

Former CU-Buffs skier coaching for Boulder Junior Nordic Racing Team

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During a rare, late-spring snow dump, Boulder Junior Nordic Racing Team coach Lenka Palanova-Sterling and a gaggle of girls ranging in age from 10 to 13 gracefully ski in circles around North Boulder Park.

At 5-foot-5, the 29-year-old coach blends in easily with the team. The girls take one more lap around the park's tracks while waiting for the boys so practice can begin.

Palanova-Sterling, who's been coaching the development team for the last five years, made her way to Boulder from the Czech Republic, where she grew up skiing and raced for the U-23 national team.

One day, Palanova-Sterling got a call from Boulder. It was Richard Rokos, head ski coach for the University of Colorado-Boulder.

"I thought somebody was playing a prank on me," Palanova-Sterling said. "But I decided I would love to have a college education and teach skiing, so I went for it."

She was 22 when she enrolled at CU. Leaving her home in 2005, Palanova-Sterling remembers experiencing the "shock of the culture change." During her three years of eligibility, the Buffs Nordic team won national championships in 2006 and 2008.

Like many graduating seniors, Palanova-Sterling said she didn't have career plans for after college. She started coaching for the BJNRT, and it became her life, she said.

When there's no snow in Boulder, the team practices at Eldora on weeknights -- a much longer commute than the one Palanova-Sterling had in Harrachov, Czech Republic, when she walked to the trails.

"It's a great thing to give back to the sport you love," she said. "I'm amazed that the kids are willing to drive 45 minutes, ski in the dark, come back and then do their homework."

Palanova-Sterling met her husband, Nick Sterling, while skiing for CU. They started dating after the 2006 championship win, Nick Sterling said, and they're one of many matches made by Rokos.

That's made the homesickness a little easier for Palanova-Sterling. She tries to fly home at least once a year, but the cost of flying internationally has made it difficult, she said.

"The longer I'm here, the more I'm Americanized in a way," she said. "But obviously I miss this type of cookie or my mom's soup. I miss the people. My sister has two kids, so I miss out on their whole growing up. But when I'm back home, I miss things from here."

Spending time with the Boulder Nordic Junior Racing Team kids has made it worth it, too, she added.

BJNRT Head coach Adam St. Pierre said Palanova-Sterling's presence on the team has attracted more women to the sport.

"Lenka's a perfect example of why skiing is great," St. Pierre said. "You can compete at all different levels. She's still really fit and trains and is a great skier. Seeing that was great for the kids. A lot of girls relate to Lenka and just having her around is motivating for them."

At North Boulder Park, girls and boys wear matching black Boulder Junior Nordic Racing Team jackets with red and white trim. Several skiers stick close to Palanova-Sterling when they stop to sort out relay teams.

"She's always supporting you," said 13-year-old Claudia Burgess. "She's always there and always flexible to do what you want to do with her. She helps you with technique."

Another skier chimed in:

"She always makes things fun no matter what we're doing," said 12-year-old Hailey Leader.

They motivate Palanova-Sterling, too, she said. Coaching reminds her to pay attention to the small joys of skiing every day, she said, and it feels good knowing she's a role model.

"There's days where you're tired or not in the best mood, or you just came from work and maybe it wasn't the best day, but they're just so goofy," she said. "They come up to you and they all smile. It's a therapeutic thing in a way. It's great to see them get better in it and take you back to your own childhood growing up on skis. I started really early, so I see myself in them in a way."

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