

## HIGH COUNTRY RUNNING

## Flagstaff: in beauty we run

BY RACHEL SMITH  
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Just earlier this week, I was out on a run with two great friends — Stephanie Bruce and Emily Sisson — when I was struck by that deep-rooted feeling of how special this mountain town truly is.

It didn't hurt that, especially for the first week of March, the weather was unseasonably beautiful: sunny and warm, yet still carrying that refreshing crispness in the air. Or that we were running on a dry dirt road — more trail than road, really, since I've never actually seen a car on it — winding through miles of quiet pine forest. Or that over the course of an hour we passed both a herd of elk and a herd of antelope.

Running with friends alone is enough to lift my serotonin and dopamine levels. But adding the gift of seeing — and for a few moments, running alongside — such majestic, elegant creatures? That felt like overflow. We finished the run, and all I wanted was to keep going for another hour.

Over the years, I've had the privilege of getting to know many runners who have spent significant time training here, and a common refrain emerges: this is one of the best places in the world to run. Which is somewhat ironic, because it's also one of the more challenging — oxygen deprivation at 7,000 feet is no small



COURTESY

The author takes on a trail run in Flagstaff with some friends.

thing. Yet perhaps that challenge is part of what makes it meaningful.

After a decade of living here — and now in a particularly full season of life, with an infant and a toddler redefining how I view the words “busy” and “tired” — I sometimes forget to absorb fully the beauty that surrounds me. Thankfully, running has a way of gently insisting

that I remember.

A friend once shared with me the Navajo Beauty Prayer, often called “In Beauty I Walk.” She explained that it's both a blessing and a central Navajo concept, one that speaks to beauty, harmony, balance and goodness in all things. She said it's all about living in alignment with nature, seeking inner and outer peace and moving through life with positive intention, even in hardship. She told me that if we are willing — and intentional — we will find beauty everywhere.

Right now, life feels like a lot at once — a juggling act of schedules, supporting needs and creating family memories. Some runs are more about fitting it in and getting it done than lingering in the moment. And yet, living and moving in a place as naturally beautiful as Flagstaff comes with a gift: it never lets me go too long without being regrounded in gratitude.

When I can see beauty in one place, my capacity to see beauty elsewhere expands. And more often than not, that shift in perspective is exactly what I need.

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## FARKAS

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of the 2026-27 sports season. The settlement will allow schools to share revenue directly with student-athletes and permit the use of their names, images and likenesses.

NAU had originally opted out during the transition to Farkas' leadership. Cal Poly, meanwhile, opted into the settlement when it went into effect last July.

“My sincere gratitude to President Jeffrey D. Armstrong, Carter Henderson and [Deputy Director of Athletics] Jackson Stava for the invitation to join their team,” Farkas said in a release. “I'm humbled to serve a premier public university with such a high value on academics and athletics.”

Farkas moves to a fellow Big Sky Conference affiliate in football. NAU and Cal Poly regularly play during the conference season. The Lumberjacks have defeated the Mustangs in each of the past four meetings dating back to 2021, including last season at home in the Walkup Skydome, 35-27.

The two will play at Cal Poly Nov. 7 — which will serve as NAU's final road game of the 2026 regular season.

## LUMBERJACKS

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she averaged 17.2 points per game.

“I came here not knowing what I was going to get into,” Williams said. “I didn't even know I was going to continue playing basketball. I'm so appreciative of the coaches giving me this chance and everyone for welcoming me in so late.”

Williams was the last of the three players honored on NAU's Senior Night on Feb. 26. She had her family as well as the entire team behind her as she walked onto the court. She had no idea they were going to do that.

“Honestly, it definitely made me cry,” Williams said. “I'm a pretty emotional person, and I really do put my all into this. Basketball is my life and these guys are my life. Seeing that they came up behind me to walk with me, it really touched me.”

Simone Morris was another player who came to Flagstaff looking for one more ride in college basketball. The graduate student came to NAU after four seasons at Robert Morris University.

While this year was full of ups and downs, she said she has no regrets about hanging up the shoes as a Lumberjack.

“This has definitely been a crazy ride, but I wouldn't change anything,” Morris said. “I believe that we're all here for a reason and that it's all going to work.”

Morris cited NAU's three-game winning streak last month as a way the team found some cohesion in the late going. NAU was in position to have a first-round bye in Boise at that point.

“Looking at our team now, from when we first started playing in Rolle [Activity Center], it's a complete difference,” Morris said.

This year has been a major shift for Taylor, who joined a team coming off an appearance in the Big Sky title game in her hometown. She attended that title loss to Montana State in 2022 after having already committed to NAU.

After two straight losses in the championship game in her first two years, the Lumberjacks lost in the semifinals in 2025. The expectations are going in as the No. 7 seed this year paint it with a new perspective.

“I'm really the only person who has any experience there,” Taylor said. “Honestly, the experience in the past has been very, like, there's that cursed game that we lost so many times. I'm kind of glad



MALLORY DERRICK, NAU ATHLETICS

Northern Arizona Lumberjacks forward Kayla Williams (23) looks back to see her teammates follow her onto the court as she is honored before her Senior Night game against Idaho on Feb. 26.

to not have that on our shoulders. We're going into the tournament with absolutely nothing to lose.”

This season as a whole was a brand-new experience. Taylor became the team's starting point guard after starting just one game in her first three seasons. She played more minutes this season than she did in her first three years combined.

Taylor enters Boise with exactly 300 career points, nearly 200 of which came this year. She saw so many things change, even as the season began.

“We had players coming in late,” Taylor said. “We had players who got hurt early. There was just every day for a while it felt like something crazy was happening, no matter what it was. We just pushed through so much as a team, and I feel like we gained so much maturity so fast.”

After winning 27 games last season, NAU started 2025-26 losing nine of its first 10 games to mark its worst start in over a decade. The Lumberjacks clawed back to win four straight games, including their Big Sky opener against Montana on New Year's Day.

Dinkins lamented not having the kind of veteran leadership she values on a team. While giving credit to the seniors, both new and returning, for taking that mantle, she recognized that they were lacking in that area this year. She hopes that this



KYLIE KNIGHT, NAU ATHLETICS

Northern Arizona Lumberjacks guard Simone Morris (35) holds flowers while posing for a photo with her family, head coach Laura Dinkins and Louie the Lumberjack before her Senior Night game against Idaho on Feb. 26.

year's group creates a foundation down the line.

“Moving forward next year, we have something to build on,” Dinkins said. “Coming into this, we had absolutely nothing. Everybody was gone.”

The three outgoing Lumberjacks will have to play every game in Boise as if it were their last. No. 7 NAU will take on No. 8-seeded Montana in the first round of the Big Sky tournament at Idaho Central Arena on Saturday at 2:30 p.m. NAU will have to win three games in four days to make it back to the title game, which is scheduled for Wednesday.



MALLORY DERRICK, NAU ATHLETICS

Northern Arizona Lumberjacks forward Kayla Williams (23) holds flowers while taking a photo with her teammates before her Senior Night game against Idaho on Feb. 26.