

HIGH COUNTRY RUNNING

We were on a break: reigniting the HCR column

BY RACHEL SMITH
High Country Running

On May 10, 2009, the *Arizona Daily Sun* published the first edition of its High Country Running column. The very first article was written by one of Flagstaff's beloved local running legends, Neil Weintraub, who detailed the fifth annual Flagstaff Running Series. Since that first publication, the High Country Running column enjoyed a long run of having a weekly publication in the *Daily Sun* for over 15 years.

Over the course of the column's approximately 775 weeks of publications, there have been three coordinating editors, hundreds of writers and a vast variety of stories shared. It became a space that helped build, reinforce, inform and inspire our local running community.

The effort was initiated by local running enthusiast Karen London, who took on the role of coordinating each week's article and serving as an editor for the first four years of the column.

Her original goal was "to get more information out to the com-

munity about the great opportunities for running here in Flagstaff, including building some pride in our town as a running mecca for runners of all levels." She succeeded, and after four years as coordinating editor, she handed the baton over to Myles Schrag in 2013.

Myles kept the column running for five years before passing the baton to Julie Hammonds in 2018. Last November, after an impressive six years, Julie needed to pass the role on, but no one stepped to the line and it seemed the column had unfortunately hit its finish line.

Hesitant to try to fill the shoes of the three that came before, but bringing a strong love for the Flagstaff running community and hearing others' stories, I decided to reach out to Neil to inquire about his thoughts on potentially bringing the column back. His enthusiasm made me quickly agree to connect with Julie, and she generously shared what the role entailed and let me pick her brain. Next thing I knew, Julie connected me with the *Daily Sun* editors and,

a few weeks later I'm excited to reintroduce the High Country Running column!

Our running community is far from ordinary, and the people, events, stories and wisdom are what makes it so special. With that, the return of High Country Running allows Flagstaff to hear the voices that make up this exceptional community in all its forms.

It is my hope that through this column I can help continue the legacy it has had for the readers of Flagstaff and beyond, and I look forward to helping share the next chapter of High Country Running here with you.

Lastly, it would be remiss for me not to mention the exciting event happening in our city this upcoming week. Our very own Northern Arizona University is hosting the Indoor Track and Field Big Sky Conference Championship meet from Feb. 27 to March 1 at the Walk-up Skydome! Come cheer on your local Lumberjacks as they go for their fifth consecutive men's and women's team sweep. All information can be found on the NAU Athletics website.



RACHEL SMITH, COURTESY

Local runner Rachel Smith races in last October's Soulstice Trail Race. She has decided to bring back the High Country Running Column — becoming its fourth coordinating editor.

Playoff push in jeopardy for Suns after trade deadline dilemma

BY JACKSON SHAW
Cronkite News

PHOENIX — "Absolute disaster" and "losers" were just some of the words used by NBA writers to describe the Phoenix Suns' trade deadline action — or lack thereof.

The Suns' main highlight of the deadline was the moving of center Jusuf Nurki, and many fans were disappointed with the Suns, who have a losing record, not making any big changes to improve the team's trajectory.

With a star-studded roster that has yet to pose much of a post-season threat in recent years, analysts are persistent in believing Phoenix will make a move on some of the big-name free agents every season.

"It's been my long-standing policy not to talk about rumors, speculation," said Suns president of basketball operations James Jones in a press conference before a game against Utah on Feb. 7. "What we do internally, we keep internally. It always gets noisy when you're not winning. We're not winning, and so we'll just stay above the noise."

The big rumor swirling around the Suns during this year's trade deadline was the potential acquisition of

Miami Heat star Jimmy Butler. Butler voiced that he wanted to come to Phoenix to team up with Devin Booker and Kevin Durant but to get the financial logistics straight, the Suns would have had to move on from Bradley Beal, who wouldn't waive his no-trade clause.

"You guys care about the rumors more than me," Beal said in an interview after a loss to Oklahoma City on Feb. 5. "I'm still competing ... I still got the Phoenix Sun uniform on. Nothing changed for me ... I want to win here."

The other move executed by the Suns before the deadline was the trading away of high-level wing defender Josh Okogie in exchange for Charlotte Hornets center Nick Richards, a prelude of the intention to move Nurki.

Closing in on the Feb. 6 deadline, Durant was also a hot topic involved in rumors about a potential departure, which sparked speculation of a "toxic" locker room. Durant shut down the conjecture.

"It's easy to say our locker room is not connected when you come in there 45 minutes before and guys are in their game mode and not talking to each other," Durant said in an interview



DANIELLA TRUJILLO, CRONKITE NEWS

Despite trade talks swirling around him before the NBA trade deadline, Kevin Durant remains focused on helping the Phoenix Suns secure a postseason berth.

post-deadline. "I think it's unfair and lazy to categorize our team as toxic when you come in there for five minutes throughout four months."

As for Jones, he recognizes that there is still work to be done within the roster, but he sees no problem in the current team's capability of winning.

"It allows us an opportunity to focus with this team on what it is that we want to do, which is compete at a high level, have success in the playoffs and compete for a championship," Jones said.

With 28 games left in the regular season, however, Phoenix

has fallen to the No. 11 seed in the Western Conference after losing six of their last seven before the All-Star break. The Suns open the second half of the regular season Thursday in San Antonio against the 23-29 Spurs.

Since the Suns' finals berth in 2021, the franchise's aggressive push to win a championship has been underwhelming. They've had their fair share of injuries, but the past two seasons ended with a 4-2 conference semifinal loss to the Denver Nuggets in 2023 and a sweep in last year's first round to Minnesota (with a healthy

Booker, Durant and Beal).

While Phoenix didn't advance past the second round in the season following its finals run, the franchise still had a promising future with a young roster surrounding Booker highlighted by key role players like Deandre Ayton, Mikal Bridges and Cameron Johnson.

But in February 2023, after the hiring of owner Mat Ishbia, the Suns started getting aggressive. Ishbia got right to work, acquiring Durant from the Brooklyn Nets and Beal in a trade with the Washington Wizards. The two stars joined Booker to form

the league's newest big three, but it cost the Suns their young pieces in Bridges, Johnson and Landry Shamet; as well as veterans Chris Paul and Jae Crowder, and four first-round picks.

The Suns have remained competitive in every season since then, but have yet to duplicate the success of the 2021 season. With the second half of the season tipping off Thursday, coach Mike Budenholzer and the Suns find themselves near the bottom of a competitive Western Conference, and they didn't give fans too much of a reason to expect an improvement.

RUNNING

FROM PAGE B1

a little more race simulation," Mullaney said. "And she's executed those very well."

The 3000m, meanwhile, is right in Hack-

er's wheelhouse, and NAZ Elite is taking the blinkers off him for this race, as is normally the case. That means taking the same approach as the team last year with this race: go in it to win it.

"You have to race to win these competitions. If you just try to be top two, three or five, or something like that, you'll be a lot further back, because you play it safer. Indoors, especially, favors bold racing," Mullaney said.

Many of the racers who finished just behind Hacker a year ago at the 3000m national title race are back — in addition to a runner who owns a 7:30.45 PR named Dylan Jacobs.

But like Nichols, Hacker hasn't set a

PR at the distance since 2023. He did, however, just post a seventh-place finish at the 117th Millrose Games 3000m in 7:38.52 two weeks ago.

"I think it says he's in good form," 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.