

HIGH COUNTRY RUNNING

A trail through time

BY FASIL BIZUNEH
Special to the Daily Sun

There are photographs of my brother and me: shirts off, young, whole. A concrete buffalo guards the entrance to the 2-mile loop. The park sits on a windswept plateau above Flagstaff where we ran in the shadow of Humphreys Peak. The photographs do not show the altitude or the way the pines smell at 7,000 feet.

There is another photograph that has not yet been taken. It exists anyway. I have already seen it. My son, Moges, stands at the same statue. He is no longer the fourth grader at Kohala Elementary. He is taller than me. He has run the loop, felt the altitude and recognized something he cannot name.

He is looking at me. His mouth is open. He is about to speak ...

The Basenji is among the oldest breeds of dog on earth. Not a pet in the ordinary sense, but a partner: alert, independent, observant. They move with intention. They choose their moments. They are not easily directed, and they do not perform for approval. They respond to trust.

In 2009, Ras — a Basenji — joined me in Flagstaff. We ran Lake Mary Road in winter, the dirt trails near the rodeo arena south of town, the plateau where the air thins and the blood thickens.

Ras was there when I left Arizona for Hawaii,

surviving quarantine to reach the island. On the trails surrounding Maliu Ridge above the windmills, across the channel from Haleakala. He was there until the dark soil of Kohala closed over him, his brindle coat catching its final light.

Moges was in his mother's womb as our family grieved the loss. He was 6 months from his delivery. He was already present in the room where Ras had spent his final year.

In the particular silence that follows a loss, you cannot explain to anyone without sounding like what you sound like. I couldn't help but feel something might be passed on when the spirit of a dog departs and a son soon enters the world.

I do not reach for that idea lightly. I studied chemical engineering. I teach math to teenagers who need a reason to believe that what is invisible can still be real.

But I have never been able to shake it. The way Moges moves. The thing in his eyes. The subtle obstinance that feels impossibly familiar. Some mornings before school, Moges will refuse to rise. The chore brings me back to memories of Thorpe Bark Park. I spent many afternoons attempting to clip a leash onto a small brindle dog that was not ready to leave and fast enough to extend his stay.

Sometimes, when I think of Buffalo Park, it

is not as a location but as a threshold. A place you pass through often enough that it becomes part of how you understand motion, effort and return.

Years later, I find myself returning to those same trails in memory. The concrete buffalo. The herds of elk. The loop that felt longer than its distance when you were inside it and shorter when you were done.

I will stand there again with my son. We will walk past the buffalo statue and onto the loop. The pines will rise around us the same way they always have. The altitude will ask something of us both.

And perhaps, in that moment, he will feel something familiar without knowing why. He is looking at me. His mouth is open. He is about to speak.

Dad. I remember. I remember this.

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GUINAN

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bit," Erin said. "He's done such a great job, and I think he would say that it was the best choice he could have made."

Fitz saw it as both a social and athletic opportunity.

"I like the culture here," Fitz said. "I love all my teammates. I'm not too sure if I could say the same if I went to Flag High, but I feel like I'm really close with all the guys here."

Fitz said another reason he was influenced to attend Coconino is its basketball program. This past season, he helped lead the Panthers to an undefeated Grand Canyon Region record, finishing second on the team in rebounds per game and fourth in points per game.

When it came time for Danny to choose a high school, Flag High was the simpler choice. Danny said the decision ultimately came down to where his friends were going and the baseball program at Flag High.

Despite the rivalry, there's little bitterness, at least not the kind one might expect.

"I mean it doesn't really matter who wins at the end of the day," Danny said. "That's my brother; I love him."

That mindset defines their relationship. Where many sibling rivalries intensify under competition, theirs remains grounded in mutual respect.

"They're best friends," Erin said. "They shared a room their whole life until probably three years ago. I've never really seen jealousy coming from either of them."

Even as Fitz became the more established player, Danny embraced the comparison.

"I think Danny kind of grew up with people saying, 'Oh, you're Fitz's brother,'" Erin said. "What's so cool is that you could see on Danny's face that it didn't irritate him. It's like he was proud of it."

Fitz, for his part, sees his younger brother's independence and potential.

"He's always done his own thing," Fitz said. "He'll end up being better than me."

Still, that competitive edge remains. "He's always kinda talking his stuff, saying his school's a lot better," Fitz said, smiling. "I wish I could play against him."

That wish, for now, remains out of reach. Fitz will graduate in May with plans to attend college, but is undecided on where. With Fitz on varsity and

Danny on JV, the brothers won't meet on the field. Instead, their competition plays out elsewhere — in conversations, during dinners and in playful arguments echoing years of backyard games.

"Let's just say there came a time where we couldn't play board games in the house anymore," John said.

Competition, he believes, has always been part of the lesson.

"I just saw the tremendous value of children playing a team sport," John said. "I think the competitive spirit comes through. You have to be a good teammate. You have to work hard."

At the same time, he and Erin made a conscious effort not to force identical paths.

"We wanted them to find their own path and create their own ways," John said.

That philosophy has paid off. Even as the brothers attend rival schools, their worlds still overlap. Travel baseball, mutual friends and Flagstaff's tight-knit sports community keep them connected.

"They all have played travel ball together," John said. "Fitz has a lot of friends over at Flag High and Danny has friends that play travel ball at Coco, so it's a small community."

Erin believes the separation has strengthened their relationship.

"The fact that they are at different schools, and they have a lot of the same friend group, and they all overlap, I think it's probably been a good thing for their relationship," she said.

Still, the logistics can be challenging. Raising two outgoing student-athletes who attend different schools can have her running around town often.

"I can only be in one place at one time," Erin said.

On any given afternoon, that might mean choosing between one son's game and the other's — a trade-off familiar to many sports families.

Long before high school rivalries, before varsity and JV distinctions, there was simply a family in a backyard, playing for the love of the game.

"We would always hit with each other," Fitz said. "We would always field with each other. Our dad was always there, too."

That foundation hasn't changed. The uniforms may differ, and the competition may carry more weight, but at its core, the story of Fitz and Danny Guinan isn't about rivalry. It's about brotherhood, one built not on beating each other, but on growing together one game at a time.

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