

HIGH COUNTRY RUNNING

Hopi runner Nicholas Qömawunu and the 1928 Route 66 Bunion Derby

BY NEIL WEINTRAUB
Special to the Daily Sun

When Ann-Mary Lutzy, Winslow's Old Trails Museum director, invited me to speak about the 1928 Bunion Derby as part of its Route 66 centennial celebrations on March 21, I jumped at the chance. I was especially excited to present at the historic Hubbell Trading Post, where its original owner, John Lorenzo Hubbell Jr., had sponsored Hopi runner Nicholas Qömawunu for the grueling 3,422-mile, 84-day stage race promoting the recently established Route 66.

While many readers may be familiar with 1908 and 1912 Hopi Olympian Louis Tewanima, far fewer have likely heard of Qömawunu, a hopeful for the 1928 Amsterdam Olympics.

Along with various local newspaper accounts, I first learned about Qömawunu through Geoff Williams's remarkable book "C.C. Pyle's Amaz-

ing Foot Race" (2007), as well as Matthew Sakiestewa Gilbert's "Hopi Runners" (2018).

In 2017, I randomly searched for Qömawunu online and came across an eBay listing for a photograph of him taken during the 1928 race. The bidding started at \$15, so I placed an offer — and promptly forgot about it. A month later, the photo arrived in my mail. I assumed it was a reproduction, but the caption on the back read: "Photo shows Kuamawahu, Indian Runner, as he arrived here in Needles on 3-16-1928."

Realizing its significance, I donated the rare original to my colleagues at the Hopi Cultural Preservation Office after scanning it for myself. As was common in newspaper coverage of the race, Qömawunu's name was often misspelled — leading some reporters giving him the nickname "Nimble Nick."

Two years ago, while volunteering on a

springs restoration project south of Williams with HCPO and Kaibab National Forest heritage staff, I worked alongside my longtime friend Joel Nicholas from Second Mesa. I showed him the photo on my phone and asked what he knew about "Nimble Nick." Joel smiled and said, "Neil, that's my grandfather — and my last name comes from him."

On Feb. 21, 1928, the Winslow Daily News reported that race promoter C.C. Pyle showcased his runners in a preliminary 15-mile event, which Qömawunu won in 1 hour and 22 minutes. When the race officially began on March 4, many reporters predicted he might outperform the other 198 entrants. By the third day, he briefly led the race in California, greeted in Needles by a 12-piece Mohave Indian marching band.

Unfortunately, a heel injury forced him to withdraw just days later, 8 miles east of



Photo discovered by Neil Weintraub on eBay of Nicholas Qömawunu running in Needles, Calif. during C.C. Pyle's Transcontinental Foot Race from March 1928.

Seligman.

Back in Winslow on March 19, Qömawunu welcomed the 100 remaining runners as they arrived to great fanfare. The \$25,000 prize was ultimately won by Andy Payne of the Cherokee Na-

tion. Despite not winning any prize money, Qömawunu was barred from competing in the Olympics due to being considered a professional since he had competed for prize money.

Returning to his

traditional Hopi life, Qömawunu worked for Fred Harvey in Winslow, sometimes commuting by foot. When I asked Joel for any further stories about his grandpa, Joel told me that his dad simply said "he was always running."

NEIL WEINTRAUB IS THE CO-FOUNDER AND DIRECTOR OF NORTHERN ARIZONA TRAIL RUNNERS ASSOCIATION (NATRA) AND IS CELEBRATING 25 YEARS OF SATURDAY SOCIAL GROUP TRAIL RUNS. IN APRIL, NATRA WILL OFFER ITS ANNUAL 6-MILE TRAIL RUN ON ASH FORK HILL RETRACING THE FOOTSTEPS OF THE 1928 "BUNIONEERS," WHO, ON MARCH 16, 1928, RAN 43.9 MILES IN THE SNOW AND RAIN FROM SELIGMAN TO WILLIAMS. TO LEARN MORE AND JOIN THE FREE FUN, VISIT NATRA.ORG AND CLICK ON "NEXT RUN." RACHEL SMITH IS A MOM OF TWO AMAZING DAUGHTERS, A PROFESSIONAL RUNNER AND THE COORDINATING EDITOR OF THIS COLUMN. SHE WOULD LOVE FOR YOU TO CONTRIBUTE TO THE COLUMN AND SHARE YOUR RUNNING-RELATED STORY BY EMAILING HER AT RACHSCHNEID18@GMAIL.COM.

EAGLES

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the initial AIA rankings this week, starting pitcher Jace Adams said the Eagles are finally getting the recognition they deserve.

"We can't really go into it thinking we're No. 1," Adams said. "We still have to go into it with a fight. We don't want to take anyone easy. We still have to go in with integrity, but it definitely feels good knowing that we're getting looked as we should this year. I feel like last year we got a bit overlooked."

Flagstaff manager Kenny Macias said he does not think much about rankings this early in the year. After the Eagles' magical run to last year's state title game as the No. 14 seed, rankings could play a role in Flagstaff's path to get there again.

"I told them, 'Let's take our region. Let's not struggle this year trying to go in at No. 14,'" Macias said. "Really go out and just put it on people early and try to make them lose their confidence. They're ruthless. They just want to go out and want to just score runs and make things happen."

The bottom of the first inning played out with Flagstaff's ruthlessness. Leadoff hitter Teyan Clerry legged out a double, setting up senior Cullen Callander to lay down a perfect bunt to drive in the game's first run. The Eagles have made catching teams flat-footed a motto for this season. They are now doing that naturally instead of forcing plays that may get in their own way.

Back-to-back walks to put runners on first and second gave Phillips the green light to swing for the fences. The right-handed hitter used Wednesday's windy conditions to his advantage by driving the ball over the

wall in right-center field.

Phillips and his coaches have worked with him to stop pulling the ball so much.

"He's been so pull-happy throughout his whole career in baseball," Macias said. "We've really been working on just staying middle-away. We're working on it a lot at practice."

The home run was his third of the season, and second in as many games. Phillips also went deep against Mingus Union on Monday. He went 2 for 3 with his home run and an RBI single on Wednesday for a career-best four total runs batted in, a third of his total season production.

"I think going center-oppo has helped me a lot recently because I'm a big pull-hitter," Phillips said. "I think that adjustment has helped me a lot just to hit the ball well."

A second double from Clerry in the inning pushed Flagstaff's lead to 8-0 before Mingus Union starting pitcher Silas Scott got consecutive outs to end the inning. Scott worked his way back from the tough start by allowing just a single in the second inning, as well as one run in the third after Clerry and senior Trey Parker collaborated on a baserunning masterclass. Clerry got himself in a rundown, taking attention away from Parker to score from third. Clerry successfully dove back to first to execute the drill to perfection.

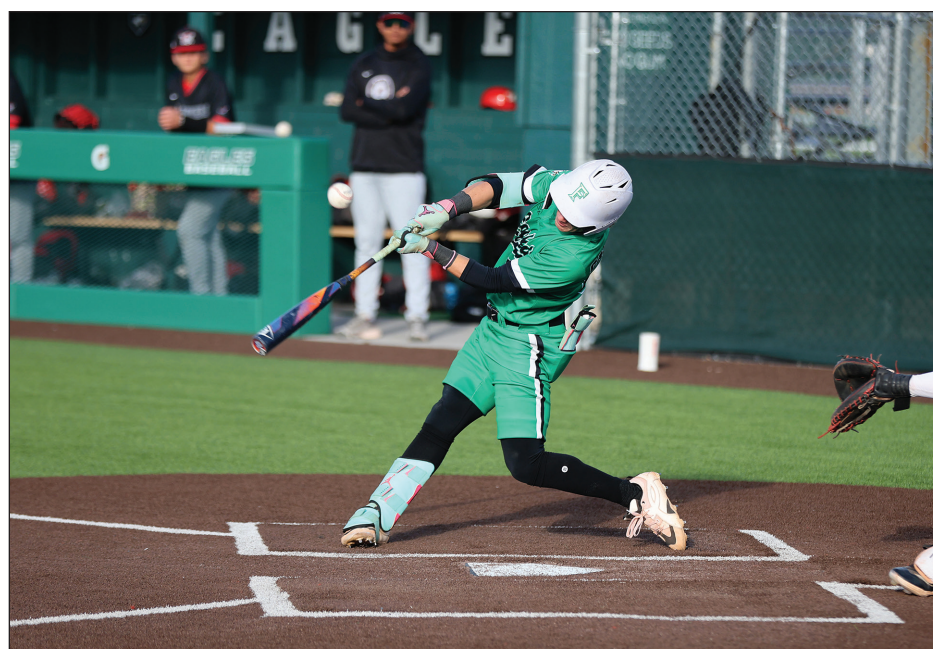
"We work on that quite a bit," Macias said. "It's actually a play that we use. We try to catch the pitcher on his way up to try to get him to balk, but if it doesn't, then we try to get in a rundown and score."

On the mound, Adams was outstanding in his four innings of work. The Arizona



HATTIE LOPER, ARIZONA DAILY SUN

Flagstaff's Trey Parker (18) completes an out at first base during a game against Mingus Union on Wednesday at Flagstaff High School.



HATTIE LOPER, ARIZONA DAILY SUN

Flagstaff's Will Carpenter (14) fouls off a pitch during a game against Mingus Union on Wednesday at Flagstaff High School.

State University commit allowed just one earned run on four hits and a career-high nine strikeouts. All four of Mingus Union's hits off him were singles. He made getting ahead in each count a priority.

"I knew these guys weren't going to be able to catch up, that was just my goal going into it," Adams said.

Adams struck out three batters in the first inning and got a third strike on opposing batters at least once in each inning. Even with his intensity and velocity on the mound, Macias thinks he is still getting into his stride.

"Jace, he just throws hard," Macias said. "He's really confident when he gets out there.

A little shaky today. He just wasn't himself, but he's getting there."

If Wednesday was not Adams at his best, then the rest of the region is in trouble. Macias added that the team is waiting to get Phillips back in the pitching rotation as he deals with elbow tenderness.

Scott did most of Mingus Union's damage in the batter's box as opposed to the mound. He drove in each of the Marauders' two runs in the second and fourth innings, accounting for half of the team's total hits.

Flagstaff bookended the day with an even larger fourth inning at the plate to reach run-rule territory. Taking on relief pitcher Tanner Brewer, the Ea-

gles batted around yet again and added nine runs to their total, running the freshman pitcher after just recording one out.

Eagles senior DJ Faust was the engine in Flagstaff's push to finish the game early. The third baseman knocked in three RBIs across two at-bats in the fourth inning alone. A two-RBI single accounted for the first runs of the inning. The order flipped back to him, and he bookended the final frame of offense with a two-out RBI double.

Junior Jayce Vesely finished the game on the mound in eight pitches in the top of the fifth, keeping himself fresh for the coming games over the

next week. He forced two straight groundouts to shortstop Will Carpenter before ending the game with a routine flyout to left field.

"He's that guy," Macias said of Vesely. "He comes in, it doesn't matter who we face, he gets ground balls. I don't know what he throws, but he gets ground balls. He comes in and shuts them down. It's awesome."

Mingus Union (5-4, 2-3 4A Grand Canyon) was on a three-game winning streak before the Flagstaff series, including a tournament-game win over Deer Valley to close out the Greenway Festival. The Marauders will lick their wounds before playing their series against the Mohave Thunderbirds, starting at home on Tuesday before traveling to Bullhead City on April 9. Mohave had yet to win a game as of Wednesday.

Flagstaff (6-0, 4-0 4A Grand Canyon) sits alongside No. 26 Bradshaw Mountain (4-4, 3-0 4A Grand Canyon) as the lone undefeated teams in region play. Macias said this week was a great start to what will be an important stretch coming up. The Eagles will travel to Kingman for a doubleheader against the No. 30 Lee Williams Volunteers (2-6, 1-3 4A Grand Canyon) on Saturday.

"I don't know that we're at our potential yet, but we're getting there," Macias said. "We got some big games coming up. Our season, as it progresses, is going to get tougher and tougher, but we're getting there."

Flagstaff's undefeated start bears a resemblance to the team's season two years ago, when it won its first 13 regular-season games and lost just two before the postseason. The Eagles made it to the state semifinals that year.