

HIGH COUNTRY RUNNING

Deaf ultrarunner taking a second swing at Cocodona 250

BY ALYNN DAVIS
Special to the Daily Sun

For 300+ runners, including myself, anticipation is high as we wait to toe the line and embark on the amazing journey of Cocodona 250 beginning May 5. As the day draws closer, we are continuing to do our best to prepare for this unique race.

It's hard to encapsulate the various challenges it involves. There's the distance itself (256 miles), the wide range of terrain and temperatures — from hot desert to cold mountains, physical and mental fatigue, figuring out how to hydrate and fuel, and having proper gear and support. The list goes on and on!

Being deaf adds an extra challenging layer. As a deaf runner, I have to figure out communication avenues and bring awareness to the race director, staff

and volunteers. Navigating in the darkness feels extra challenging as my world is narrowed down to a tiny tunnel where my light shines. I am oblivious to any animal sounds or movements and not able to engage in conversations with a fellow runner or my pacers. When I'm on the trail and another runner approaches from behind, wishing to engage in a conversation, they may think I'm rude. I have to be my own motivator and give myself that extra "oomph" to boost my mental state and stay positive.

You may wonder why anyone, nevermind a deaf runner, would do such a crazy event. When this race first came to life in 2021, I was immediately drawn to it. I love adventures and yearn for them. I worked at the race for the first three years from 2021 to 2023 and decided to race it in 2024. Not only does



ALYNN DAVIS, COURTESY

Local ultrarunner Alynn Davis practices trail running to prepare for the Cocodona 250 in May.

it provide 256 miles of an outdoorsy adventure, but I get to hop around on various trails as I train for this epic event.

The race itself traverses a wide range of terrain and I'm likely to see some awesome wildlife. Each mile is

beautiful and makes me feel proud to call Arizona my home.

Along with being drawn to the event itself, I have felt lucky to work with their amazing staff. The race director, Steven Alderholt, has been so welcoming to me and

very willing to work with the extra challenges that come with supporting a deaf runner. In 2023, he hired a contractor who knows American Sign Language to work with me during the event. We hit it off so well that we became instant friends

and she has worked and paced me various times! Everything about the Cocodona 250 generates positive energy.

In 2024, I had hoped to complete this journey during the year I turned 50. Unfortunately, at mile 117 I dropped out due to issues and mistakes I made. This year, I feel better prepared. I've learned from those mistakes and have made big changes to my training and approach. I feel excited to once again attempt this challenge and come out with layers of new self awareness and perspectives on life.

A Flagstaff resident, **Alynn Davis**, who is Deaf, inspires many and enjoys being part of the Arizona running community. She works part time for Squirrel's Nut Butter and Aravaipa Running LLC. This May 5th she'll be attempting the Cocodona 250 challenge.



PHOTOS BY HATTIE LOPER, ARIZONA DAILY SUN

TOP LEFT: Northland Prep's Wyatt Massey (19) makes the out during a game against Hopi on Thursday at Sinagua Middle School. TOP RIGHT: Northland Prep's Dylan Stoffers (3) beats the out sliding into second during a game against Hopi on Thursday at Sinagua Middle School. BOTTOM RIGHT: Northland Prep's Michael Cary (11) slides safely into third base during a game against Hopi on Thursday at Sinagua Middle School. BELOW: Northland Prep's Blayden Cosper (13) swings at a pitch during a game against Hopi on Thursday at Sinagua Middle School.

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"I think it's just [about] getting the bats going," Cary said. "Once you see that going, everybody in the dugout seems to really get engaged and get involved after a couple hits in the field and we get some runs scored."

The Spartans stole bases frequently, which helped them score more runs as well. Nick Cosper was near third base, swinging his arm in circles, signaling to the boys to keep running when Hopi's defense was slow. The boys followed suit and stole bases 15 times. Blayden Cosper, Green and Cary each stole



three bases. Stoffers, Massey and Zesiger all stole twice.

"I just think they're growing. They are growing as a team,"

Nick Cosper said. "I don't think there's any magic to it. I think

they're growing and they are figuring it out."

Cary said the team is used to regularly stealing bases, and practices that aspect of the game often.

"We normally jump on every opportunity we see," Cary said. "Coach has no hesitation to send us to second. If we are able to jump on that opportunity, and they are not going to try to get us out, yeah, we will take that advantage."

There are five games left in the regular season for Northland Prep. Three of those are home games. The Spartans are scheduled to host Kingman Academy on Monday at 4 p.m.

MAKAYLA O'BANNON can be reached at makayla.obannon@azdailysun.com.

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"He had to will himself to go for it," Mullaney said.

And NAZ Elite's Abby Nichols broke through for a win that day, running 4:11.91 in the women's 1500m. It was her first victory since winning the Sir Walter Miler in August 2023.

Mullaney said Nichols executed the race

plan brilliantly in being aggressive and ready to make a strong kick at the end of the race.

She also, he said, checked off all her goals for the weekend with success.

"The three goals for the evening were to own the process of competing and then turning around and pacing one of the heats of the 10,000 — which she did really

well," Mullaney said. "The second was to go for the win in 1500, and the third was to have fun and enjoy the racing experience overall."

Indeed, the athletes at the event had wonderful conditions for racing that evening — which is always a big draw for athletes. NAZ Elite's athletes made the best of the "close to perfect" conditions. Mullaney said the tem-

peratures were in the 50s and the wind was hardly present.

"It was very ripe to run fast," he said.

NAZ Elite's Jackson Sharp also showed a speedy result, placing second in the men's 1500m in 3:36.82.

It was also a night that showed the team is on the right track heading into a very competitive summer season. Going to The TEN, Mullaney said,

and having all the racers "competing" in the way they wanted was overall a good sign of things to come.

It was also another opportunity for the runners and coaches to work through the process of preparing for, executing during and coming away from races.

"You really need reps. You don't want to go into a major race or a major champion-

ship not having had a few reps practicing different racing scenarios, different types of things you want to do for an evening," Mullaney said.

MIKE HARTMAN is the associate editor of the Daily Sun, a role he moved into after working as the sports editor, a sports reporter and a page designer. He can be reached at mhartman@azdailysun.com or (928) 556-2255.