

## Olympic steeplechase in London awaits CU Buff teammates Emma Coburn and Shalaya Kipp

By John Meyer *The Denver Post* The Denver Post  
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BOULDER —

Emma Coburn went to her first Colorado football game when she was a week old. She could sing the CU fight song when she was 4, and she wore a little Buffs cheerleader outfit to her older brother's flag football games when she was 5. Her parents attended CU, as did grandparents, aunts, uncles and older siblings.

"I mean," Coburn said, "I was born to be a Buffalo."

Apparently she was born to be a special runner for CU's successful track and cross country program as well. Next month she will represent her school and her country on the track at the London Olympics, two months shy of her 22nd birthday. And then, unless she changes her mind about turning professional — she won the Olympic trials' steeplechase running world-class times — she will return to CU for her final year of eligibility.

A Boulder native who grew up in Crested Butte, Coburn has had trouble grasping the notion that she and teammate Shalaya Kipp will be running in the Olympics together in the same event. Kipp, who is from Salt Lake City, finished third at the trials.

"I know we're flying there soon, but I just still feel kind of in a daze," Coburn said after a workout Thursday, six days after she made the team. "Part of me feels like, 'OK, now what?' And part of me is kind of not back to reality yet."

Kipp said the reality of their impending trip to the biggest athletic stage in the world hasn't sunk in for her, either.

"Maybe it will, by the time we're done with it, by the end of the summer," Kipp said. "Right now, mainly just focusing on my training, not trying to get too overwhelmed, going, 'Oh, my gosh, I'm training for the Olympics!' This is what I do every day. Don't want it messing with my head."

Coburn won the NCAA steeplechase title last year but redshirted the indoor and outdoor track seasons this year to focus on making the Olympic team and peaking in London. Kipp won the NCAA title last month, the fifth steeplechase title for a CU woman in seven years.

Steeplechase is one of the most demanding events in track and field, requiring speed, aerobic capacity, strength, balance, coordination and a lot of courage. Runners go over 35 barriers in a 3,000-meter run, including a "water jump." Those barriers are 30 inches high and can be dangerous, especially in traffic.

"It requires everything," CU coach Mark Wetmore said. "It's almost a middle distance event, so the more economical you are over the barriers, the more of a middle distance event it becomes. But I would say here, our method of preparation more emphasizes the 2,970 meters that are between the hurdles than the total of 30 meters of jumping up and down. A lot of steeple coaches spend a lot of time on drills and drills and drills. We do less."

Coburn appears to float over the hurdles, seemingly stepping over them effortlessly rather than leaping. Kipp has to put more effort into getting over them.

"Shalaya has more engine and less aerodynamics," Wetmore said. "I think in terms of Formula One racing — her aerodynamics aren't perfect, but she's got a 1,000-horsepower engine."

Trading ski poles for steeples

Coburn may have been born to run for CU, but Kipp grew up splitting time between Salt Lake City and the ski town of Park City, dreaming of competing in the Olympics as a ski racer. She was 11 when Park City hosted slalom and

giant slalom for the 2002 Olympics.

"As a little kid, I drew the Olympic rings with snowflakes around it," Kipp said. "My Olympic dreams happened in the winter, not in the summer. (Running) kind of ended up being a surprise, but I'm not going to complain either way. Training is training. You learn to work hard from ski racing, and you can apply that to running."

In fact, CU first got Kipp's attention because of its ski team, winners of 18 NCAA championships.

"I remember I was looking at colleges with my mom as a sophomore in high school, I was still ski racing and I actually looked at the ski team here," Kipp said. "I kind of kept Boulder in the back of my mind. I really liked it. As time went on in high school, I started thinking about Colorado as a running school."

In fact it was Kipp's background as a ski racer that made Wetmore think she just might have potential in steeplechase.

"She had been a downhill skier and wasn't afraid of going 50 miles an hour over slippery, scary things," Wetmore said. "We thought, 'Well, jumping off of stuff in crowds when you're tired has some fear involved, she seems to have the courage necessary for (steeplechase).' While the technique of it hasn't come as easily for her as it has for Emma, the crowd and the jumping and stuff was never a problem for her, which is huge."

Kipp saw her ski background as an asset as well.

"When he explained the water to me, I thought, 'Well, if I'm fine going on wooden boards 60 miles per hour, landing on ice, I can go running-speed and land in some water,'" Kipp said. "Turned out it was a lot of fun. I found some similarities, and I really enjoyed it."

Coburn's family moved from Boulder to Crested Butte when she was in the third grade. She and her three siblings attended a small K-12 public school called the Crested Butte Community School. Before focusing on running, Coburn played volleyball and basketball.

"We had a little deal with all the kids that, if they kept high grades and did three sports a year, there were perks involved in that," said her father, Bill Coburn. "The third sport of the year, besides volleyball and basketball, is track. They all did track. She just kind of followed along."

In basketball and volleyball, Coburn developed athletic skills that would serve her well in the steeple.

"She was super coordinated and super athletic," Bill Coburn said. "She averaged 16 rebounds a game and had the most spikes. Just being able to coordinate your body and know where your body is in space, being able to jump, you put that kind of quality with distance running and it's a great event for her, the steeplechase."

Fueling each other's fire

Despite competing against each other in the same event, Coburn and Kipp are good friends. Their affection and respect for each other is obvious.

"Emma and I work together really well because we kind of have a yin-yang aspect to our relationship," Kipp said. "We both have our strengths, and we both can respect the other one's strengths. We'll go on 15-mile long runs together, and some days she'll be pulling me up all those hills, some days I'll have to pull her up those hills."

Coburn is the better steepler, at least for now, but Kipp typically beats Coburn in cross country running.

"I think we just know that we'd rather be working hard together than have a little more glory on our own," Coburn said. "In workouts we're neck-and-neck for everything and we're not competing against each other, we're just deciding to run together and we both love it. I'd just rather have her by my side than a stranger by my side in London."

Coburn could make good money now as a professional, but American record holder Jenny Simpson finished her CU career after racing steeplechase in the Olympics, and Coburn wants to do the same.

"It's a discussion I have had several times," Coburn said of turning pro, "but I'm very happy being at the University of Colorado. My coaches and I made the decision to sacrifice my indoor and outdoor seasons and redshirt so I could focus on (London), so I feel like I owe it to my school, my coaches, my Colorado community and my teammate Shalaya to finish out my eligibility there and represent the school again on the track in 2013. I'd like to stay at Colorado."

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CU women on the fast track

Recent NCAA steeplechase titles for Buffs

Jenny Simpson: 2006, 2008, 2009

Emma Coburn: 2011

Shalaya Kipp: 2012

Recent U.S. titles for CU women in steeplechase

Jenny Simpson: 2007, 2009

Emma Coburn: 2011, 2012

CU Olympians for 2012 Games

Emma Coburn — 21 years old; hometown: Crested Butte

Shalaya Kipp — 21; hometown: Salt Lake City

What is steeplechase?

At the elite level, steeplechase is a 3,000-meter run with four ordinary barriers on the track and a fifth barrier with a "water jump," so the race requires runners to clear barriers 35 times in a race. For women, the barriers are set at 30 inches. For men, they are set at 36 inches.

Steeplechase has been an Olympic event for men since the inception of the modern Olympics in 1896. The first women's Olympic steeplechase was held at Beijing in 2008, where Jenny (Barringer) Simpson finished ninth while still a student at CU and was the top American. She also is the American-record holder (9 minutes, 12.5 seconds) but no longer runs the steeplechase. She made the London Olympic team in the 1,500 meters. John Meyer, The Denver Post