than individual parts is what a team is all about. They have deep squads on both sides this fall, with a nice mix of seniors and freshmen. Assistant coach Billy Nelson, a 2008 U.S. Olympic steeplechaser who has already made his mark by helping recruit the next generation of Buffs, put it this way:

"One of the biggest things this year is that the team is really close. They get along, train well together and like to hang out together. That all helps the team atmosphere."

Which is what is needed for any runner wanting to reach his or her potential, says Boulder Olympic marathon gold medalist Frank Shorter, who will be giving the pre-NCAA meet talk to the collegiate racers at Saturday night's banquet in Terre Haute.

According to Shorter, "Depth always wins out" in cross country. "This depth is established and improved upon by training as a group on both easy and hard runs. Training for cross country is the best way to learn this."

Roger Briggs, a former Fairview coach and teacher, and ex-CU runner, recalls Shorter showing up at Colorado cross country workouts in fall 1971. The then-unknown Shorter began training with the Buffs as he got ready for the 1972 Munich Olympic Games, having moved to Boulder because it was the only city in the nation over a mile high that had an indoor

track.

The reason for jumping in with the CU team for his workouts? Running with the Buffaloes would make him faster.

He remembers doing mile repeats with John Gregorio, John Lunn, Ted Casteneda and Tim Cronin on the dirt roads north of town: "We all got better than we would have training alone."

The message Shorter will give to the collegians Saturday on the eve of what for most will be the most important race of their life: "For many runners, like me, it all started with cross country and what we learned from the day we first showed up; how to set goals, how to train and how to compete, both physically and mentally."

Which is, it seems, a message we can all learn from.

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