



Buff harriers gear for regionals

Men, women aim to nail down NCAA berths

By Michael Sandrock

Friday, November 9, 2007

It is Tuesday afternoon in the Balch Fieldhouse on the Colorado campus, and the CU cross country team is finishing stretching and listening to a pre-workout talk from head coach Mark Wetmore. When the runners are ready to head out the door for warm-up before running their final workout of 300-meter repeats heading into Saturday's NCAA regional meet in Ogden, Utah, it is senior Erin Marston who takes the lead.

"You girls ready?" Marston asks.

Saturday, the young Buffs will follow Marston and fellow veterans Sara Vaughn and Jenny Barringer into the regional, where they hope to qualify for the Nov. 23 NCAA championships in Terre Haute, Ind. Weber State is hosting the regional.

The Colorado women, second at the NAAs in 2006, are ranked No. 13. A key has been Marston, sixth at the Big 12 championships, who has turned into a solid runner and one of the glues for the women after coming to the team as a walk-on. "Erin is the most improved runner we have ever had at CU," assistant coach Heather Burroughs said. "She is motivated, stays healthy and is easy to coach."

That is heady praise coming from Burroughs, a former Buff All-American who is a keen student of the sport. A quick glance at the CU stats shows that Marston ran nearly three minutes faster on CU's 5.8K Buffalo Ranch home course this fall than she did as a freshman.

Marston got another compliment from her teammates before the season started when she was elected captain. She joins fellow senior and men's captain Stephen Pifer in giving the Buffs a calming presence on race day. With runners like Barringer and Big 12 champ Brent Vaughn, Colorado has enough maturity not to need "rah-rah" speeches.

"Erin is enthusiastic before races," said Allison Sawyer, a freshman from Hilton, N.Y. "She knows what she is doing and is very comforting, very reassuring. I get a little nervous before races and sometimes don't trust myself, and she helps me stick with what we know."

Added junior Sara Vaughn, "Erin does a great job. She embraces being a captain."

Just as Pifer does for the men, said redshirt junior Bradley Harkrader. "Stephen is outgoing and friendly, but yet with a commanding presence," Harkrader said. "We are a very close team, and Stephen is one of the unifying forces. His personality definitely helps us."

Marston and Pifer took different routes getting to CU. Pifer was a high school star in Illinois, one of only a handful of runners to win the prep "Triple Crown" — Illinois high school titles in cross country and in the 1,600 and 3,200 meters on the track. Marston, while the top runner at Chaparral High School in Parker, had a best finish of 24th in the Colorado state cross country meet.

The No. 6 CU men are ranked third in the region, behind Northern Arizona (No. 2 nationally) and UTEP (No. 3). The top two teams at regionals earn an automatic bid to the NAAs, with 13 other squads nationwide getting selected to "at-large" berths from among the nine regionals being held Saturday.

"It is a little bit different for us this year," said Harkrader. "It will be tight."

Jenny Barringer will be going for the regional title for the CU women, while Brent Vaughn will be looking for the win for the men.



© 2006 Daily Camera and Boulder Publishing, LLC.