

HIGH COUNTRY RUNNING

Running through the years: a journey of joy, connection and health

BY CHRIS GOMEZ

Special to the Daily Sun

Running has been a beautiful constant in my life and has accompanied me through high school, college and well into adulthood. Each season has brought something different, but the cycle I'm in now might be my favorite.

These days, I get to run with people whose ages span across three to four decades. It's such a gift to feel such fitness in my 40s. Never did my high school self imagine I would be running with such joy 20-plus years later. When I turned 40, I had one of my best years of running, and

ever since I've felt grateful for how much it continues to give me.

Running has touched nearly every part of my life — school, career, friendships, even marriage. In fact, I met my husband, Ryan Stevens, through running. I love that something as simple as lacing up a pair of shoes can bring people together in such deep and lasting ways; especially the sense of community that the Flagstaff running scene has fostered.

Some of my proudest running moments haven't been about me at all, but about running for others. Pacing my best friend,

Diane Nukuri, in her final professional marathon in Chicago was unforgettable. It was fun, emotional and so full of gratitude.

Another moment that stays close to my heart was running the Imogene Pass Run with my friend Fon's bib after she passed away. That finish remains my best, not because of time, but because it was about honoring her. I've now run Imogene for more than a decade, and while not every race goes perfectly, it's never just about the results. The beauty of the course, the energy of the people, and the love that surrounds that race make it something more. When

you finish, you don't just feel accomplished — you feel transformed.

Of course, beyond the memories and friendships, running quietly takes care of the body and mind. I notice how it keeps me strong and steady. Each run feels like it strengthens my heart and lungs, builds muscle and bone and helps me stay balanced. It's reassuring to know that these miles are not only good for today but also for the years ahead, lowering the risks of chronic diseases such as heart disease or diabetes.

Running also clears my head in a way that nothing else does. Some days it's a

moving meditation, other days it's a burst of joy, and often it's just a chance to breathe and let go. Science says running supports memory and learning, even protecting against cognitive decline, and I believe it. I can feel the difference every time I come back from a run — calmer, clearer, more myself.

For me, running is more than exercise. It's love, joy, community and connection. It has carried me through life's chapters and given me some of my most meaningful relationships and experiences. More than results or finish lines, running is about what happens along the way —

step by step, mile by mile, year after year.

Chris Gomez is a long-time Flagstaff runner and proud member of the local running community. A former Northern Arizona University cross country and track and field athlete, he now works as an urology nurse practitioner. Chris can often be found on Flagstaff's trails and plans to keep racing both at home and at national masters events. Rachel Smith is the coordinating editor for the High Country Running column. You can email her at rachschnid18@gmail.com to contribute to this column.

NAU

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Soccer

NAU continues conference play with a single contest this weekend in Flagstaff.

NAU (4-2-5, 1-0-1 Big Sky) hosts Northern Colorado (1-8-4, 0-2 Big Sky) Sunday at 1 p.m. Admission at Lumberjack Stadium is free for all fans.

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The Lumberjacks currently sit second in the conference standings with four points, while the Bears are still searching for their first ones. Northern Colorado will look to end its two-match losing streak after being bested by Montana and Sacramento State. NAU has faced the same opponents in league play so far,

earning a 2-1 win over the Montana Grizzlies and a 1-1 draw with the Sacramento State Hornets.

Historically, the Lumberjacks have dominated the Bears, holding an all-time 11-7-1 record dating back to 2009.

Micala Boex ranks second in the conference in shots and first in assists, with 43 shots, five goals and six assists on the year.

Avery Ott leads the conference in shots on goal and ranks third in total shots, posting 21 shots on goal, 38 total shots and five goals.

Reece Reichwald remains the starter between the posts for NAU. The true freshman has accumulated a 0.96 GAA and 0.836 save percentage in 11 match appearances, owning two shutouts in

her young collegiate career. The Lumberjacks maintain a GAA of one as a team through its most recent games, as they have conceded multiple goals in just three matches this season.

Northern Colorado counters with junior forward Lexi Tuite, who has tallied 25 shots and four goals this season, 14 of those on target. She pairs

with sophomore forward Sunnie Yarnell, who has also recorded 25 shots and one goal.

After Sunday's match, Northern Arizona heads to Oregon to face Portland State on Thursday at noon.

Ashley Croft and Richie Young of NAU Sports Information contributed to this roundup.

LUMBERJACKS

FROM PAGE 1

"We felt like throughout the course of the game he kind of got the hot hand," Wright said. "We decided to keep him in there and give it to him a few more times. He did a great job of breaking tackles when a couple of those runs weren't there."

Redshirt senior offensive lineman Ethan Kramer touted his unit's experience as to why it can shift around and create openings for the running backs.

"I feel like we're just re-

ally working very well with each other," Kramer said. "Each week is a new week with what we see from the opponent."

Establishing the run

Getting the running back into the second level of the defense, past the line of scrimmage, has been a big emphasis for NAU and the offensive line.

The Lumberjacks could have a tough time reclaiming that running rhythm. The Bobcats enter the week with the best run defense in the conference, only allowing 116.6 total rushing yards per game.

On the other side, Montana State runs the ball itself as well as anyone else in the league. It comes into Flagstaff with exactly 1,000 rushing yards. The Bobcats bring two running backs who already have over 200 yards on the ground. Senior Julius Davis leads the team with 254 rushing yards, followed by sophomore Adam Jones' 207.

Jones was named Big Sky Freshman of the Year last season and was declared the conference preseason MVP.

Stopping those two and the running game falls

into the lap of defensive run game coordinator and linebackers coach Aaron Cheatwood.

"As long as we fit the run properly, do our jobs, do our assignment and not try to do other people's jobs, we're going to be pretty good as a defense," Cheatwood said.

The Lumberjacks will get some added help this week that they did not have to start the year. Senior linebacker Brandon Wong has been lights-out since he returned from off-season injuries against Incarnate Word. In his first start against Portland State, he

led the Lumberjacks with five total tackles.

The NAU secondary, however, will be down redshirt sophomore safety Shahid Wilson for the rest of the season after an injury he suffered against Incarnate Word. Wilson will have season-ending surgery, putting an end to the Ventura Community College transfer's first season as a Lumberjack.

The team got positive news surrounding senior offensive lineman Terrence Caldwell, who also went down with a lower-body injury against Incarnate Word. After being

out for the Portland State game, Wright said Caldwell has a shot to play this week.

"We got some good news that he's feeling better," Wright said. "We just don't know where he's going to be by Saturday yet. I know Terrence well enough that he's going to do everything he can to be available for Saturday's game."

The offensive line has seen a lot of movement to account for Caldwell's absence. Redshirt freshman Corey Johnson took a majority of the snaps at center.

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