

HIGH COUNTRY RUNNING

Greatness continues as NAU wins Big Sky titles

BY ALDO MARQUEZ
Special to the Daily Sun

For the first time since 2018, Flagstaff had the honor of hosting the indoor track and field Big Sky Conference championship meet last weekend. Despite the NAU men's team having won the previous 12 team titles and the women's team having won the previous four team titles, both teams expected it to be a close matchup with Montana State and other conference rivals.

If you were in attendance at the Walkup Skydome during the Friday and Saturday events, you witnessed the Lumberjacks run, jump and throw for much more than individual prestige. Every place and every point mattered for the team score, and athletes across all specialties battled for team glory.

When the last points were scored, NAU proved dominant on both sides. The men's team won with 188 points (Montana State in second with 148 points, and Montana in third with 69 points) and the women's team won with a total of 205 points (besting Montana State with 132.5 points, and Sacramento State in third with 78 points).

Graduate student Drew Bosley brought home the meet's Most Valuable Athlete award for the men, and senior LiNay Perry brought home the award for the women. Kiki Vaughn was awarded Freshman of the Year for the women. And a unique achievement award was bestowed to Lumberjacks director and head coach Mike Smith by the Big Sky commissioner for achieving one of the most storied coaching careers in

conference history.

Smith, who is in his ninth year of coaching at NAU and, prior to this championship, has won an impressive 38 Big Sky Coach of the Year awards, will be ending his NCAA coaching career at the conclusion of this outdoor track season to pursue a full-time career as a professional running coach. He's had an amazing impact at NAU, the Big Sky and in the NCAA that is hard to capture in words, and one I felt lucky to have witnessed for the past seven years.

Having walked on the NAU cross country and track teams back in 2018, graduating from the university in 2022 and then becoming a member of the coaching staff as the director of operations, I've gotten to experience firsthand just how special this program is from both an athlete and from a staff member experience. Conducting ourselves with intention and creating a culture we feel proud to be a part of, finding joy in pushing our personal limits, striving to be our best and to bring out the best in others, prioritizing process over outcome, and knowing each member is a valuable part of the team are a few of the pillars that has made our program successful in more ways than one.

Watching all our athletes do a victory lap in our own Skydome with huge smiles on their faces and fans cheering them on is something I won't forget. Tired and proud was a collective feeling from the athletes and coaches when leaving the Skydome after this year's indoor championships. And, per usual, fired up for what's ahead!



PHOTOS BY JAKE BACON, ARIZONA DAILY SUN

The Flagstaff Eagles girls basketball team cheers as they are presented with the state title trophy after a decisive win over Eastmark Thursday in Phoenix at the Arizona Veterans Memorial Coliseum.



Lacey Walker (22) takes shoots a 3 during the 4A Conference state tournament championship game against Eastmark Thursday in Phoenix at the Arizona Veterans Memorial Coliseum.



Kyleigh Walker (10) looks for an open teammate Thursday night during Flagstaff's win over Eastmark to claim the 4A Conference state title game in Phoenix.



Flagstaff's Lexi Neal (1) fights her way through the Eastmark defense Thursday night during Flagstaff's decisive win in the title round of the 4A Conference state championship tournament in Phoenix at the Arizona Veterans Memorial Coliseum.

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of the two D-II programs.

Ana Drinen, Autumn Didovic, Annika Didovic, Kaitlyn Barr, Josie Shinkle and Sophie Harman all secured victories in the singles matches for the Eagles.

Autumn Didovic and Drinen won their doubles match, 8-3, on the No. 1 court. Annika Didovic and Barr dominated at No. 2 doubles, 8-1, and Harman and Lynneah Birdno were the last doubles match and won 8-3.

Flagstaff will take a

two-week hiatus and return play Deer Valley at Thorpe Park on March 25.

Boys Tennis
Vipers 8, Eagles 1

D-II Flagstaff put up one point at D-II Verrado in the singles flights on Wednesday.

Aaron Kirk, playing the No. 1 spot for the Eagles, won his singles sets 1-6, 7-6, 10-2.

After spring break, Flagstaff is slated to host Lee Williams on March 19.

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could. We have to push through this whole game," Begoody said, "It was the last game of our season, and just to give it all on the court." Coming out of half-time, Eastmark went on a 6-0 run. It finally broke into double digits halfway through the third quarter, but Flagstaff continued its surge. The Eagles came alive offensively in the third quarter with 19 points — six of which came from Begoody. She connected on a 3-pointer, a jump shot and layup all in the third to stay a threat. Nidaya Nez made her first and only 3 of the game in the same frame.

Flagstaff boosted itself to a 22-point lead to start the last quarter of the game at 36-14. Eastmark earned the most points in a quarter with a 11-0 scoring run, but it was not enough to close the gap. Although Begoody was one of the leaders in points, she credited her entire team to the win.

"I think that our whole team did good. They all contributed," Begoody said. "I think that we all wanted the state championship game."

The points were evenly spread between the players. Walker provided six points, and Neal and Nez each added five.

With less than a min-

ute on the clock, Martin stepped up to the free-throw line for the last time of her varsity career. She choked down tears as the realization struck her that she once again won a championship.

Once the buzzer rang, everyone rushed to the sidelines and joined in on the crying.

Johnson said he was confident the girls would come back "victorious", but did not expect such a wide margin. The two teams met for their season openers back in November, and the Firebirds came away with the 46-42 win in Flagstaff.

"For the girls to really respond and step up, it's something that we as coaches have always believed they could

do," Johnson said.

The celebration did not last long for the girls, with the threat of snow in Flagstaff. Soon after receiving the trophy and banner, most of the girls were already on their way back up the mountain to beat the storm.

Johnson stayed to watch the first half of the 4A state title game for boys basketball between Deer Valley and St. Marys. His uncle was being honored as part of the Flagstaff boys 1975 championship team for the 50th anniversary.

Flagstaff ended the season at 20-4 and was undefeated in region play 14-0.

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FLAGSTAFF SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

NAU
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at Northern Arizona University, has been named the FCS/At-Large Video Coordinator of the Year for the second consecutive season, announced by the Collegiate Sports Video Association in

February.

This is the third FCS/At-Large Video Coordinator of the Year award for Foran, who was also honored in the 2014-15 and 2023-24 seasons.

Foran is entering his 15th season leading the video efforts for Northern Arizona's football program. He and his staff are responsible for

all technology needs, including film acquisition of practices, games and opponents, and managing the cloud-based Thundercloud video networks used by coaches and players to watch film and prepare for competition.

In 2024, he oversaw the implementation of the GameStrat system

for the viewing of in-game video by the football program.

Outside of the football program, Foran also trains and supervises a staff of students that shoot all football practices and games, men's and women's basketball home games and home soccer matches.