

HIGH COUNTRY RUNNING

An ode to the life and legacy of coach Matt Holton: Part I

BY NEIL WEINTRAUB
Special to the Daily Sun

A few weeks before this year’s Soulstice Mountain Trail Run, I was heartbroken to learn that one of my first running coaches, Matt Holton, had died earlier this year.

Originally from Maui, Hawaii, Matt moved to Flagstaff in 2001 to train as a professional runner. Shortly thereafter, he took over the coaching reins from coach Trina Painter, who had organized low-cost weekly track workouts at Northern Arizona University, fondly known as “Team Trina.” Matt carried Trina’s legacy forward without missing a beat.

During a track workout in the spring of 2002, I’ll never forget seeing Coach Matt at the track dressed in street clothes and sporting a fedora. I immedi-



Matt and Cristina are shown in their apartment in Flagstaff in this photo from 2005.

ately thought how cool and dapper he looked! Unfortunately, during one 200-yard interval, I pulled a hamstring. The injury was so painful that I stopped doing speedwork for nearly 20 years, until I joined Team Run Flagstaff.

In November 2003, Matt told me he was racing the Philadelphia Marathon as the paid “rabbit.” He paced the top pros through the first half of the race

before continuing on to finish himself, setting his all-time best of 2:23:39. Afterward, Matt called me and asked if I could round up some NATRA runners to join him in his quest to break his pal’s beer mile record on the NAU track.

Word spread about his beer mile attempt, and half a dozen local runners and three times as many spectators eagerly showed up. I participat-

ed, choosing Pabst Blue Ribbon as my beer of choice — a decision that had me dry-heaving by lap two. Meanwhile, Matt swilled Coronas at the start of every quarter-mile as if they were cups of water at an aid station, finishing comfortably in about seven minutes.

I don’t think he broke his buddy’s beer mile record that day, but immediately after the race, Matt happily invited all the participants and spectators back to his house for a gingerbread house-making party! Unfortunately, after the beer mile, I wasn’t feeling well enough to attend. Remarkably, a few weeks later, a photograph appeared in the Dec. 13, 2003 edition of the Arizona Daily Sun featuring Matt and his friends, with a caption announcing that they had won the Radisson Woodlands Hotel’s

Gingerbread Dreams Contest.

My last memory of Matt was in 2005, when I was on an early date with my now-wife, Diana, at Monsoon’s restaurant in Heritage Square. Matt was there with a bunch of friends, dressed in a red 1970s-style sweatsuit with sweatbands on his wrists and head. When he saw me, he called out, “Neil, come join us at the Cinnabar! It’s ladies’ night, and I’m stripping!” I was laughing so hard. I think he told me he did that periodically to make a few bucks.

While I never knew Matt very well, I admired his eccentricities and his passion for coaching during his time in Flagstaff. When I recently heard the news of his passing, I quickly tracked down his beloved partner, Cristina Pineda. Cristi-

na kindly shared details of Matt’s extraordinary life with me, including his comeback from a debilitating stroke he suffered while running in 2024 — a story you won’t want to miss reading in next week’s High Country Running column.

NEIL WEINTRAUB COFOUNDED NORTHERN ARIZONA TRAIL RUNNERS ASSOCIATION (NATRA LLC) IN OCTOBER 2001, JUST BEFORE MEETING COACH MATT. HE WISHES TO THANK MATT’S LONGTIME PARTNER, CRISTINA PINEDA, WHO WILL SHARE MORE OF MATT’S STORY IN NEXT WEEK’S HCR COLUMN. RACHEL SMITH IS A MOM TO TWO WONDERFUL GIRLS, A PROFESSIONAL RUNNER, AND FEELS LUCKY TO CALL FLAGSTAFF “HOME.” SHE IS ALSO THE COORDINATING EDITOR OF THIS COLUMN AND WOULD LOVE FOR YOU TO CONTRIBUTE TO IT BY SENDING YOUR RUNNING-RELATED STORY TO HER AT RACHSCHNEID18@GMAIL.COM.

VOLLEYBALL

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midway through the frame. BASIS Flagstaff remained strong, carrying the momentum it had from the first set.

With the Yetis up 17-5 in the second set, the Antelopes called a timeout. Seligman came out of the timeout on a roll, winning six of the next eight points. Guthrie said he saw his team start to lose focus.

“A lot of my girls do not play club and when they stop focusing on volleyball, they just kind of start to goof around,” Guthrie said. “I don’t want to disrespect the other team or the game. So I just kind of refocus on what’s important and get ready for what we need to do.”

Guthrie and the Yetis regrouped to close out the set, 25-15.

The Yetis continued their dominance in the third set, winning the first seven points with sophomore setter Sophia Haynes on the serve. After a short BASIS Flagstaff cold stretch with back-and-forth points, the Yetis closed out the match strong, taking the final set, 25-11.

Seligman (1-17, 0-9 1A Central) ended the regular season on a 17-match losing streak after defeating 2A Sedona Red Rock in their season opener.

BASIS Flagstaff’s first year in the 1A Central Region has been nothing short of a success. The Yetis played in 1A North last season, winning a previous record of 10 matches. A young program without a single senior turned what would have been a senior day for some into a celebration of all the work it put into its best season yet.

The Yetis (17-1, 8-1 1A Central) secured second place in the regular season region standings ahead of Friday’s region tournament in Ash Fork. They were set to open the tournament Friday morning against No. 27 Mayer (7-9, 3-6 1A Central). BASIS Flagstaff swept Mayer at home back on Sept. 17. The Wildcats accounted for one of the 11 sweeps the Yetis earned in the regular season.

BASIS Flagstaff is on



HATTIE LOPER, ARIZONA DAILY SUN

BASIS Flagstaff’s Cadence Bedonie (4) passes the ball during a home match against Seligman on Wednesday.



HATTIE LOPER, ARIZONA DAILY SUN

BASIS Flagstaff’s Clara Maring (22) hits the ball during a home match against Seligman on Wednesday.



HATTIE LOPER, ARIZONA DAILY SUN

BASIS Flagstaff’s Sophia Hayes (8) puts up a block during a home match against Seligman on Wednesday.

track to host a first-round matchup in its first-ever state tournament. The first-round

matches are set for Tuesday. All following rounds at the 1A state tournament will

take place at Coronado High School, with the championship set for Nov. 7.



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BASIS Flagstaff’s Ellie Suda (11) winds up to hit the ball during a home match against Seligman on Wednesday.



HATTIE LOPER, ARIZONA DAILY SUN

BASIS Flagstaff’s Nova Tan (7) sets the ball during a home match against Seligman on Wednesday.



HATTIE LOPER, ARIZONA DAILY SUN

BASIS Flagstaff’s Rienna Wang (5) hits the ball during a home match against Seligman on Wednesday.