



CU standout Barringer has more to add to her resume

By Ryan Thorburn
Thursday, March 26, 2009

BOULDER, Colo. — Jenny Barringer is perfect.

She's a world-class athlete, an honor-role student, a team leader.

She's competitive, charitable and a national champion.

But the University of Colorado track star and Olympian says she is not flawless. Barringer explains that she gets tired, nervous and even overwhelmed.

Ironically, it wasn't until after returning to Boulder from Beijing last fall when she finally ran smack into a great wall.

"If I would have changed anything about my whole Olympic experience it would probably be that I would have taken the semester off immediately after the Games," Barringer said during a recent interview with the Camera. "I was just so wiped and emotionally ... the letdown and coming back and all of a sudden this thing you've been working for for two years is over. Plus everyone wants to hear about it, there are lots of appearances and interviews and people want to celebrate what you've done.

"But I was like, 'I'm in 15 credit hours of school and I still have to train.' I was just really exhausted when I came back. It was a good semester; just a really hard semester."

Despite taking a full load of coursework and attempting to accommodate all of the requests for her time, Barringer was able to exhale after setting an American record in the steeplechase at the Olympics, where she finished ninth overall with a time of 9 minutes, 22.26 seconds.

During the recently completed indoor track and field season, Barringer added to her amazing list of accomplishments by:

- Breaking Sara (Gorton) Slattery's six-year-old CU record of 9:07.16 in the 3,000-meter run with a time of 8:53.88 at the Washington Invitational on Jan. 31 in Seattle.

"The first 3K was the scariest race of the whole season.

"It was my first race out after the Olympics. It was in the Dempsey Center at an invitational where it's not quite as highly focused as if you're at a championship race where people are announcing you. But it was still my first race, and I felt like all eyes were on me, even though half of the people there probably didn't know or didn't care. I wanted to do well. Knocking those nerves off was really important," Barringer said.

- Setting an NCAA record in the 5,000 with a time of 15:01.70 at the Husky Classic in Seattle on Feb. 14. Barringer demolished the previous 5K record by 37.34 seconds, but Shalane Flanagan set the American record this season with a 14-second cushion.
- Setting an NCAA record in the mile (4:25.91) while finally defeating Texas Tech rival Sally Kipyego at the Big 12 Indoor Championships on Feb. 28 in College Station, Texas.
- Winning an NCAA indoor title in the 3,000 with a record time of 8:42.03 — nearly seven seconds faster than the previous NCAA record held by Kipyego (8:48.77).

Believe it or not, after returning from the Olympics, Barringer was as worried about being a good CU teammate as she was about preparing herself to dominate her indoor events.

“When you come back immediately, how do you know how your teammates are going to react to you, the little star of the university for the last couple months?” Barringer said. “It’s not easy because you want to be friends with people, you want them to treat you like you’re a 22-year-old college student. But there is a little bit of a separation, a little bit of a difference. My teammates have been phenomenal, they’ve been supportive, the men and women across the board have been awesome.

“It was really important to me to get back in tune with the team again and be a member of the team. So it was hard to sit out (the cross country season), but an important role for me to take as sort of a cheerleader on the sideline. I was no longer in the spotlight and was supporting them and it was good to take a turn doing that.”

Finding her inner Olympian

When Barringer won an NCAA outdoor title in the steeplechase three years ago, the first true freshman to win an NCAA title at CU, she realized what head coach Mark Wetmore and distance/middle distance coach Heather Burroughs had suspected when they recruited her.

She had the competitive drive to take her career to an elite level.

“It was a cue to all of us that there was something in me that we maybe don’t even realize yet, a potential to rise to the occasion that not even I knew was buried in there,” Barringer said. “I think for me it was important to see that. ... Mark and Heather, maybe that’s why they recruited me, because they saw that in me before I did.”

Barringer was a five-time state champion in Florida on the track and also won three cross country titles during her prep career. During her senior year she finished 10th at the Foot Locker National Championships.

“So on paper she was a coveted recruit, but there were others who were more accomplished,” Burroughs said. “We knew early on she was talented. I think she’s calm and really enjoys racing. She’s not really impressed by pressure or expectations. And she’s durable and trains hard.

“All those things are important factors in improving to where she is now. We wouldn’t have predicted that she would have run these times when she was a freshman, but we would have predicted that she could be a national champion and a really big star for us.”

Wetmore followed Barringer’s training very closely after her return from Beijing and was not surprised

by her record-setting performances during the indoor season.

There are a few events he will probably never coach Barringer in, but anything from the 800 to the 10,000 is always a possibility for the versatile distance runner.

“I don’t know how she’d be as a pole vaulter or a hammer thrower,” Wetmore said.

Barringer plans to compete in the steeplechase this spring and “push collegiate athletics as far as it can go.”

That will include returning to CU in the fall to graduate with degrees in political science and economics in December, and also to pursue the NCAA cross country title that has eluded her thus far.

Barringer could have turned pro and started cashing checks while the Olympic iron was still hot. But after talking to her coaches, parents and peers, she said remaining an amateur and a Buff was an easy decision.

“When I signed a scholarship to Colorado I felt like it was a two-way commitment. They agreed to support me in my running career, but I also agreed to represent them for four years,” Barringer said. “I really appreciate all the university has done, allowing me to go to the highest level of competition. Mike Bohn and the whole athletic department, not just Mark and Heather, have been really supportive.

“The best way I can give back is to run in a Colorado uniform for four years.”

Role model, ‘Wonder Woman’

Last Saturday at Potts Field, CU’s Emma Coburn won her collegiate steeplechase debut. You can guess who the talented freshman aspires to be like on the track.

“We’ve been roommates on road trips before and she’s just such a sweetheart,” Coburn said. “Her experience and her advice about being nervous or training or whatever, you couldn’t ask for anything better. It’s a big treat to have her around. Jenny is such a positive person. Even if you’re not in the steeplechase, she’s a great teammate to have.

“She’s on such a different level than all of us, but she’s still so humble and nice.”

Senior sprinter Jeremy Dodson, who was on the Arkansas track team with Tyson Gay and Wallace Spearman before transferring to CU, says Barringer’s work ethic is as impressive as any he’s witnessed.

“I observe her all the time and see how she works,” Dodson said. “Just like when I was at Arkansas and trained with Tyson and Wallace, it was the same deal. They kind of humbled me and brought the international level down to my level and my perspective. It makes you realize that everything is within reach.”

If only everyone in the program believed they could follow in Barringer’s footsteps.

“I would like it if they would look up to her and say, ‘If she can do it, I can do it.’ And look at the sacrifices she makes and the time that she puts in and how careful she is about the running outside the two or three hours of training,” Wetmore said. “I’d like that, but honestly, as often as that happens I think five times more people say, ‘She’s Wonder Woman. It’s impossible, I give up.’”

Still chasing the dream

Barringer ran brilliantly in Beijing and also soaked up every ounce of the atmosphere inside the Olympic Village. She had a chance to mingle with everyone from the who's who of distance running to NBA stars on the U.S. basketball team.

"It really inspired me and made me realize I'm not at the top of the game. There are new heights I want to reach to," Barringer said. "And being around these people made me see that what I'm doing is really good, but it's not good enough."

Gulnara Samitova-Galkina easily captured the gold medal in the Olympic debut of the 3,000-meter women's steeplechase. She was one of three Russians to finish ahead of Barringer, who also trailed two Kenyans, a Romanian, an Ethiopian and Poland's Wioletta Frankiewicz by a second at the finish line.

And Barringer predicts the American record will be broken every year leading up to the 2012 Games in London as the sport gains in popularity.

"It was awesome because I was a little fish in a big pond," she said. "I think that's so important for any athlete's development."

It turns out that Jenny Barringer isn't perfect.

Not yet.



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