



CU eyes more Big 12 titles

Bufs have dominated conference meet

By Michael Sandrock

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Despite its national titles and lofty rankings year in and year out, the University of Colorado cross country team is used to running without much fan support, except at its home-course Rocky Mountain Shootout. Not many sports fans make the trip to conference and regional meets.

Today, however, at the Big 12 Cross Country Championships in Lubbock, Texas, the CU runners will have some in-house support on the course when athletic department officials Mike Bohn, Ceal Barry and Chris May attend the meet, set for Rawls Golf Course.

They will be cheering for Colorado to extend its dominance of Big 12 cross country, and watching to see if seniors Brent Vaughn or Stephen Pifer, or sophomore Jenny Barringer, can unseat the defending Big 12 champs in the individual races.

Bohn, Barry and other department personnel are in Lubbock to watch the CU football team play Texas Tech on Saturday. They rearranged their schedules to get to Lubbock in time to attend the cross country championships, which start at 10 a.m. with the men's 8K, followed by the women's 6K.

"Many of the administrators will roll in Friday, and we are glad they are coming," head coach Mark Wetmore said. "They were also there last year."

The defending NCAA champion and No. 5 Colorado men will be going for their 12th Big 12 title in a row, while the No. 15 women have taken 10 of the 11 conference crowns handed out since the Big 12 began operations. CU has been by far the most successful cross country program in the Big 12, on both the conference and national levels.

The Colorado men and women have won five NCAA team titles since 2000, and some years, the conference meet has been no more than a hard workout for the Colorado runners.

Not so today. Other Big 12 schools are getting better, most notably No. 14 Texas, No. 18 Oklahoma State and No. 24 Iowa State on the men's side, and host and No. 14 Texas Tech in the women's race.

In addition, the Buffs could be a bit tired from the long, two-day bus ride to Lubbock. The team left Boulder Wednesday after classes and did not check into their hotel until Thursday afternoon.

"The trip took a little longer than expected, but we will be ready to go in the morning," Wetmore said in a phone interview Thursday.

So will CU's opponents, with Wetmore saying both the team and individual races should be close. Defending champs Colby Wissel of Kansas and Texas Tech's Sally Kipyego are back, with Kipyego the favorite, said Wetmore.

"Sally is fitter than last year, but Jenny is also a little fitter than last year, so it should be closer," he said. "On paper, in a small field, Texas Tech looks a little better (than CU). Plus they are at home. It will be a close race."

Kipyego has dominated the past two Big 12 races by wide margins, with Barringer second both times. Barringer is just

getting back to full training after taking a break after returning from the World Track and Field Championships in August in Japan.

In the men's race, any one of 10 runners could win, including Buffs Pifer and Vaughn. "It should be a very good race," said Wetmore.

But even if Pifer, Vaughn and Barringer race as expected, it is the lesser-heralded runners that are key. Said Wetmore, "Team titles are rarely determined by the first runner; it is more often by the fifth runner. We will be looking for someone to rise up, from the fourth to seventh (runners), to have an unusually good day. We need someone to take a step on both sides."

The biggest unknown in today's races will be the psychological factor. Colorado gears its season to winning a national title, while trying to win the Big 12, while many of its conference foes focus their year on the conference championships and perhaps being the team that finally knocks off the highly regarded Buffs.

"While we are the highest-ranked team, if we are casual or cavalier, someone could get us," said Wetmore. "Our opponents are the best they have been in a while."

Wetmore held a team meeting earlier this week to emphasize to his runners the importance of today's race and to remind the Buffs they will have bulls-eyes on their backs.

"We can't overlook the meet, even though our training culminates in three weeks (at nationals)," said Wetmore. "We are in the difficult situation of wanting to be ready then, and not wanting to stumble (at conference)."



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