HIGH COUNTRY RUNNING

An ode to the life and legacy of Coach Matt Holton: Part II

BY CRISTINA PINEDA
Special to the Daily Sun



COURTESY

Matt Holton and Cristina Pineda were head coaches for Kihei Charter High School's boys and girls track and field teams.

Born and raised on Maui, Matt Holton graduated from Maui High, ran at Bentley University in Boston and later walked on at the University of Oregon in 1998. He graduated in 2000 with a B.A. in Philosophy and Political Science. After a year at Temple Law School, he moved to Flagstaff, where he ran, coached and worked as a baker — and where our paths eventually crossed.

I met Matt at Josephine's Restaurant and was immediately drawn to him. We quickly became friends. Matt lived in a running house with LetsRun.com founder Weldon Johnson and Olympic steeplechaser Anthony Famiglietti. Recognizing my track and field background, he invited me to help coach Team Trina. In 2005, after he lived in Flagstaff for nearly a half of a decade, we left for Maui after a road trip through the western United States, Jasper and British Columbia.

On Maui, Matt pursued painting full time and returned to competitive road racing. We operated Holton Gallery out of our home, where Matt created artwork inspired by the people and landscapes of Hawai'i. He assistant coached at Seabury Hall, his former school, and we covered meets through our now-defunct website, MauiRunner.com. Our photography took us to the Prefontaine Classic, World Juniors and World Indoors. We later became co-head coaches of Kihei Charter High School's boys and girls track teams. Matt taught his athletes to work hard, have fun and represent their school and island with pride. He embodied and coached what his grandmother always said, "Do your best, and have fun."

Matt won the Honolulu Marathon's Kamaʻāina award four times, recognizing the top Hawai'i resident. He placed ninth at the 2015 Anchorage Mayor's Marathon in 2:52:43, then won the 2016 Madison Marathon in Montana in 3:54:30 on a challenging gravel course that began above 8,000 feet. His marathon personal best was 2:23. The half marathon eventually became his favorite distance, with his personal best being 1:09. He was selected nine times for Team Hawaiʻi's Chase at the Hapalua Half Marathon — more than any other team member — and finished as high as third against professional runners.

In 2019, we moved to the Island of Hawai'i to pursue our dream of off-grid living. We built through the pandemic. Matt continued painting, creating videos for his monetized YouTube channel and writing. His self-published books include "Mindful Miles," "Treasures Memories in Paradise" and several coloring books. They are all available through https://volcanocreativestudio.com.

On Nov. 11, 2024, our lives changed forever when Matt suffered a massive stroke while running in Hilo. A blood clot traveled through a previously undiscovered hole in his heart to his brain. After weeks in a coma and intensive rehabilitation, Matt gradually began painting again and working toward recovery. He underwent a procedure to close the hole in his heart, but pneumonia tragically took his life on Jan. 14, 2026, at our home in Volcano, Hawai'i. He was 47.

Despite losing Matt too soon, I feel gratitude for the final 14 months we had together thanks to a good Samaritan recognizing that he was having a stroke and acting quickly. I also feel immense gratitude for the Hawai'i Stroke Coalition, an amazing organization that helps raise awareness about strokes and recognizing the signs — which can be remembered by the running-related acronym: BEFAST (balance loss, eye changes, face drooping, arm weakness, speech issues, time to call 911).

On Sept. 24, 2026, Matt was inducted into the Hawai'i Running Hall of Fame. His legacy lives on through his art, mentorship, the many people he inspired, and the ways he found joy in helping others reach their goals.

https://hirunning.org/inductee/matthew-holton/

CRISTINA PINEDA CONTINUES TO LIVE ON THE BIG ISLAND OF HAWAII WITH HER KITTY KIMCHI. SHE IS INVOLVED IN THE ART COMMUNITY BY WORKING AT THE VOLCANO ART CENTER GALLERY AND RUNS SEVERAL YOUTUBE CHANNELS, INCLUDING ONE FOR THE GALLERIES, HER OWN AND MATT'S. PLENTY MAHALOS TO NEIL, RACHEL AND THE ARIZONA DAILY SUN FOR HONORING MATT'S LEGACY BY TELLING THIS STORY.
RACHEL SMITH IS A MOM TO TWO WONDERFUL GIRLS, A PROFESSIONAL RUNNER, AND FEELS LUCKY TO CALL FLAGSTAFF "HOME." SHE IS ALSO THE COORDINATING EDITOR OF THIS COLUMN AND WOULD LOVE FOR YOU TO CONTRIBUTE TO IT BY SENDING YOUR RUNNING-RELATED STORY TO HER AT RACHSCHNEID18@GMAIL.COM.

WRIGHT

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our football team ran out onto the field for our opening stretch," Wright said. "I thought we were concerned a little bit more about Southern Utah than we were about the Lumberjacks, and that's not how we roll here in this program."

Wright said the team was "lackadaisical" during its pregame warmups, a new problem for a team already fighting through early-game slumps.

Distractions turned into a lack of discipline. Southern Utah took a 10-0 lead in the first quarter in part because of a bad penalty after the whistle that kept the Lumberjack defense on the field.

"The number of penalties we had is embarrassing," Wright said. "It's not who we want to be in this program, but it's what we did on Saturday."

NAU was called for nine penalties for 111 yards, its most penalty yards allowed under Wright. It was the first time NAU totaled at least 100 yards on penalties since 2024, Wright's first season leading the team. The Lumberjacks were called for three unsportsmanlike conduct penalties, some of which directly contributed to Southern Utah scoring drives.

"We're going to get that corrected," Wright said on Monday. "We've already started to get that corrected in practice today. Not happy with that at all."

The Lumberjacks received a much-needed spark in the form of junior running back Quran Gossett in his first game back from an ankle sprain he suffered early against Montana. Wright said he was not 100%, but felt good about him playing after a strong week of practice. Gossett was cleared to play after practice the day before the game.

"It felt great," Gossett said. "I was really missing it after missing these weeks. I was just excited to do my best and go out and be there for my teammates."

He did indeed do his best. Gossett had career highs in rushing yards (131) and receiving yards (72). He heard the halftime message and took it to heart. He only had 15 rushing yards in the first 30 minutes of play.

"I would say we had better attention to detail," Gossett said. "We were more fired up. We don't want to let what happened last year, like what happened at Weber. We were supposed to go in and win by a lot and ended up losing. We don't want that to happen this year and them ruin our season."

Nationally ranked Weber State will have something to say about next week.

NAU has one final road game against Cal Poly on Saturday in San Luis Obispo, a place the Lumberjacks are 8-0 all-time against the Mustangs. Cal Poly is coming off a brutal 61-7 loss at No. 3 Montana State last week.

"That to me is a little bit of the anomaly," Wright said. "When you look at the bulk of their season, I think they've really been an improved football team from a year ago."

Wright remembers last year's late-season matchup against Cal Poly at the Walkup Skydome: a game that saw 25 points scored in the final 1:14 before halftime. It also featured a controversial fourth-down call by Wright inside the NAU 30-yard line in the final minute of a one-possession game.

Much of last season's theatrics came largely thanks to Cal Poly quarterback Anthony Grigsby Jr., who launched a 57-yard Hail Mary touchdown to end that wacky first half last season.

"He's a playmaker," Wright said. "He can extend plays as well as anybody does. He's a good runner. He's an accurate thrower. I didn't give him enough credit a year ago when we played him here. ... He made a lot of big plays against us last year."

A spot in the FCS Playoffs seems all but assured for NAU with three games left in the season, all of which it will likely be favored in. The schedule appeared to benefit the Lumberjacks in their homestretch of the season. Two home games against Weber State and Northern Colorado await them after this week.

Business has to be taken care of before NAU begins thinking about the postseason. A first-round bye is on the table after NAU was placed sixth in the NCAA FCS Playoff Committee Top 10 rankings released on Thursday. Wright will tell you he does not care.

"Maybe you start to listen to the people who tell you how good you're doing," Wright said. "Maybe we're listening too much to some of these playoff predictors and some of that stuff that has no bearing on what we need to do to get better. I just felt like some of the landmines that are out there were starting to take some of our attention."

His players appear to be on the same page. Only time will tell if they can stay the course and not get ahead of themselves.

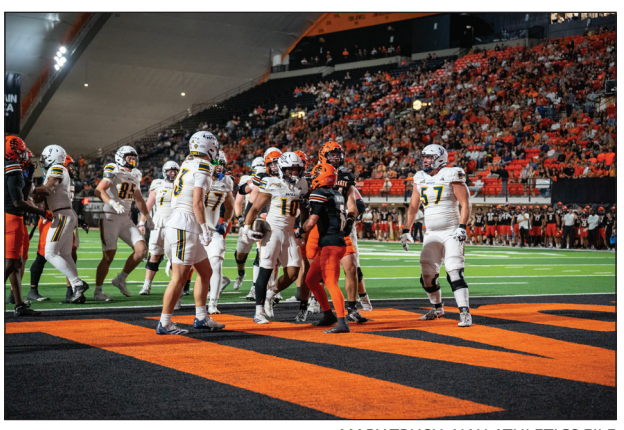
"It's outside noise," Gossett said. "Rankings don't really matter. All that matters is who is playing in January. We're not even worried about being sixth."

NAU and Cal Poly will kick off at 3 p.m. on Saturday from Mustang Memorial Field.



LANDON JOHNSON, NAU ATHLETICS FILE

Northern Arizona running back Quran Gossett (10) reacts after scoring a touchdown during a game against Southern Utah on Oct. 31 at Eccles Coliseum in Cedar City, Utah.



MARY TRUSH, NAU ATHLETICS FILE

Northern Arizona running back Quran Gossett (10) scores a touchdown during a game against Idaho State on Oct. 3 at Idaho Central Credit Union Dome in Pocatello, Idaho.



SILAS MEISTER, NAU ATHLETICS

Northern Arizona head football coach Brian Wright walks to the Walkup Skydome before the Lumberjacks' Family Weekend game against Incarnate Word on Sept. 12.