

HIGH COUNTRY RUNNING

Coming home to Hardrock

BY ADAM STEPANOVIC
Special to the Daily Sun

For as long as I can remember, I've had my eyes on one goal: kissing the rock at the end of the Hardrock 100.

The course begins and ends in Silverton, Colorado, winding its way through Telluride, Ouray and the ghost town of Sherman — crossing 13 major mountain passes along the way, with the highest point being the summit of Handies Peak at 14,048 feet. The 102.5-mile ultramarathon has a cumulative vertical gain of 33,197 feet of climbing and 33,197 feet of descending, with the average altitude of the race sitting around 11,000 feet.

I grew up in Ouray, which is about the halfway point in the run. My dad and I worked at the aid station there for several years when the event was founded in the early 1990s. Every July, our summers revolved around Hardrock. I admired the runners as they stumbled through the dark, hungry and humbled by the mountains, and I remember thinking, even as a kid, I want to be one of them someday.

I'd crewed and paced others at Hardrock in the past, and I'd spent years training in the mountains. I ran the climbs. I studied the course. My family has been extremely patient with me as I took valuable time for long runs and built a lifestyle that revolved around being ready — not just physically, but emotionally — for when my name would finally be drawn in the Hardrock lottery.

After 30 years of

dreaming, and 13 years of racing ultra-marathon qualifier events and accumulating Hardrock lottery tickets, my name was finally drawn. And somehow, despite the magnitude of the race, I showed up calm. Strong. Joyful.

My dad passed away when I was in college 20 years ago, but I've carried his voice with me all these years on just about every run I've done. I know he wanted me to run Hardrock one day. I could feel him with me during this year's race — especially as I ran into the Ouray aid station. It was the strongest I've ever felt his presence since he passed, like he was right there, welcoming me home. To the place that mattered so much to both of us.

The race itself was everything people say it is: brutal, beautiful, honest. But the moments I'll carry with me weren't about my split times or the summits. They were about the people: high-fiving friends at Animas Forks, a mezcal with my buddy at Kroger's, laughing with other runners on the long, grinding climbs and feeling my dad's intense presence from the very first mile. When it got tough, he kept telling me to focus and push through, because something important was about to happen.

And then came the final mile.

My wife. My kids. My mom and her partner. My aunt and uncle. Friends who paced, crewed and drove across the West to help me get here. They were all there, running with me through the streets of Sil-

verton, laughing, crying, sharing that moment as if it were their own.

It was one of the most important moments of my life.

When I finally reached the rock, I kissed it like I'd always dreamed I would. But something unexpected happened: it didn't feel like the culmination. It felt like a punctuation mark. Because after all those years of dreaming, it turned out the finish wasn't the most important thing.

The time spent with family and friends — over years of training, during the race itself and in that unforgettable final mile — that's what mattered most. The rock had been a guiding star, something to aim at. But what it really did was lead me to exactly where I needed to be, as the person I needed to become, surrounded by the people I love most in the world.

Thank you, Hardrock, for getting me ready for this moment. And thank you, Dad, for running there with me.

Adam Stepanovic is a longtime ultrarunner who has completed more than 20 100-mile races. He lives in Flagstaff with his wife and two kids, where he trains year-round in the surrounding mountains. He's also the founder of DashLX, a Flagstaff-based company helping brands build deeper, more human relationships with their audiences. Rachel Smith is the coordinating editor for the High Country Running column. You can email her at rachschneid18@gmail.com to contribute to this column!

BASEBALL

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onship game against Winslow on July 1.



PHOTOS BY JAKE BACON, ARIZONA DAILY SUN

Flagstaff's Vaughn Barber (42) gets a piece of a pitch Wednesday at Dawson Field during a Little League All-Stars 11s state tournament semifinal game against East Mesa.

NAU

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defense (316.5 yards per game), scoring defense (18.8 points per game) and turnovers forced (20), the Lumberjacks completed the 2024 campaign tied for third in the conference with a 6-2 record.

Wright guided NAU to an 8-5 overall record. The eight victories were the program's most since 2013, and NAU posted its third undefeated home season (5-0) in school history.

NAU, ranked No. 19 in the HERO Sports FCS Preseason Top 25 Media Poll, is seeking consecutive FCS Play-

off appearances for the first time in program history heading into 2025.

The Lumberjacks kick off the 2025 season on Saturday, Aug. 30, in Tempe against Arizona State.

2025 Big Sky Preseason Coaches Poll (first-place votes in parentheses)

1. Montana State (7) - 117
2. UC Davis (1) - 100
3. Montana (2) - 96
4. Northern Arizona (1) - 94
5. Idaho - 81
6. Sacramento State (1) - 73
7. Idaho State - 56
8. Weber State - 55
9. Eastern Washing-

- ton - 48
10. Portland State - 32
11. Cal Poly - 25
12. Northern Colorado - 15

2025 Big Sky Preseason Media Poll

1. Montana State (30) - 488
2. Montana (6) - 434
3. UC Davis (4) - 399
4. Idaho (1) - 364
5. Northern Arizona - 354
6. Sacramento State (1) - 282
7. Idaho State - 247
8. Eastern Washington - 225
9. Weber State - 192
10. Portland State - 140
11. Cal Poly - 94
12. Northern Colorado - 57

RAFTING

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When Striewski and Scott found out they were assigned to Arizona for the series, they thought something was amiss.

"We thought we were kind of in trouble with our bosses because we got sent to Arizona in the middle of the summer," Striewski said. "We're also getting sent to Florida in the middle of the summer. So we were like, 'Who did we make mad?'"

He and Scott are set to cover the Florida portion of the series to feature "The Ocho at ESPN Wide World of Sports Complex" on Aug. 1.

Once they saw that they were going whitewater rafting, the two felt much better about Arizona in the summertime. By the end of their shoot, they couldn't help but feel they lucked out being the ones who were selected for this episode.

Striewski, who was born and raised in Colorado, admitted that while he had done just about every outdoor activity someone from the state has done, whitewater rafting was a glaring hole until he touched down in Arizona.

"It was kind of like a full-circle moment," Striewski said. "Now I get to go back with ESPN and feature Arizona and do whitewater rafting. It was awesome."

Arizona's installment in the series starts with the two hosts walking the out of Hualapai Lodge in Peach Springs, less than two hours from Flagstaff, on the Hualapai Indian Reservation. Peach Springs is an entryway to Grand Canyon West, where whitewater rafting is accessible on the Colorado River.

Striewski and Scott met up with Robby Pitagora, the owner of Flagstaff-based Rivers & Oceans. Pitagora served as the guide for the rafting adventure, showing the two TV hosts how to handle the rapids and get through the day safely, albeit a little drenched.

The Hualapai Tribe oversees whitewater rafting in Grand Canyon West.

According to Striewski, the tribe coordinated the entire expedition and served as the travel leads for the production. Hualapai river guides told the crew that they experienced rapids close to class four on the six-point classification scale.

Striewski made it a



MATT HEBERT/TRUE STORY FILMS FOR ESPN, COURTESY

Cary Truelick, director of photography, films SportsCenter anchors Gary Striewski and Randy Scott rafting down the Colorado River in the Grand Canyon.



CARY TRUELICK/TRUE STORY FILMS FOR ESPN, COURTESY

This photo documents the scout day during the SportsCenter rafting shoot down the Colorado River. From left are director of photography Cary Truelick; guide Robby Pitagora; producer Laura Ramirez; producer Eric Feinstein; boat operators from the Hualapai River Runners and others.

point to share the importance of wearing sunscreen while out on the rapids, saying he even got burned in parts of his feet that were not covered by his water shoes.

The production crew originally flew into Las Vegas from Boston and drove about two and a half hours to Peach Springs to meet up with their Hualapai guides. Vegas is a popular entry and exit point for tourists coming from other parts of the country.

Going out in the world and going hands-on with one of Arizona's most iconic recreational activities was eye-opening for Striewski and Scott.

This first assignment the two had together for the series will be a hard act to follow.

"I would definitely say that the rest of the states have an incredibly high bar to clear," Striewski said. "Not to take away from the other 49 states, but what we got to do, where we got to do it, who we got to do it with, we were legitimately all by ourselves in one of the wonders of the world."

The work it took to capture SportsCenter's voyage in the Grand Canyon was a major undertaking. Camera crews, audio technicians and other personnel made up separate rafts to accompany the ragtag duo of TV anchors.

"I think this is one of the bigger productions because of what it was," Striewski said. "I

think the great folks in Arizona are going to be quite pleased with how we were able to represent the state. I think this one is going to be the best surprise ending of any of the other 50 states."

He confidently said that the surprise twist ending of the piece will be something people will be talking about for a long time.

Striewski specifically requested to be in the assignment in Wyoming, where his first TV job was, to cover the Cheyenne Frontier Days on July 24. He is also slated to cover the Savannah Bananas play at Coors Field back in his home state next month.

"We aimed to experience iconic American locations, ensure our hosts could participate in the chosen activities and take advantage of stunning visuals," Clark said. "We couldn't have found a better combination, and we are thrilled with how everything turned out."

The feature will premiere Monday, July 21, on the 4 a.m. edition of SportsCenter, with subsequent showings later in the day on the 11 a.m., 3 p.m. and 8 p.m. editions of the show on ESPN.

The series will continue well into August, featuring other events such as the MLB Speedway Classic at Bristol Motor Speedway, the Maine Lobster Festival, the Xfinity US Gymnastics Championships in Louisiana and more.



MATT HEBERT/TRUE STORY FILMS FOR ESPN, COURTESY

The ESPN crew utilizes three boats and 11 crew members to film SportsCenter anchors rafting down the Colorado River. Producer Laura Ramirez and camera operator Alex Mitchell ensured everything was set before anchors Randy Scott and Gary Striewski tackled the rapids with guide Robby Pitagora.