

NORTHERN ARIZONA FOOTBALL

# NAU faces a must-win in pursuit of playoff bid

BY BRENDEN MARTIN  
Sun Sports Editor

The No. 23-ranked Northern Arizona football team stands at a crossroads almost identical to the one it faced at this point last season. The Lumberjacks need to complete a long winning streak if they want a shot at the FCS Playoffs. A victory on Saturday on the road at Weber State is mandatory for them to continue their season, and even then, that is not guaranteed.

Lumberjacks head coach Brian Wright said his team is focusing on the controllables and seeing where the chips might fall. Naturally, keeping an eye on other key games may be tempting, but needing to take care of business themselves, paired with an early kickoff, could make that difficult.

“I certainly don’t envision any real scoreboard watching before the game,” Wright said. “After the game, if we do what we need to do, then certainly, yeah, because we all know that we’re going to need some help also.”

The Big Sky Conference is known for having a handful of teams represented in the playoffs each year. Montana State and Montana are ranked in the top three. No. 15 UC Davis might have to fend off Sacramento State to make it in as well. The rival schools will play for the last time as conference foes in a game that could determine if NAU sneaks in — like it did last year.

The Lumberjacks have never made consecutive appearances in the FCS Playoffs. Their resume looks fairly similar to last year’s team, which won the games it was supposed to win and was competitive in a handful of losses against higher-ranked opponents.

NAU will play away from Flagstaff for the first time in three weeks. In addition to its last road game against Idaho State at the ICCU Dome, this will be NAU’s first outdoor game since losing 45-24 to then-No. 5 UC Davis on Oct. 11.

As is the case whenever they are set to play outside, the Lumberjacks spent the week practicing outdoors. Junior quarterback Ty Pennington said he and the team are prepared for the elements.

“We can’t look at that as an obstacle or something that might hinder our performance,” Pennington said. “We got to do what we do, can’t be controlled by the elements. Preparing outside any way we can, hopefully it gets pretty cold out there.”

Flagstaff got a mix of snow, cold and rain this week, adding to the tough stretch of preparation before the team jets off to Utah. Ogden’s forecast for Saturday looks to be a little more forgiving, with sunny skies set for Saturday with a brisk high in the 50s.

### The Wright call to go for it

The end of the first half and the beginning of the second half looked to be

the true turning points of last week’s game against Cal Poly. A combined 25 points were scored in the final 1:14 of the first half. NAU jumped out of the gate in the second half with a 38-yard touchdown catch by redshirt senior wide receiver Kolbe Katsis.

Wright said those parts of the game are crucial. He lamented allowing Cal Poly to convert a Hail Mary to end the first half — which cut NAU’s lead to 22-17.

“As I stated after the game, that was all on me for not having the right guys out there to defend that,” Wright said.

Wide receiver Jayson Raines was explicitly mentioned as someone who should have been sent out to bat down the pass. He said he didn’t think anything of him not being out there in such a unique situation. “I don’t really think it was necessarily (Wright’s) mistake or anybody else’s mistake on the field,” Raines said. “I think they wanted to have their defensive personnel out there just in case they were going to a hook-and-ladder.”

Personnel also factored in Wright’s risky decision to go for it on fourth down deep in NAU territory late last week. The failed fourth-and-1 call gave Cal Poly a chance to tie the game in the final minute. While the defense held, Wright said he would never go back on a decision like that.

“No, I’m never going to change my mind or wish I would have done something necessarily



PHOTOS BY ZACH MELENDEZ, NAU ATHLETICS  
**Northern Arizona quarterback Ty Pennington (6) escapes from a Cal Poly defender during a game on Senior Day in the Walkup Skydome Saturday, Nov. 15.**

just because we didn’t get it,” Wright said. “Certainly, it doesn’t look as good of a decision when you don’t get it, but I still stand with where we are as a football team right now, and how we best give ourselves a chance to win the game.”

Wright said after the game that the handful of injuries on defense contributed to keeping the offense on the field. Going into a must-win game, everyone who is banged up is working hard to get on the field.

Senior linebacker Travis Arena, who is still second on the team in total tackles despite missing the last three games, is improving and has a chance to play with an ankle injury. Senior captain Quinlan Popham played on his senior day last week with a cast on his broken arm. He also looks to be available on Saturday.

Offensive injuries may be starting to catch up to the battering the defense has seen. NAU’s second-leading rusher, sophomore running back Quran Gossett, missed last week with an ankle injury, as did junior wide receiver Joey Stout with a shoulder injury. Wright said none of those guys have been ruled out, signaling decisions on them will come down to right before kickoff.

### Weber State’s struggles

Saturday is another game where NAU is heavily favored on paper.

The Weber State Wildcats were one of the premier teams in the Big

Sky Conference not long ago. Former head coach Jay Hill led his team to four conference championships and six FCS Playoff appearances since he started in 2014. His 68-39 overall record and impressive 50-19 Big Sky record allowed him to join BYU as its defensive coordinator after the 2022 season.

Mickey Mental took the reins of the program after Hill’s departure, posting a 13-20 overall record and an 8-14 Big Sky ledger. Weber State parted ways with Mental after losing to Montana State, 66-14, two weeks ago.

Both Wright and Mental grew up in Ohio, where they got their playing and coaching careers started. Wright said he did not understand why a move like that was made so late in the season.

“I hated to see that,” Wright said. “I know Mickey personally and really think a lot of him. We’ve known each other for quite some time now, before either one of us came out west.”

Weber State (3-8, 1-6 Big Sky) elevated longtime assistant Brent Myers to interim head coach for its final two games. Myers has been a part of the Wildcats staff since 2014, through both the Hill and Mental eras.

Myers has a lengthy coaching history. Before Weber State, he was the offensive coordinator at UNLV. He was also an offensive line coach at Louisville (2007-09) and Arizona State (2004-06) and was Urban Meyer’s assistant head coach at Utah in 2003.

He was also an assistant at NAU from 1992-97, and coached at his alma mater, Eastern Washington, for nine years. Myers was a Division II All-American Honorable Mention for the Eagles in 1981 before they moved to DI and the Big Sky.

Myers made his head coaching debut last week against Idaho State, resulting in a 31-3 defeat in Pocatello. He will get to send off this year’s senior class on Saturday at Stewart Stadium.

Wright said his team is not worried about Weber State looking any different with a new coach.

“It doesn’t change how we prepare for them,” Wright said. “They’re not going to change a whole bunch offensively and defensively from a scheme standpoint. We’ve got to really focus on us, regardless, and get ourselves to play really well.”

Like most of NAU’s opponents, Weber State has put multiple quarterbacks behind center. Junior Dijon Jennings has seen the most time as the team’s signal caller. The Akron transfer has completed 99 passes in his seven appearances but has thrown no more than one touchdown per contest.

He had a season-high 24 completions for 192 yards in the recently revived Train Bell Trophy game against the Idaho State Bengals.

NAU (7-4, 4-3 Big Sky) will look to maintain its grasp of the also recently revived Red Rock Rivalry Trophy on Saturday at 1 p.m.



**Northern Arizona defensive back Jerry Johnson III (13) and linebacker Quinlan Popham (48) combine for a sack during a game Saturday, Nov. 15, against Cal Poly on Senior Day at the Walkup Skydome.**

HIGH COUNTRY RUNNING

# November is American Diabetes Awareness Month

BY ANNIE PHILLIPS  
Special to the Daily Sun

After almost 40 years of running with Type 1 diabetes, I am full of gratitude for the gift of running. Type 1 diabetes is an autoimmune disease in which the body does not produce insulin. Anyone with Type 1 must take insulin daily through injections or an insulin pump. Type 2 diabetes is a non-autoimmune condition in which the body does not use insulin properly. About 90-95% of diabetes cases are Type 2; people with Type 1 make up the remaining 5-10%.

My journey with Type 1 began in 1986, when I was still competing as a runner. I had competed in college and had goals I wanted to accomplish in running, specifically in the marathon. Newly married, my husband

and I were working at the South Rim of the Grand Canyon for the National Park Service. The Grand Canyon was a fabulous place to train, with its high altitude, vast array of trails and beautiful views. On weekends, I enjoyed many trips to Flagstaff to compete in local races.

While I was not an exceptional runner, running was — and still is — my passion. So many of us have our own “whys” that explain the reasons we run. This time in my life also reminded me of the “what”: what running has given me. In 1986, I did not realize that running would give me the gift of the best health possible in the nearly 40 years ahead with an autoimmune disease.

While gearing up for a 10K race, I noticed I

was losing an inordinate amount of weight. As a park ranger, I wore a uniform every day, and it began to sag on me; I kept cinching my belt to keep my pants up. I also began to crave food and water incessantly. I was thirsty to the point of being utterly unsatiated. Still, I was determined to run that 10K race. It was unwise to race since I was feeling worse than ever, but I ran anyway. Although I was surprised to finish very well, something was terribly wrong.

The next day at the Grand Canyon Clinic, the diagnosis was clear. Like so many receiving astonishing news, I felt as though my body were betraying me. I had always been healthy and athletic. The symptoms I had experienced — extreme thirst, excessive

hunger, unexplained weight loss, fatigue, excessive urination, and blurred vision — are all signs of Type 1 diabetes.

I was told not to expect to ever run another marathon. That only fueled my desire to change that narrative. What started as a passion for running and chasing times became my mission to figure out how to live the life I wanted while managing diabetes. Thankfully, I was fortunate to be diagnosed at a time when the value of exercise in helping to manage diabetes was becoming more widely recognized.

After 40 years with an unexpected diagnosis, running has been a driving force in my health, and I am profoundly grateful to have it as a tool for living with this disease.



COURTESY  
**Annie Phillips**

*Annie Phillips is so very thankful to be part of the Flagstaff running community and is a loyal fan of all runners. She is happiest running and hiking on the trails of Flagstaff and the Grand Canyon. Once in a while, she tries to keep up on runs with her daughter,*

*Chloe, who also has Type 1 diabetes and runs marathons. Rachel Smith is also the coordinating editor of this column and implores you to send articles to her at rachschneid18@gmail.com so you don’t get stuck reading her ramblings!*