



COLORADO BUFFALOES

OFFICIAL ATHLETIC WEBSITE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO



Emma Coburn at the 2012 Summer Olympics.

Photo Courtesy: Associated Press



Brooks: In Emma Coburn's World, Frenetic Means Fun

Release: 05/23/2013 Courtesy: B.G. Brooks, Contributing Editor

BOULDER – When she left what she calls her “mountain mecca” five years ago to enroll at the University of Colorado, Emma Coburn already was accustomed to the pedal-to-the-metal pace that college life would demand.

At Crested Butte High School, hers was no ordinary life, and in Boulder it would become even more extraordinary.

Even by her standards, Coburn has had a “decent” senior year at CU. She kicked it off last summer in London at the 2012 Olympics and capped (and gowned) it earlier this month by graduating with her degree in marketing.

Bunched between those noteworthy bookends were other accomplishments such as her first championship in the Pac-12 Conference steeplechase (her Olympic event) and sharing the school’s Female Athlete of The Year award with skier Joanne Reid. She also shared the Female Career Athletic Achievement Award with the basketball team’s Chucky Jeffery.

And Coburn’s final year of eligibility isn’t officially over. Upcoming are the NCAA West prelims this weekend in Austin, Texas, then the NCAA Outdoor Championship on June 5 in Eugene, Ore. This week has found Coburn training typically hard, with the always wearying task of moving worked in for good measure.

"It's been very busy but fun," she said, and anyone expecting a different answer is out-of-touch with Emma. Spare time and Coburn appear to be total strangers; busy is what she does best.

Coburn knew what she was getting into when she stepped onto the CU campus. "I was busy most of my time in high school," she said. "I really didn't spend that much time running (at Crested Butte). But I did four sports and was part of a lot of extra academic committees – the National Honor Society, Student Council, Prom Committee, those kinds of things."

She and older sister Gracie had similar schedules – meetings before school at 7:30 a.m., classes starting at 8:30 a.m., cross country practice from 3:30-5 p.m., volleyball from 5:30-7:30 p.m., then another committee meeting on some nights.

College life might have offered a reprieve.

"We always were really busy," Coburn understated. "Then when I got to college I knew that it was going to be a big deal and I was excited for that. I knew I had to step up to the plate and be accountable. I was excited for the responsibilities the coaches give us."

HERE'S THE FIRST THING YOU should know about Coburn's coaches, Mark Wetmore and Heather Burroughs: They don't coddle. Wetmore has said on numerous occasions that anyone who runs for him and CU understands what it means to be uncomfortable. Very uncomfortable. You learn it fast or leave quickly.

"They don't baby us," Coburn said. "We know if we show up to practice and step to the starting line we have to want to do well. They leave that to us. They require us to have a lot of self-motivation and autonomy. They're obviously always there to motivate and oversee us, but they make sure the athlete is doing it for themselves – doing it for their personal gain and motivation rather than having to have a coach in their ear 24/7 saying, 'You gotta do it, you gotta be there.'"

"Distance running is unique in that it's pretty painful. We all find it fun, but fun in a different way. If you're not excited and self-motivated to come to practice every day to work hard and know when you're ten miles into a fifteen-mile run your coach is not going to be there with a bullhorn yelling, 'You can do it!' We definitely have to be strong-willed people – and the coaches really help develop that. I'm a much stronger person than when I came in, and not just physically. They really help put willpower in their athletes. I think that's unique to distance running. People who come in (to CU) have some of it, but it gets strengthened through Mark and Heather."

Still, not all of Wetmore's and Burroughs' runners are wired like Coburn. They had no doubt that when she left for a three-week Christmas break and returned to Crested Butte, she would wear out her treadmill. "They trust that I'm going to get it done," she said. "They taught me the skills to get it done without them."

The time required to "get it done" is staggering. Even more staggering is doing it at Coburn's level -- becoming an Olympian, winning championships in two conferences (Big 12, Pac-12), graduating . . . I asked her if she believes most people can comprehend the demands placed on student-athletes for four or five years.

"I know my friends and family understand it, they get it and respect it," she said. "I'm not sure if everyone else does, but as long as the people I care about respect me back – that's all I care about. I think what people don't realize about distance running is that it's seven days a week. We meet six days a week, but run seven days. We never take a day off. Sunday runs at 8 a.m. Two to four hours a day of practicing. And in those two to four hours we're pushing ourselves pretty hard – to the limit in fact."

Then there's the travel, which has required her to keep luggage ready "basically every other weekend from January in the indoor season through the ones of us that have summer races to the end of August and into September," she continued. "And for those of us who race cross country, it's on through November and some people have indoor in December. We don't have a three-month season; it's year-round."

COBURN DIDN'T WIN A CHAMPIONSHIP last weekend in Los Angeles; in fact, she finished eighth. But it might have been the most gratifying "non-podium" finish of her career.

At the Oxy High Performance meet, she ran the 1,500 meters in 4:06.87. She was the only collegian in a field of

professionals, and her time was the fastest in the NCAA this season. It was a PR by three seconds and also made amends for a sub-par 1,500 performance (4:11.36) in April at the Drake Relays.

Coburn came away from that race in Iowa unusually forlorn. "I was really upset about it – maybe a little too upset," she said. "I was pretty down, so to come out and run five seconds faster and three seconds better than my best – that was really exciting. When I finished I was happy and Mark and Heather both gave me hugs. But I think we all – at least I know I had this feeling – were a little hungry for more. We were so satisfied with a 4:06, but we're still hungry."

There were "tactical errors," said Coburn, to be smoothed out. She believes she can improve her time with better execution in "certain parts of the race." Outsiders, she said, might view her as a veteran, "but this is my fifth or sixth (1500) in my life. My opponents were all professionals who specialize in this event . . . they run eight, ten or twelve of them a year. I've run five or six since 2009. I'm definitely still trying to learn the tactics of it."

Coburn won't try and "double" in the NCAAs, concentrating on the steeplechase and banking her most recent 1,500 time as a confidence-builder/reminder of her potential in that event. The way NCAA meets are structured, said Coburn, competing in the 1,500 and the steeplechase would be a killer. The 1,500 final is about 90 minutes before the steeple final, plus there are two 1,500 qualifying rounds and two more rounds at the nationals. Plus, there are three steeplechase rounds.

"It's really difficult to 'double' in those events," she said. "I don't think anyone has ever done it . . . it's all just a little too much."

THAT LEAVES THE STEEPLE, but to Coburn it remains a rich alternative. Despite its grueling nature, it's her priority race and her first love. She can't see a breakup any time soon.

"I think I'll spend the next decade – or however long my body lets me – doing the steeple," she said. "But I'll definitely still be doing other events, too. I think your body can only run a certain amount of steeples in a year because it is so grueling. I think as long as we plan accordingly that I can continue to do it for several more years."

"I love it; it's what brought me to Colorado and it's been my most successful event here. It'll always be a favorite because of that, but I really enjoy getting to run the 1,500 and developing those skills. I'll probably end up in a few years running the 5K and trying other things, but the steeple is just a fun event."

After the NCAA Championships in Eugene come the USATF Outdoor Championships in Des Moines. Mid-July through mid-September brings a European tour. A return to her "mountain mecca" will have to wait.

"Summer is the peak of our season . . . no vacation, no barbeques, just running – which I'm thrilled about," Coburn said. "Running can take us on some interesting routes and bring us to really beautiful cities around the world. And I'm really looking forward to that. There's not much free time, especially when we're at those meets for five days or a week . . . but the summer is all planned and I think it's going to be a lot of fun."

No surprise there. Fun for Emma Coburn is staying busy. It's what makes her run – literally – and she's pretty good at it.

Contact: BG.Brooks@Colorado.EDU

SHOW MENU

