

## HIGH COUNTRY RUNNING

## Group environment assists in return to running

BY ANDREA TRUJILLO LERNER

Special to the Daily Sun

As we step into a new year, people keep asking me, “So ... what are your running goals?” This question terrifies me. Not because I lack goals, but because it implies that I am a runner, a title I have never fully claimed, despite a long resume of running-related behavior.

I ran cross country in high school. I kept running through my 20s, 30s and now into my 40s. Up mountains and by the ocean. By all observable metrics, I run. And yet, I never quite felt like I belonged to the running crowd. I wasn't

fast enough. I didn't have the right build. I wasn't winning races. I lived firmly in the land of “most OKest runner.” Still, there I was, running in the cold, wind, heat and snow, quietly clocking miles alone.

A few years ago, I stepped away from running. It wasn't dramatic; it just stopped providing the fulfillment it once had. I felt a void and didn't know what could replace it. In a moment of mild curiosity and moderate desperation, I went to a talk at a local brewery, where a friend was on a panel about women in climbing. I went looking for inspiration. What I found was connection.

A casual conversation led to an invitation: a 12-mile run up Mount Elden in two weeks. I said yes immediately, then panicked, because the longest run I'd done in months was 3 miles — on flat ground. So, I did what any seasoned, out-of-shape runner would do: I went out and ran(ish) 8(ish) miles ... and promptly sprained my ankle. With most of my remaining prep time devoted to resting, the signs to bail were plentiful. But something deeper pulled me in.

On run day, I repeated some self-affirmations in the mirror, taped my ankle and met my friend and her equally intim-

idatingly cool friends. I immediately felt an energy I had never experienced running alone, and then immediately tripped and fell. Not bad, but badly enough to bruise my pride in front of these mountain-running superheroes. After a quick systems check (ankle fine, ego questionable), we took off again.

What followed was awesome. We were doing something hard, but together. We talked, laughed, gasped for air and kept going. In that space, something shifted. For the first time, I felt like I belonged.

Since then, I've returned to running. I have been up Elden more

times than I can count. I've run our mountains and the grandest Canyon with friends. I even ran a marathon, buoyed every step by their support and cheers. I still run alone sometimes, but I prefer to run with my people. We might not always be the fastest, but we bring laughs, snacks, occasional tears, massive effort and we show up for each other and for ourselves.

If you don't see us coming, you'll hear us. We'll be charging uphill, smiling, oversharing, working hard, together.

So, my running goal for 2026 is simple: to be strong enough to keep running with friends who run hard things.

And to never underestimate the power of showing up.

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**RACHEL SMITH IS A MOM OF TWO AMAZING DAUGHTERS, A PROFESSIONAL RUNNER AND THE COORDINATING EDITOR OF THIS COLUMN. SHE WISHES YOU ALL THE BEST IN 2026 AND ASKS YOU TO SHARE YOUR RUNNING-RELATED STORY TO THE COLUMN BY EMAILING HER AT RACHSCHNEID18@GMAIL.COM.**

## BROWN

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before the injury. Part of what made San Bernardino Valley College his ideal landing spot was how they handled the news of his ACL tear.

“We set up a plan, and it seemed like they were genuinely there for me,” Brown said.

Brown took his visit to campus the week following the end of Flagstaff's season. He made the trip to watch San Bernardino Valley College take it to Los Angeles Pierce College, 66-0. The Wolverines went 7-4 last season and earned a share of the American Conference Pacific League championship. They played in the Western State Bowl last season, their first bowl game since 2019.

That showing made Brown's decision easy. He announced his commitment just three days after his visit.

“The reputation for them is they got some athletes out there,” Brown said. They get people on the map. They get guys to D-I colleges.”

Brown had California circled on his map for a



**Chase Brown (middle) thanks his family, coaches and teammates during a ceremony at Flagstaff High School on Wednesday afternoon during which he signed a letter of intent to play football for San Bernardino Valley College.**

JAKE BACON, ARIZONA DAILY SUN

long time. He narrowed down his options to San Bernardino Valley College and Golden West College in Huntington Beach, another member of the Southern California Football Association. He also weighed some options in Kansas, another powerhouse state in junior college football.

Going to a junior college was not always Brown's plan. He said he got some bigger looks as a freshman and sophomore. His re-

cruiting grew quieter after his injury.

The path to a bigger school in the future is there for Brown. Northern Arizona University, for example, recently announced the signing of Wolverines running back Jonathan Coar after he spent last season at San Bernardino Valley.

Clements played a big role in getting Brown's name in front of coaches, reaching out to whoever he could. He had seen Brown's talent

even before he became his head coach at the start of his sophomore season.

“I still remember when Chase first arrived on campus as an eighth grader,” Clements said to Brown during his speech. “I heard he was pretty good. The first time the ball left your hands, it was just beautiful. I could tell right away, you're a natural.”

Brown's rise to the starting spot on the Eagles varsity squad

unfolded right in front of Clements, who was the team's defensive coordinator during Brown's freshman year in 2022. After playing select snaps and drives in the first two games, Brown exploded onto the scene in his first start against Rio Rico, throwing for six touchdowns and 405 yards in a 59-12 win.

“I'll never forget the first start you had a record-breaking game and how much fun it was,” Clements said.

Brown has a nearly unlimited supply of memories from his four years in an Eagles uniform. His mind quickly went to that final full game against Tempe, which served as his final Homecoming game.

He said his favorite play was a 35-yard touchdown pass on third down to fellow senior Zeke Jim to give Flagstaff a 48-12 lead in the fourth quarter.

“That's probably the best ball I've thrown,” Brown said.

He also cited a pass that led senior Will Carpenter to pull off a spin move around two defenders to score in Flagstaff's season opener against Marcos de Niza this past season as another favorite moment.

Brown will major in business, a field he wants to pursue in the future.

His legacy as the most decorated high school quarterback in town will stand for a very long time. His records, highlights and moments will be preceded by how he touched the community in different ways. His time on the gridiron in Flagstaff was cut short, but his playing career is just getting started.

## EAGLES

FROM PAGE B1

desperately to find a seam in the Bears' four defenders, but were as cold as the frigid winds that swirled the field throughout the match. Whenever the strikers broke loose, their shots on goal did not connect as smoothly as they wished. Aggressive goal-keeping cornered them into more long-range attempts.

All of the goals the Bears scored in the first half were quick. Instead of long-developed offensive flows with a prolific amount of ball movement, they took advantage of split-second lapses by the defense to trap Eagles senior goalkeeper August Fahy in tough angles.

The Bears paired a goal in the 32nd minute with another in the 38th, extending a manageable hole into a bottomless pit for the Eagles just before the halftime break.

Jenkins thought the barrage at the tail end of the half, along with his team's fringe play-off ranking ahead of the match, put the Eagles on their heels and made a breeding ground for



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**Flagstaff's Cruz Rivera (8) runs with the ball up the field during a match against Bradshaw Mountain on Wednesday at Flagstaff High School.**

high emotions. Jenkins used the halftime break to remind the team about what has always made them click as a unit.

“Sometimes, as teenagers, they start getting on each other, so we talked at halftime,” Jenkins said. “At the end of the day, we've got to be good to each other. We've just got to continue to work.”

Jenkins' words of wisdom imparted great poise and chemistry onto the team from the moment the whistle blew to start the second half. The Bears went scoreless in the second half, despite their refusal to lay off the gas.

Dreams of a second-half comeback inched farther away as seconds ticked off the

clock. A fast break for the Eagles in the 51st minute flew past the keeper, connecting with the right goalpost instead of the net. It was a shot emblematic of the opportunities that always seemed to be missed throughout the game.

The Eagles finally got their courtesy score in the 72nd minute off the foot of sophomore Diego Soto.

A last-gasp breakaway by senior midfielder Brendin Ogg was just off the mark, hitting the side of the goal.

“What can I say, the guys poured their hearts out,” Jenkins said.

The play-in round of the 4A Conference state tournament is scheduled for Feb. 13, with the first round set for Feb. 18.



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**Flagstaff's August Fahy (6) maintains possession during a match against Bradshaw Mountain on Wednesday at Flagstaff High School.**



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**Flagstaff's Carson Boettcher (22) traps the ball during a match against Bradshaw Mountain on Wednesday at Flagstaff High School.**