

T&FN INTERVIEW

Emma Coburn

by Jon Hendershott

In this, her first full pro season, Emma Coburn slashed more than 12 seconds from her steeplechase best, the quickest of her four PRs timing 9:11.42 to give her the American Record.

The previous mark of 9:12.50 was set by good friend/training colleague Jenny Simpson (see p. 20). Overall, in 6 of her 8 steeple finals Coburn ran faster than her previous best, 9:23.54, which had earned her 9th in the Olympics.

She also found time to lower her 1500 best by 1½ seconds to 4:05.29. It was a stellar year for the 23-year-old Colorado native, who shared some thoughts with us from her Boulder home:

T&FN: How would you assess your first season as a pro?

Coburn: My first pro season was to be the summer in '13 but I was injured. I had a sacral

stress fracture in my back. It was the first injury I ever had. I still had a contract with New Balance, though. While it was into this past winter before I first raced as a pro, I got a taste last year of what off-the-track life is like for a pro athlete. Things like photo shoots and personal appearances.

In racing this year, I kind of had a smooth transition because in college I ran in the Worlds and the Olympics and also some Diamond League races.

So I had traveled and raced internationally since athletes that [coaches Mark Wetmore and Heather Burroughs] coached had run in DL and other races. With the experience I gained in '11 and '12, I was able to have a pretty smooth transition to being a full-blown professional.

T&FN: What would you say you learned from

this year's racing?

Coburn: I learned that I like to kind of dictate my own pace and not wait for other people to decide it for me. I also learned that I'm not as intimidated by opponents as maybe I once was. Even though they beat me, I wasn't as nervous racing them even if they might be better than me.

T&FN: Out of all your steeples this year, was there one that was most satisfying to you?

Coburn: I would say it was the American Record in Glasgow. I was right behind the rabbit for the first K and then was alone leading for almost the next 2000. I got passed with 300 to go.

I think I proved a lot to myself that day, not only in running a fast time but how I did it. By doing a lot of the work alone. I still have things I can improve on: getting a stronger kick and

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having a little more strength at the end. I still need to work on those.

But that was the most satisfying race because it was the culmination of a lot of work. To run a personal best or a record, everything has to be perfect: the conditions, your training, everything. So it was just satisfying to have it all come together and work out perfectly. Also, leading so much of the race gave me more satisfaction in knowing that I *really* earned it.

T&FN: Did you ever feel that people “expected” you would be the one to break Jenny’s AR since you have improved so steadily in your career?

Coburn: Honestly, the expectations of other people never bother or worry me. I guess I feel that it was a natural thought after I won USAs in ‘11 and the Trials in ‘12.

And even though I was injured in ‘13, I had

been pretty much the top American those years.

The record conversation started from that. Yet I was far from Jenny’s time; until this year my PR was 9:23. Eleven seconds is a lot to take down. But other people’s expectations didn’t bother me or add any extra pressure to it.

As long as my coaches believe I can do it, that’s important to me. My boyfriend, Joe Bosshard [3-time NCAA 10K finalist], is a runner and if he believes I can do it—and my parents and family, too—that’s also important to me. Having key people believe in me and tell me I can do it makes me have more confidence that it can happen.

T&FN: After the injury in ‘13, what were your aims for this season?

Coburn: Mark and Heather took a very conservative approach with my cross training and my time off. I started training last fall and had a long, slow buildup, then ran a couple of indoor races. Nothing spectacular but it was good just to be healthy again.

Mainly, the goal for this outdoor season was to be healthy and try to get a personal best. That happened right away in Shanghai [9:19.80].

So while it was disappointing to miss the summer of ‘13, it was a good time to remind myself that even if I’m running well, I have to take care of all the little details. So it was maybe a necessary break since I hadn’t had a break in college. I think my body was ready for a break.

T&FN: It has to be a huge plus having the consistency from working with Mark and Heather since your frosh year of college.

Coburn: Obviously, I’m really lucky to be training under them. Yet I never thought I would be good enough to run in college; never

would have a chance at it. Ever since the summer of ‘08, I trained under them and they have given me great wisdom and guidance.

Six years later, we’re still working well together. I trust their judgment so much. They’re also very honest about what their expectations are for a certain race. They are very accurate and honest in their predictions.

T&FN: Mark was at the Glasgow DL with both you and Jenny, so did he predict anything specific for you in that race?

Coburn: He said that after I ran 9:14.12 in Paris, I was on AR pace until the last 100, but I died pretty hard. He just told me he thought

I could get it in Glasgow, but he also didn’t want me to get too hung up on the words “American Record.”

He and Heather both have told me multiple times that they thought I could run that fast, but he never said before a race, “You can get that record!” He just gave me similar splits to what I had run in Paris and said I was ready to run faster than that.

T&FN: So how do you feel to be the AR holder?

Coburn: It’s exciting, obviously. Like I said, it’s been a long road of hard work and commitment. But I’m also still pretty young in the sport and I believe that that achievement isn’t the pinnacle of my career. I was excited about it, but pretty soon afterward I thought, “OK, in my next race how can I get better? How can I get faster?”

I’m really pleased I get to be in the record books, but I also hope I can improve more and have more achievements to come home with. I see this as just the start of the good achievements in my career.

T&FN: Would you say that the Continental Cup win also belongs in that list of notables?

Coburn: Oh yes. It definitely was fun to be in Marrakech; a completely different part of the world and unlike any other place I had ever been. It also was a different race plan than I had all year. It was 97 degrees, so to win in Sacramento—which also was very hot—I had been conservative for the first half at Nationals before pressing the pace.

In the Cup I hoped someone else might lead and maybe it was a problem that I created myself. But the runners I raced all year pretty

much expected me to go out from the gun. I like that approach but in Morocco I kind of wanted someone else to lead so I could just sit and relax and not be as affected by the heat.

But no one did; our first 800 was pedestrian. I was in the front but I wasn’t pushing the pace.

I felt great with 300 to go when typically I’m feeling pretty lousy. When I lead from the gun, by the end it’s a big mental battle to keep going at that pace. Everything is just kind of falling apart. But I felt great with 300 to go, like it was just the first interval of a workout. I felt fine and I knew I could finish strong.

When I want to run a fast pace, I like being in control of the pace and making it happen

myself. At that meet, time was irrelevant and only place mattered, so I was happy to try a new technique and it worked out. And it was great to finish out the season with a win.

T&FN: It’s surprising to hear you sometimes feel with 300 to go that things are “falling apart,” because often you appear so calm, relaxed and in control in your running style.

Coburn: I am in control, but it’s more that

Coburn In A Nutshell

- Personal:** Emma Jane Coburn was born October 19, 1990, in Boulder, Colorado; 5-8/ 120 (1.73/55)
- PRs:** 800—2:09.81 ‘10; 1500—4:05.29 ‘14; Mile—4:29.86i ‘13; 2000St—6:10.18 AR ‘14; St—9:11.42 AR ‘14
- Schools:** Crested Butte (Colorado) HS ‘08; Colorado ‘13; now represents New Balance
- Coaches:** Trent Sanderson (HS); Mark Wetmore & Heather Burroughs (Colorado & pro)
- Major Meets:** Mile—8)NCi ‘11; 1)NCi ‘13. Steeple—11)NC ‘09; 2)NC ‘10; 1)NC, 1)US, 11)WC ‘11; 1)OT, 9)OG ‘12; 1)NC ‘13; 1)US ‘14
- World/U.S. Rankings:** x/4 ‘10; x/1 ‘11; x/1 ‘12; x/1 ‘13; ?/1 ‘14

Emma Coburn — continued

I'm telling my body to go—but it isn't listening! [laughs] It's not that things are falling apart so that I have to tell myself to just put one foot in front of the other. It's falling apart in the sense that I can't will myself to go any faster. I'm hoping that I can shift gears and kick hard.

Often, in the really fast DL races, my body doesn't quite respond the way I'd like it to. In Paris, it didn't do that. In Glasgow, I was able to kick better.

But I'm not falling apart to where it's a disaster. I just meant that in the last 300 in Marrakech I felt fresh like I hadn't even been in the race. Where in most races with 300 to go, it's quite difficult.

T&FN: You ran 6 of your 8 finals this season under your old best of 9:23.54, so what was behind that level of consistency?

Coburn: In '12, I was just 21 and had really only two years of steeple training under my belt. I think most runners with two years of training can get better and faster. But there really wasn't any "aha!" moment when I shifted my training or racing. There wasn't anything significant. It was just two years of fitness and good training. In training, I just started thinking a little bit faster, a little bit faster. So I think the progression of this season was pretty natural.

T&FN: How, in fact, did you start running?

Coburn: Because Crested Butte is so small, pretty much every kid in town did track in the spring. It was basically the only organized sport. Once summer started, then kids did other things. My siblings did track and I wanted to be exactly like them.

They signed up to be distance runners and by middle school I was a distance runner too. If they had signed up to be shot putters, I probably would have done that [laughs].

I didn't start to take running seriously until I was probably a junior in high school. I never ran in the winter or the summer; just during track season. I played volleyball in the fall all four years of high school, while doing cross country. Then as soon as cross country ended, it was basketball season and I even played some hockey during that time, too.

T&FN: When did you first ever hear of the

steeplechase, let alone try it?

Coburn: I had been to a meet where I saw a steeple, but I didn't know what it was. Then when I was a junior, I planned to run the 800 at the Great Southwest meet in Albuquerque.

We were driving and my dad didn't want to drive all the way there just to do an 800. We looked at the meet schedule and the only event on a different day that worked was the 2000 steeple.

I was like, "That could be fun. I think that's hurdling... and something else."

My coach Trent knew the coach at Western State, where they had a steeple pit, so we used their track to train. I did one lap around the track and over the water jump and was like, "Oh, OK, let's go."

I ended up winning at the Great Southwest but when I walked to the starting line, I didn't even know how many laps were in 2000 meters. So I kind of stumbled into the steeplechase in a funny way because of the meet schedule at the Great Southwest.

T&FN: After such a great '14, what do you feel you will carry forward into coming seasons?

Coburn: I definitely learned that I like to run aggressive races and kind of control them. With that comes race confidence and I can gain more of that. I think those two components were fun things that I established more with myself this year: getting more race confidence and learning that racing from the front is my preferred

be with.

"Being a serious runner doesn't mean you have to be a machine. That was a good influence for me when I was younger.

"When she came back to Boulder late in 2012, I had won the NCAA and USAs and been on World and Olympic teams. So I had gained enough experience internationally that she didn't try to teach me about becoming an expert steeplechaser. I had found success because Heather [Burroughs] and I had figured out a lot. And Heather had learned a lot from coaching Jenny at high-level races.

"I think that Jenny's greatest influence on me since then has been just as a great training partner. I can hop in workouts with her and my

tactic. I had run like that domestically, but not internationally so it was fun getting to do that.

Races at championships will have different tactics and there will be different mindsets. So

Coburn improved by a dozen seconds this year



MIKE SCOTT

there might be different perceptions of races, like a domestic championship race versus an international title race. But in general, I approach every race with the same mindset of just trying to focus on my own race and on executing what I'm capable of running. □

The Simpson Influence

Mile star Jenny Simpson has been a mentor and friend to Emma Coburn ever since the latter's frosh year at Colorado. The influences have been numerous, says Coburn:

"She obviously has great steeplechasing experience and when she left Colorado after '09, I was still very much under the radar. We only saw each other here and there over the next couple of years.

"But from the start, she influenced me since I saw what a great runner is like, off the track and on. We became good friends and it was great to see that she's a normal person—she can joke around and is fun to

1500 and mile skills have improved greatly since she came back. Overall, I'm just a better, more-fit runner than I was before.

"We will run easy days together three or four days a week. Like 9-10 miles at 7:00 pace. On long runs, Jenny is ahead of me—very far ahead. We just meet at the same venue on those days but she goes much faster than me.

"Track workouts we probably do one a week that are identical in the sense that we will start each interval together. But hers might be a second or two faster than mine for something short and maybe 10 seconds faster for something longer. Those are pretty serious, high-level workouts. I might start ahead of her but she will catch me."