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Coburn poised to be CU's next great steeplechaser

By Patrick Ridgell
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BOULDER — Freshman steeplechaser Emma Coburn enrolled at Colorado knowing she'd run in the large — make that enormous — shadow Olympian Jenny Barringer casts over other female steeplechasers in this country, including those in CU's track and field program.

Despite Barringer's continued excellence, Coburn is beginning to emerge.

She hopes to take another step this weekend at the NCAA Midwest Region Championships in Norman, Okla., where a top five finish will assure her a spot in the steeplechase field at next month's NCAA Championships. If she places sixth through 12th, she'll be eligible for the NCAAs through the descending order list, which holds four spots for the sixth- through 12th-place finishers at regionals for the women who ran the four fastest times during the season.

Such an achievement would be notable for Coburn, who ran a 10 minutes, 6.54 second steeplechase on May 2. It's the seventh-best time in the NCAA this year. No one is calling Coburn the next Jenny Barringer.

But there are similarities between the two as the program prepares to replace the woman who owns the event's American record.

"We certainly do not expect Emma to be the next Jenny Barringer," said assistant coach Heather Burroughs, who works with CU's middle and long distance runners. "But she's running times now in some meets that are faster than Jenny ran her freshman year. So she can say, 'I'm at a comparable level to Jenny as a freshman, and I can hope to have an improvement curve that might not match Jenny but is comparable.'"

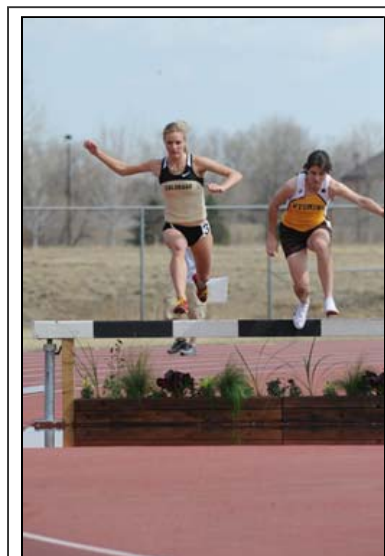
"One of best things for Emma is she does not have to be the star. I did not want her to be a freshman with a spotlight on her."

Coburn's 10:06.54 on May 2 is the best time among U.S. juniors, which includes all steeplechasers younger than 20. It was the second fast time run by a CU freshman, behind Barringer's 9:53.04.

Coburn was born in Boulder and has strong family ties to the community. That was a recruiting advantage CU used, Burroughs said, while Michigan and Virginia also sought her. Coburn moved to Crested Butte in third grade and attended Crested Butte Community School. Her graduating class in 2008 numbered around 20, according to Burroughs.

As a junior in high school, Coburn went to a meet in Albuquerque to compete in the 800. She didn't want to travel that far to simply run one race, and the only other distance race held on another day during that meet was the steeplechase. She signed up for it despite only having seen it run.

She did so well in the race she qualified for nationals, where she placed fourth that summer. A year later as a senior, Coburn placed second at nationals.



Colorado's freshman steeplechaser Emma Coburn hopes to make an impression with the rest of the Buffs at this weekend's NCAA Midwest Region Championships in Norman, Okla. **Cliff Grassmick/University of Colorado**

"I always had a blast when I did it," Coburn said.

Burroughs said Coburn's early introduction to steeplechase is helping her excel quickly. Only the state of New York sponsors the event at the high school level, Burroughs said, and it's run at only a few national high school meets. The high school version is 2,000 meters while collegians go 3,000.

"Her improvement curve, not to say it was expected, but it is impressive," Burroughs said.

Running with Barringer helps, Burroughs said. Coburn sees how Barringer trains and competes. She's also heard the stories about Barringer's dealings with adversity, like when she lost a shoe at the 2007 NCAA Championships while trying to defend her national title. She had to stop and put it back on, then finished seventh.

"If she was on another team, what Jenny is doing might seem unattainable," Burroughs said.

"Jenny is a teammate and a friend and not just a superstar. It humanizes her. Jenny trains hard and does more volume than Emma, which we expect of a senior versus a freshman. But Emma can see it's not super human what Jenny does on a regular basis. It's impressive, but not unrealistic."

Barringer won her second Big 12 steeplechase title May 17 with a meet-record time of 9:58.14. Coburn took fourth in 10:33.49. After the meet, Barringer said her teammates, including Emily Hanenburg's sixth-place finish, did well.

"The Big 12 is a high-pressure meet even if people say don't worry ... so to step on the line in the best conference with your teammate being an Olympian, that's a big shadow to follow."

Asked what she's learning from Barringer, Coburn said, "everything."

"How to manage your time and deal with practice everyday and all the stress of it all," Coburn said. "I have only five percent of the pressure and stress she has. She works out so hard and trains really hard. She's a good example, kind of a perfect runner. She shows if you work hard enough what you can achieve."

"When she leaves next year, I still want to be doing well because she's done it so well."

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10 Buffs ready for Midwest Regionals

NCAA championships berth on line

By Ryan Thorburn
Thursday, May 28, 2009

BOULDER, Colo. — The Big 12 wants to see the elimination of NCAA regional track and field meets to help with "cost containment" in a tough economy.

Colorado track and field coach Mark Wetmore is all for the plan -- approved by Big 12 leaders at last week's spring meetings in Colorado Springs -- and would like to see a return to the old system, which used a descending order list of times, distances and heights to establish eligibility for the NCAA championships.

For one more year, at least, the top five finishers in each event at the regionals will continue on to the NCAA championships.

Kaity Kark -- one of 10 Colorado athletes headed to the NCAA Midwest Region Championships in Norman, Okla., today and Saturday -- is looking forward to having one last opportunity to qualify for the national championship meet.

"I'm going there with a nothing-to-lose attitude," said Kark, who finished 9th in the discus at the Big 12 Championships with a personal-record throw of 155-06. "I did not expect at the beginning of season to hit the regional mark. The fact that I was able to hit that mark at the Big 12's leaves me extremely happy with my entire season."

Happy but not completely satisfied.

Kark has been surpassing her Big 12 distance consistently during practices at Potts Field for the past two weeks.

"I know I can do better, so there are a little bit of nerves. I want to prove in Oklahoma that I can do what I've been doing in practice," Kark said. "I'm always tough on myself and have high expectations. I want a PR for myself at the regional meet. That would definitely be my next goal."

What could be the program's final outdoor NCAA regional meet will be Kark's first. In fact, she is the first CU female thrower to compete at regionals in the discus and is just the third thrower in the brief seven-year history of the meet.

Kark started throwing the discus in the 8th grade when a teacher suggested it might be perfect for her build and body type.

After an impressive prep career at Mountain Vista, Kark signed with CU because she believed throwers

coach Casey Malone — a former NCAA champion in the discus and a two-time Olympian — could get the best out of her talent.

“I’ve learned tons,” said Kark, who is a junior. “Back in high school I wasn’t much of a lifter and my technique was very rudimentary. Casey has refined everything to make my throw farther. I’ve learned a lot on physical side and also the mental side of what it takes to perform well at meets. ...

“I definitely think I can throw farther at regionals than I did at Big 12’s. I’m excited to see what happens.”

As usual, all eyes will be on Jenny Barringer in the 3,000-meter steeplechase. CU’s star will be joined by teammates Emma Coburn and Emily Hanenburg in her signature event, which will be run at 7:15 p.m. on Saturday.

Barringer owns the top time in the region at 9:49.93 after converted from altitude. She made her debut in the event this season with a victory at the Big 12 Championships; it was her first steeplechase race since the finals at the Beijing Olympics.

Coburn is the fifth-ranked racer in the steeplechase. Her time of 10:06.54, which she set at the Mt. SAC Relays, is the U.S. Junior record. Hanenburg had an altitude adjusted time of 10:43.95, set at the Big 12 meet in Lubbock. All three scored for the Buffs in the steeplechase.

Barringer is the meet record holder in the steeplechase with a mark of 9:44.31 and has won the previous three regional titles. A CU woman has won the event every year but one (2004) since the regional format was incepted in 2003.

“I love being around and watching Jenny Barringer,” Kark said. “Not only is she a great athlete, she’s a great person.”

Other Buffs competing this weekend include:

- Brandin Williams, the Big 12 javelin champion, will kick off the competition for the Buffs at 2:30 p.m. today. He ranks fifth in the region with his toss of 222 feet, one inch, which he recorded in his final throw of the conference championship.

Williams became CU’s first conference javelin champion in 47 years.

- Patrick Bachmann and Chase Dukes will be making their regional debut in the hammer throw at 11 a.m. on Saturday.

- Matt Tebo and Andy Wacker will be racing in the men’s 5,000-meter run at 9 p.m. tonight. Tebo ranks seventh on the regional list with a time of 13 minutes, 56.39 seconds while Wacker is 15th at 14:06.39.

- Christian Thompson is set for his second consecutive trip to regionals. He ranks fourth overall in the 3,000-meter steeplechase, which is set for 7:40 p.m. on Saturday and will be the final event for the Buffs.

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