

HIGH COUNTRY RUNNING

Runners enter new world when at altitude

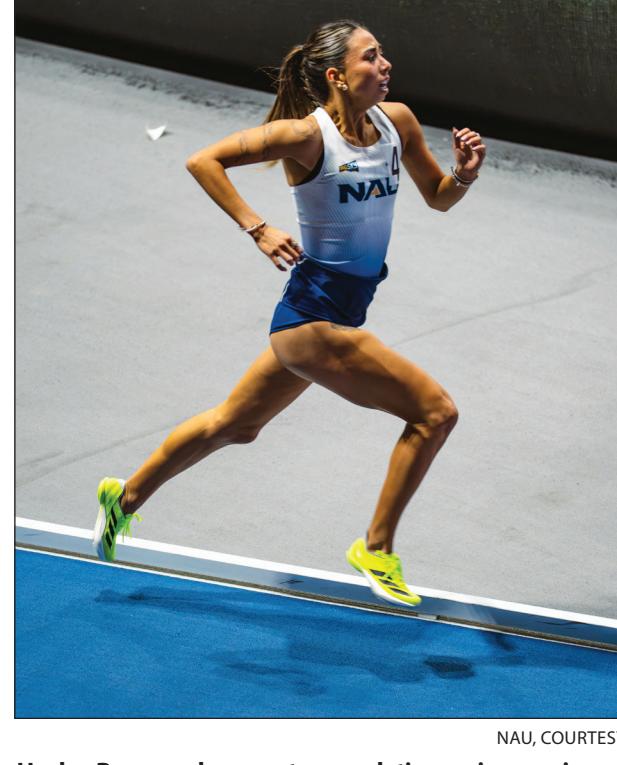
BY CRAIG HUNT
Special to the Daily Sun

Living and running in Flagstaff, I've learned that altitude doesn't need defending. It needs context.

When Northern Arizona's Hayley Burns ran 4:35.77 for the mile inside the Walkup Skydome last weekend, the conversation naturally turned to conversion charts and comparisons. At 7,000 feet, that comes with the territory. Hayley's adjusted time, 4:25.76, now sits at the top of the NCAA women's mile list this season.

Altitude conversions don't diminish the performance. They explain it.

Altitude performances are not necessarily looked down upon



NAU, COURTESY

Hayley Burns on her way to completing an impressive 4:35 mile, the current NCAA-leading mile time, in the Walkup Skydome last weekend.

nationally. They are simply often misunderstood by those who

have never trained in the environment. Thin air changes everything.

Paces slow. Recovery stretches. Effort becomes the only honest metric. What looks controlled on paper often feels fragile in real time.

Altitude teaches patience quickly. You cannot chase sea level splits without consequences. Easy days demand restraint. Hard days require precision. Fitness is built quietly, often without the reassurance of fast times. Progress shows up later, sometimes suddenly, when the air thickens and the stakes are at their highest.

That is what makes performances like this meaningful. Sustaining that pace at 7,000 feet requires more than talent. It requires aerobic depth, composure and trust in preparation that does

not always announce itself. There is nowhere to hide at altitude. If you are underprepared, the environment exposes it. If you are ready, it still makes you earn every second.

What often gets lost

in conversion debates

is that altitude does not

create fitness. It reveals

it. The adjustment is not

a bonus. It is a transla-

tion for those who were

not there to feel what

each lap required.

Flagstaff has long

been a place where run-

ners learn to measure

success differently. Ef-

fort over ego. Process

over spectacle. The

watch becomes a ref-

erence point, not a ver-

dict. Those lessons tend

to scale well.

Altitude does not

make great runners.

It teaches them how to

become ready.

And when an athlete carries that readiness into a performance that leads the national conversation, the result does not need an asterisk. It needs understanding.

Altitude doesn't in-

flate greatness.

It clarifies it.

CRAIG HUNT IS THE HEAD CROSS COUNTRY COACH AT COCONINO COMMUNITY COLLEGE.

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 RACH-SCHNEID18@GMAIL.COM.

NAU

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play. The Bears (11-9) have suffered four straight losses by five points or fewer, most recently on Monday at home to Montana State, 73-68.

Northern Colorado is the Big Sky's top scoring team at 83.5 points per game overall, but it is only averaging 77.1 points per game in conference play. Overall, the Bears are first in 3-point percentage (.366), second in field goal percentage (.487), second in 3-pointers per game (10.2) and first in assists (17.3) in all games.

Quinn Denker, a three-time Big Sky Player of the Week this season, is averaging 17.6 points per game and a conference-high 6.9 assists per game. Zach Bloch is one of the nation's best sharpshooters, ranking fourth in the country with a 47.1% clip behind the arc and 14th with 64 3-pointers made. Bloch is averaging 13.0 points per game.

Northern Colorado has swept the season series with NAU in each of the last two years, winning four straight meetings and leads the all-time series, 26-16. Prior to this two-year stretch, NAU swept the season series in 2022-23.

With Saturday being the final Astrojacks game of the season, fans may bid on the game-worn Astrojacks jerseys and more through the jersey auction that ends on Sunday at 2 p.m. To enter the auction, fans may text "NAUHOOPS" to 855-800-4975 to receive a registration link.

Mitch Strohman and James Malamas will be on the call both on ESPN+ and the Northern Arizona Healthcare NAU Lumberjack Radio Network, with the radio pregame show going live at 5:30 p.m.

Women's basketball

NAU continues its season on the road this weekend in Greeley, Colorado, against the Northern Colorado Bears. The Lumberjacks will tip off against the Bears on

Saturday at 2 p.m. NAU brings a 7-13 record into this contest, including a 3-4 mark in Big Sky games.

The Lumberjacks fell on the road on Monday in Missoula against Montana, 76-72, after a fourth-quarter rally fell short.

The matchup will feature two of the top-ranked scoring offenses in the Big Sky, as NAU currently sits third at 71.7 points per game while UNC follows closely behind at 71.5 points per game.

Madison Watts continues to provide efficient scoring for the Lumberjacks, as the sophomore recorded the top field goal percentage in the conference over the last week at 69.2% on 18-of-26 shooting from the floor. Naomi White secured her ninth game scoring 25 points or more against Montana as the redshirt freshman went for 29 points on 9-of-19 shooting, remaining the top-scoring freshman and ninth overall in the country.

Northern Colorado brings a 14-6 record into this contest, including a 5-2 mark in league games. The Bears' only blemishes in Big Sky games have come at the hands of Montana State, which they opened conference play with on Jan. 1 and most recently met in Bozeman on Jan. 19.

Neenah George is scoring 13.7 points per contest to lead the offense, while Tatum West is averaging a near-double-double of 10.4 points and 8.8 boards per game, ranking third in the Big Sky on the glass.

Defensively, Gabi Fields is grabbing 2.35 steals per game. UNC is second in the league in offensive boards per game (14.8) but second to last in defensive rebounds per game (23.6). Along with Montana State, Northern Colorado is the only team in the conference currently appearing in the top four in both scoring offense and defense.

Men's tennis

NAU is set to play its season-open-



Northern Arizona Astrojacks guard Chris Komin (2) wears the Astrojacks uniform in a game against the Montana Grizzlies at the Walkup Skydome on Monday.

ing matches over the weekend, two against Western New Mexico Friday and two against Ottawa Saturday. On Saturday, opening serve for each of the matches against Ottawa will be at 11 a.m. and 3 p.m. All matches during the weekend will be at the NAU Tennis Center and are free for fans to attend.

The Lumberjacks are coming off of a season from which they finished first in Big Sky regular-season play but fell short of making the NCAA Tournament with a loss to Montana in the final of the Big Sky Tournament.

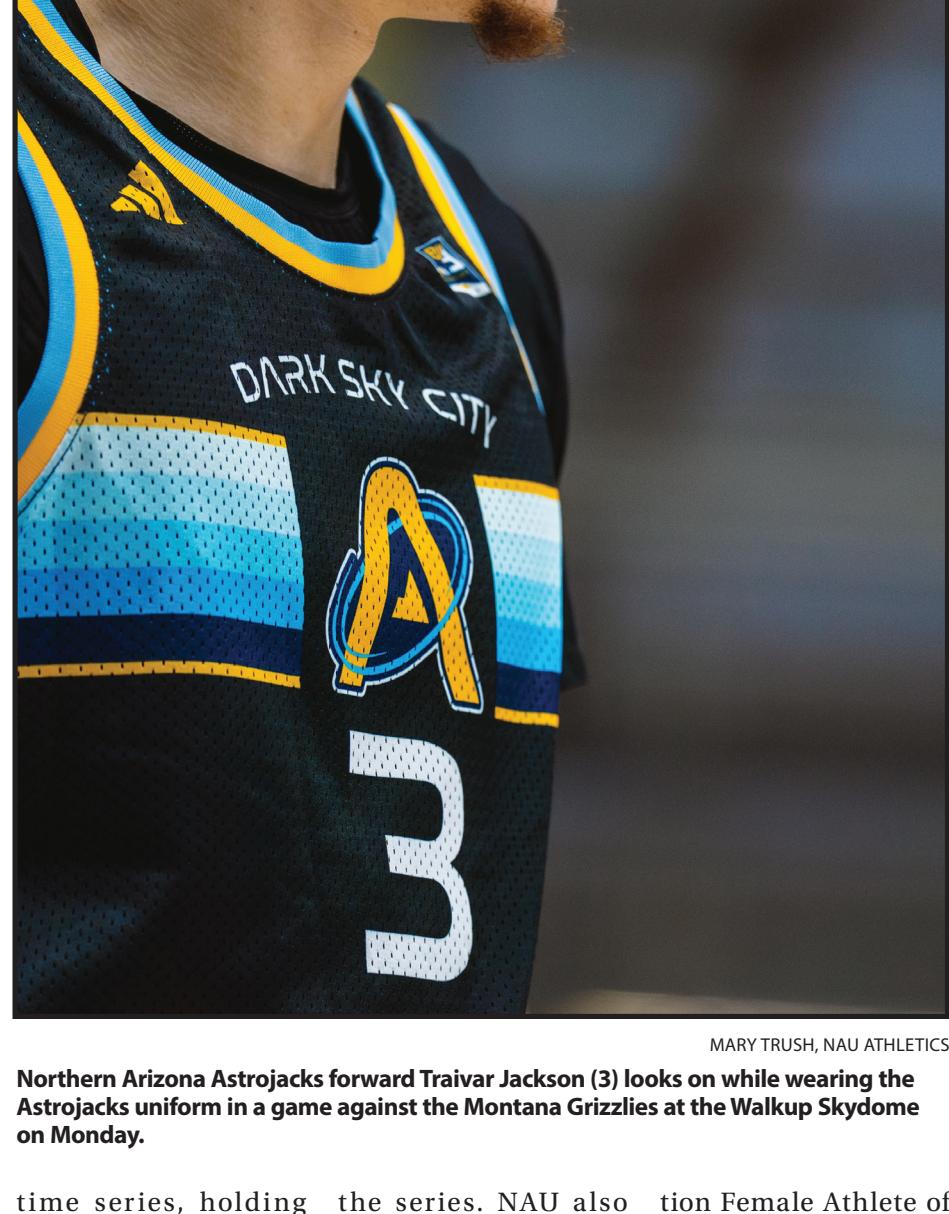
Last season, the Lumberjacks played the Mustangs and beat them 6-1 at home. Returning players Takumi Katsuda, Jakub Volesky and Ivan Perisic secured wins in doubles and singles in the match.

The contest against Ottawa will be the inaugural match between the two schools.

Swimming and diving

NAU hits the road Saturday, heading to Albuquerque for a nonconference dual against University of New Mexico at Seidler Natatorium.

NAU enters the weekend riding strong momentum in the all-



Northern Arizona Astrojacks forward Traivar Jackson (3) looks on while wearing the Astrojacks uniform in a game against the Montana Grizzlies at the Walkup Skydome on Monday.

time series, holding a 7-4 advantage over the Lobos since the programs first met in 2012. The Lumberjacks have won four straight meetings, including a dominant 183-102 victory last season in Flagstaff — which was the largest margin of victory in

the series. NAU also earned a 172-120 road win in Albuquerque during the 2022-23 season.

The Lumberjacks are coming off a standout performance from senior diver Mackenna Stocker, who was named the Mountain Pacific Sports Federa-

tion Female Athlete of the Week following a stellar showing on the boards at the Bruin Diving Invitational hosted by UCLA.

STAYSON ISOBE, MAXWELL NAGLE, AUSTIN WILLIAMS AND JACK SHEA CONTRIBUTE TO THIS ARTICLE.