"Just don’t get last,” she warns; her breath turning white swirls in the near 0-degree weather.

The calm Colorado morning is broken by the sound of a gun, and she’s off. But Sloan Storey doesn’t stop to think of getting far before her mantra seems more like a jinx. Five feet into the 15-kilometer cross country race, the Nordic skier hears a sharp snap — she’s broken a pole.

Her coach, standing in the snow on the sidelines, radios instantly and hands her a replacement. The freshman skier has never broken a pole before and now, during her first collegiate competition, is not ideal.

“OK, OK, I’ve got this,” she repeats to calm her growing nerves as she falls further behind the pack. She rounds her first bend, and the impending panic still looms when it happens again. Another snap. Her drive is incomprehensible.

Nordic head coach Abi Holt is 300 yards away uphill — a distance Storey only defines as “enough time to lose everything.” Even so, she makes an unorthodox drive at her coach to grab another new pole. “Now, that’s it — slow and steady,” Holt shouts as she passes by. Storey, though, isn’t as sure. She can no longer see any of the other 25 racers on the course. She’s in dead last.

“Lose my coaches are wondering why they recruited this 18-year-old,” she thinks.

That certainly wasn’t on Holt’s mind, though. When the coach first saw Storey compete a year previously, as a senior in high school, she knew she wanted the skier for the U’s team.

Holt watched her race at Soldier Hollow, and when Parker Tyler, who formerly competed for the U, passed Storey on the course, Holt recalled a “look in Sloan’s eyes like, ‘Uh-uh.’”

“She stayed with her and passed her back,” she says. “I watched that, and I was like, ‘Oh yeah, I want her.’”

That’s how hot storey wasn’t up yet now. Two broken poles weren’t enough to stop her from finishing.

Storey knows it, too. She replays Holt’s “slow and steady” comment over in her head, takes a deep breath, and keeps moving. By one mile in, Storey starts passing other skiers, clumped together in groups of five.

After 2 1/2 miles, she comes to her first food. Storey reaches for her shot of diluted Coke — used to replenish sugar levels — and spills it down the front of her black uniform, coating her from finishing.

Her coach, standing in the snow on the sidelines, reacts almost instantaneously and be a feat to get a different answer.

Storey, age 21, what her biggest motivation is, and her first reply is always: “my team.” It’d be hard to believe that anyone who has ever been lazy. She’s just a super positive, happy person that showed me that the love of the sport is what would carry me farther.

Storey was inspired by her sister’s attitude, crediting Elitsa, now 27, for leading her into Nordic skiing, Storey could easily get edged out from the NCAA championships by her own teammates. Sitting in her office at the Huntsman Center, Holt says the U’s racers are some of Storey’s “most competitive” this year. Her silver winter salary down her arm as she describes how Storey often comes in second or third to her own teammates, such as sophomore Veronika Mayerhofer, who won the 5k Nordic national title last season.

Storey’s tendency to celebrate the team over her own individual accomplishments is deeply rooted, and not likely to change soon. It’s a way of thinking that stems largely from her family life and upbringing in Hailey, Idaho, where her parents and all four of her siblings — all older than her — skied.

Her sister, Elitsa Storey, had one of the bigger impacts. Storey’s parents adopted Elitsa, then age five, from an orphanage in Bulgaria after having three boys. She was missing joints in her right knee, and when Gary and Janis Storey brought her to the U.S., doctors suggested amputating the limb. They said she’d be more capable with a prosthetic leg — and they weren’t wrong. Elitsa learned to ski by seven years old and qualified for the U.S. Paralympics alpine ski team by age 16, later competing in Toronto and Vancouver.

Storey was inspired by her sister’s attitude, crediting Elitsa, now 22, for leading her into the sport and giving her an early example of success to follow.

“She never ever felt bad for herself, never thought she couldn’t do anything,” she says. “That relaxes straight to me, where I have no disabilities of any sort. I can have no excuses to win my way. She’s just a super positive, happy person that showed me that the love of the sport is what would carry me farther.”

Elitsa, Storey’s closest sibling at age 18, taught her to be a good winner and a humble loser, to celebrate the team over her own individual accomplishments. Her mantra, though, might be a little different. “Just get first,” Storey hopes — both for herself and especially for her teammates.

storey.nordic.utsaltutes.net

@CourtneyLTanner

PHOTOS COURTESY OF UNIVERSITY OF UTAH ATHLETICS

BY COURTNEY TANNER / UTAH ATHLETICS

storey.nordic.utsaltutes.net

@CourtneyLTanner

 Editor