

HIGH COUNTRY RUNNING

The Buffalo Park water tank monumental mural survey

BY NEIL WEINTRAUB
Special to the Daily Sun

This past Saturday as I watched Girls on the Run 5K participants joyfully run around Buffalo Park, it reminded me how the park is central to Flagstaff’s identity as a running community.

Coincidentally, a few days later, when my friend Carla McCord, a volunteer on the city’s Beautification and Public Art Commission, emailed me about a Buffalo Park survey, she mentioned that it needed input from runners. I immediately shared it in my latest Northern Arizona Trail Runners Association (NATRA) newsletter.

The city’s website list of projects states: “The City of Flagstaff is commissioning a large-scale 360-degree mural on the water tank located at the entrance to Buffalo Park. To guide the creative process and ensure the artwork resonates with this trea-

sured natural recreational space, the City is launching this survey to learn what Buffalo Park means to residents and what themes and ideas might be reflected in this monumental mural.”

One of the survey’s questions, “What makes Buffalo Park special?” filled me with memories from my 40-year relationship with the park.

When I moved here in 1986, the Arizona Daily Sun headlines were filled with stories about how voters approved a citizens initiative, Proposition 200, to save Buffalo Park. Sam McManis’s April 19, 2020, column about Buffalo Park historian John Parsons documented this watershed moment. John, an outdoor enthusiast but not a runner, told Sam, “Without the runners, Buffalo Park as we know it today simply wouldn’t exist. The runners were, and remain, the guardians of the park.”

In 1987, I found my

dream apartment at the foot of Buffalo Park on North San Francisco Street. I ran there almost every day, basking in its panoramic views and spectacular sunrises and sunsets for seven years. I savored having home-field advantage for Flagstaff Road and Track Club’s annual summer ending 5K. In 1989, I nearly broke 19 minutes, finishing in 19:05. Since then, I have never broken 20 minutes in any 5K, even ones I raced at sea level.

In 2001, when I co-founded NATRA, Buffalo Park served as our Monday evening meeting for our “Oldham Steps” 4.5-mile up-tempo group runs.

In 2012, many of you may remember NATRA’s epic Mayan Apocalypse 5K group run held in the park shortly after a blizzard, as we wondered if asteroids would fall from the sky.

Buffalo Park is also where my wife, Diana, joined Team Run Flagstaff’s “Step into Run-



COURTESY

Runners and walkers enjoy a brisk stroll around Buffalo Park during NATRA’s Mayan Apocalypse 5K group fun run Dec. 21, 2012.

ning” program and went from hating running to becoming an incredibly competitive running enthusiast.

Through my countless cherished memories at Buffalo Park, I’ll also never forget when, in 2021, Olympian Rachel Smith invited me and my little brother, Zach, to run alongside her, five-time Olympian Abdi Abdiraham and

other pros. The park is undeniably a meaningful meeting ground for everyone.

Through Nov. 12, please take a few minutes to complete the survey at <https://connect.flagstaffaz.gov/buffaloparkmural> so that the mural is most representative for all citizens.

Neil Weintraub is the co-founder and direc-

tor of Northern Arizona Trail Runners Association (NATRA LLC). NATRA Saturday group runs are free to runners and hikers of all abilities. To learn more and receive NATRA’s twice monthly newsletter, visit natra.org. Rachel Smith is the coordinating editor for the High Country Running column. You can email her at rachschneid18@gmail.com to contribute to this column.

HOMEcoming

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students really show out in these types of opportunities as we’re building momentum as a program.”

Wright continued: “We need that fan support. We need the dome to be loud. We go to some of these other places, the student section, the volume at some of these stadiums really affect the game and play a part of the outcome. We could have used that the other night, and we’re going to need that Saturday at Homecoming.”

This week’s game against Northern Colorado was deliberately moved back to start at 4 p.m. to allow students time to “take a nap,” as Wright put it, after participating in the traditional early-morning Homecoming activities known as Tequila Sunrise.

NAU will have some work to do to put a product on the field fans want to watch. As much online fanfare as last week’s game presented, getting people in the door at games is a priority.

Keeping playoff hopes alive

Last week showed some holes the Lumberjacks look to plug before making one last push for the playoffs over the final three games of the regular season. NAU fell out of the FCS top 25 rankings for the first time all season after last week’s loss.

“Defensively, just too many blown coverages,” Wright said. “Leaving the running back wide open multiple times in the passing game, [and we] blew a coverage at the end zone for their first touchdown. Not being able to stop the run consistently really hurt us.”

NAU went a combined 6 for 20 on third- and fourth-down conversions last week and tried creative ways to get out of tough situations. The Lumberjacks lost 12 yards on a sweep play on third-and-1 in the first quarter. They also tried a fake punt on fourth-

and-6 that was a couple yards short in the second quarter. A direct snap to sophomore running back Quran Gossett on another fourth-and-1 play was also stuffed.

Wright took responsibility for the play-calling mistakes and said it was poor judgment to draw up plays without junior quarterback Ty Pennington involved.

“I think where our team is right now, you need to play the percentages just a little bit better on offense and put it in the hands of Ty in those moments rather than some of those other things where maybe more can go wrong,” Wright said. “I think that’s what happened the other night. When something could go wrong, it did. It’s a lot less likely to go wrong when that football is in the hands of Ty Pennington.”

Pennington had a busy night leading NAU’s comeback from down 26-7 to take the lead early in the fourth quarter. He went 23-for-34 passing, tied for the second-most passes he has made all season, for 267 yards and a touchdown pass.

He took a few massive hits, particularly late in the game, and was sacked twice by a team sitting dead last in the Big Sky Conference in pressuring the quarterback.

Redshirt senior offensive lineman Connor DePrez called Pennington the toughest quarterback in all of college football.

“I love the guy,” DePrez said. “I love the way he plays.”

Pennington has weathered the hits he has taken. He is sixth in FCS with 2,240 passing yards and averages the 10th-most passing yards per game (248.89).

NAU has allowed 21 sacks in its nine games. Only UC Davis (23) has allowed more in the Big Sky.

DePrez said his unit will need to lock in to withstand the Bears’ defensive line.

“We just have to do better up front,” DePrez said. “We have to play



LONDON JOHNSON, NAU ATHLETICS

Northern Arizona Lumberjacks linebacker Jordan Lee (42) and long snapper Logan MacGregor (93) come off the field during a game against the Idaho Vandals on Halloween night in the Walkup Skydome.

better. We have to prepare better and will this week.”

No Bears down

Northern Colorado (3-6, 1-4 Big Sky) comes into Flagstaff as a bit of an anomaly. After going a combined 1-22 in its first two years under head coach Ed Lamb, the Bears are 3-6 and have been in just about every game against some tough competition, with the exception of No. 4 Montana State last week.

The Bears lost a heartbreaker to Colorado State after a touchdown call was reversed with an official review. They lost to a ranked South Dakota team in overtime the following week. They hung around against Sacramento State and No. 6 UC Davis. The highlight of their season so far was a 49-33 win over then-No. 13 Idaho.

“They really improved on offense,” Wright said. “They have a quarterback that can get the ball downfield and a couple of receivers that he throws to that are dynamic and make a lot of plays.”

Redshirt junior quarterback Eric Gibson Jr. was a Louisiana State University walk-on as a quarterback and wide receiver. He later transferred to Monterey Peninsula College in California before landing in Greeley this season.

He sits 11th in all of FCS with 2,180 passing yards.

Gibson Jr. also has the league’s top receiver as his primary option. Junior wide re-

ceiver Carver Cheeks leads the Big Sky in catches (58), receiving yards (831) and averages a league-high 92.3 yards per game. He trails Rhode Island’s Marquis Buchanan by just 39 yards for the most receiving yards in the country.

Cheeks’ running mate, junior receiver Brayden Munroe, is fourth in the Big Sky with 79.7 receiving yards per game.

NAU’s defense has worn fairly thin at the linebacker position with redshirt senior captain Quinlan Popham still out with a broken arm. Redshirt senior Travis Arena did not play last week after Wright said he was on track to see the field. His ankle injury may keep NAU’s leading tackler out for a little longer.

“We’re still pushing hard to try to get him back and get him ready, but he’s still a little ways away,” Wright said.

Arena’s chances of playing this week will come down to how he is feeling pregame.

Redshirt junior linebacker Bobby Niven picked up the slack in his first career start. The Thunderbird High School grad led NAU with a career-high 10 total tackles, three of which were solo hits.

The defensive side of the ball will make or break the Lumberjacks’ chances at a win and at a second straight FCS Playoff appearance. NAU (5-4, 2-3 Big Sky) and Northern Colorado will square off in the Walkup Skydome on Saturday at 4 p.m.

NAU

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a shot on goal. The Eagles also attacked early, as they drew their lone goal in the fifth minute off their only corner kick. The Lumberjacks did not take long to respond, as Ott played the ball just outside the box to a sprinting Llamas, who put it past the keeper in the right edge of the net in the eighth minute for the equalizer.

Ott gave NAU the lead in the 20th minute after her initial shot in the box was blocked. While NAU did not record another shot on goal in the half, Saveski stopped the Eagles’ two shots in the 23rd and 32nd minutes to keep the advantage heading into halftime.

Boex opened the second half with another shot on goal in the 46th minute, while Saveski continued making saves on the other end in the 56th and 65th minutes. The defensive backline of Karli Burton, Ella Freebury and Erin O’Connor also made several key plays to clear the Eagles’ aggressive forwards.

The Lumberjacks snapped the Eagles’ three-match win streak they brought into the postseason, during which they had outscored opponents 7-0.

Volleyball

NAU battled through a back-and-forth match against Sacramento State on Thursday night inside The Nest, ultimately falling in five sets.

Senior Kylie Moran paced NAU with a season-best 17 kills on .283 hitting, while Hanah Stoddard added 15 kills and 14 digs. Stoddard now has 995 career kills, just five away from joining the 1,000-kill club. Setter Keira Hall directed the offense with 26 assists and recorded 11 digs to secure a double-double, while libero Melia Barlow anchored

the back row with a match-high 15 digs.

The Lumberjacks finished with seven team blocks, five from Gigi Greenlee, three by Sophia Wadsworth and two from Avery Gottschalk. Overall, the team hit .233 on the night as NAU dropped to 16-8 overall and 9-3 in Big Sky play. Sacramento State improved to 16-8 and 9-3 as well, creating a tie for first place in the conference standings with just four matches remaining in the regular season.

In the opening set, the Lumberjacks found early rhythm behind kills from Moran and Wadsworth, pulling ahead midway through before Sacramento State closed on a late run to take the set, 25-23.

The Lumberjacks regrouped in the second set. Moran delivered multiple key kills alongside a service ace from Ella Hosfeld during an 8-2 stretch, giving NAU control, and the Lumberjacks evened the match with a 25-19 win.

Set three featured long rallies and strong defensive play on both sides. Despite a late push from Moran and Stoddard, Sacramento State edged out another close frame, 25-23.

The Lumberjacks hit .333 as a team in the fourth game, with Moran, Stoddard and Wadsworth each landing powerful kills to stretch the lead. Moran secured a kill in the closing point to secure a 25-18 victory.

Sacramento State opened the final set on a 6-0 run before NAU responded with kills from Stoddard and Moran. Despite defensive efforts from Barlow and a late block by Wadsworth, the Hornets maintained momentum to close out the match 15-7.

NAU faces Portland State on Saturday at 8 p.m.

Maxwell Nagle and Ashley Croft of NAU Sports Information contributed to this roundup.