

Cross Country: CU Buffs have unfinished business

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Throughout the fall, the Colorado men's cross country team has had hopes of winning a national title. The Buffs aren't about to let a disappointing result at regionals get in their way.

A surprising third-place finish at the Mountain Regional on Nov. 9 dropped the Buffs from No. 2 to No. 7 in the national rankings, but they enter Saturday's NCAA championships -- held at E.P. Tom Sawyer State Park in Louisville, Ky. -- with eyes on the top prize.

"If everything falls into place, I think we have a pretty good shot," senior Aric Van Halen said. "It's anybody's day, but I think it's between us and (Oklahoma) State.

"I think we needed a little reality check (at regionals). We were flying a little high, but I think now we know that we just need to keep working. We can't get complacent and we've got to keep going."

The CU men's team is seeking its fourth national title -- the Buffs won in 2001, 2004 and 2006 -- while the women are shooting for a fourth consecutive top-20 finish at nationals.

Led by Jake Hurysz, the Buffs men's team had won every race of the fall before regionals and had vaulted to No. 2 in the rankings. That's why they aren't too concerned about their slip up at regionals, when they finished behind Northern Arizona and Brigham Young.

"We definitely realize that what we did at Pre-(Nationals) and what we did at Pac-12s really worked and we're just going to go right back to it," said Hurysz, a junior who finished 62nd at nationals in 2011 while competing for North Carolina. "I have all the confidence in the world in these guys."

So does head coach Mark Wetmore, who has guided the men's team to 12 top-five national finishes and back-to-back Pac-12 titles.

"I feel good about their chances to run their bums off and see where it shakes out at the end," he said.

While Wetmore has a great deal of nationals experience, his current crop of Buffs do not. Just four of the eight men's runners (including one alternate) have never been to nationals and the group has just five nationals races between them.

The lack of experience could hurt the Buffs during the race. Wetmore feels that's part of what happened to his team at regionals. But, the Buffs did run on this course on Oct. 13 at Pre-Nationals and did a practice run on Friday afternoon.

Wetmore had heard that the course, which is said to be very fast and run almost exclusively on grass, gets narrow and crowded. The Buffs didn't experience that at Pre-Nationals, but that could come into play Saturday with a much more talented field of runners bunched together.

Regardless, Wetmore said CU's strategy would be the same as always. The Buffs won't worry about Oklahoma State, Iona, Stanford or any other teams in the field.

"Our strategy is always to figure out how to run the course best for us," he said. "We're not going to race any particular school. We're going to race our team against the course."

Same goes for the women, who have a much different goal in mind. They come in ranked 23rd nationally and were the 31st -- and final -- team to get into the field. For that group, a top-15 finish would be a reason to celebrate.

"The training coach Wetmore has given us throughout this whole season has definitely set us up well," freshman Carrie Verdon said. "Even though we had to go hard last week (at regionals), we can definitely pull it together and get another good race in."

With just one senior on the women's team, junior Shalaya Kipp -- a two-time All-American -- said the experience of running this weekend will be valuable for the future.

"At the end of this season we're going to be able to take a lot away from it and know what we want next year," she said.

The men's team certainly has no interest in next year at this point. They are focused on winning it all on now.

"We have a lot of pressure on us and we have a lot of expectations, but that makes it more fun," Hurysz said. "We're here for a different reason (than some other teams). We're here to take care of business."

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