

HIGH COUNTRY RUNNING

Unknown Runner sprints onto Flagstaff scene

BY ALEX AND KATIE METTE
Special to the Daily Sun

What makes a town the best running town in the country? It's easy to point to things such as access to great trails and miles of pavement, a high density of runners across disciplines, the support infrastructure like coaches and doctors, and the climate conducive to year-round running. Each of those elements matters, but they don't fully explain what makes Flagstaff such a special running city. We moved to Flagstaff last year with a dream of raising our girls in a place shaped by the outdoors and running. We were taking



The authors pose for a photo with their children.

a swing and starting Unknown Runner — a performance merino trail apparel brand. Despite the brand being primarily direct to consumers online, we knew where we started the business would play an important role in how the brand devel-

oped over time. We officially launched Unknown Runner this summer at TrailCon in Olympic Valley, California. At every corner, we met someone either from Flagstaff or who reminisced about their time in Flagstaff. We're feel-

ing incredibly energized after our time at TrailCon. We had such a good response to the product and the spirit of the brand. As we build Unknown Runner, we want supporting the community to be part of the brand from the beginning. Before we even had product in hand, we were reaching out to people like Kat Baker at Runners for Public Lands and Austin Corbett here in Flagstaff. We connected with Neil Weintraub at NATRA — first to tag along on his group runs and then to find a way to support the races he directs. That spirit spawned Unknown Runner Support Services. The name is a little tongue-in-cheek, but the purpose is sincere. We want to show up where runners are, whether

that means providing freshly brewed coffee at a trailhead, volunteering at a race, supporting trail work initiatives, shuttles to the canyon, crewing, pacing or simply making it easier for runners to support one another. Over time, we're hopeful that Unknown Runner Support Services can act as a hub for runners to find and support other runners in their trail running pursuits. That same idea is why we're proud to sponsor the Soulstice Mountain Trail Run. Soulstice represents everything that is special about the trail running community and running in Flagstaff: proudly local and grassroots, connected to place and in support of a deeper mission. The best running

town is a debate that will never be settled, but it takes everything described above to make a truly great running town. It's why we think Flagstaff is unmatched and will continue to be the best running town in America.

ALEX AND KATIE METTE LIVE IN FLAGSTAFF WITH THEIR TWO DAUGHTERS. BOTH ARE AVID RUNNERS, PRIMARILY ON THE TRAILS, AND TOGETHER THEY ARE THE FOUNDERS OF UNKNOWN RUNNER. RACHEL SMITH IS A MOTHER TO TWO AMAZING DAUGHTERS AND FEELS VERY LUCKY TO LIVE AND TRAIN IN FLAGSTAFF. SHE RUNS PROFESSIONALLY FOR NIKE AND IS ALSO THE VOLUNTEER COORDINATING EDITOR FOR THIS COLUMN. SHE WOULD LOVE FOR YOU TO CONTRIBUTE TO HIGH COUNTRY RUNNING BY EMAILING HER YOUR RUNNING-RELATED STORIES TO RACHSCHNEID18@GMAIL.COM.



Eastern New Mexico guard Aaliyah Smith led the Greyhounds with 76 total assists last season.



Eastern New Mexico guard Aaliyah Smith drives with the ball against at Texas Woman's University defender during the Lone Star Conference semifinals on March 7 at Comerica Center in Frisco, Texas.

SMITH

FROM PAGE B1

Community College (Illinois) on Nov. 4, 2022. She opened her career with four straight double-digit scoring performances and reached double figures in nine of her 15 games. The 5-foot-7 guard scored a season-high 24 points against Wabash Valley College, where she would end up playing the following year as a sophomore. Smith made the move to Wabash in Mount Carmel, Illinois, where she once again lit up the score sheet. Smith averaged more shots (17.2) than points (17.1) across her 24 games, leading the team in both categories. She once again got off to a great start to her tenure with the Warriors, scoring in double figures in her first five outings with the team. She opened the year with 17 points against Triton College and went on to score in double figures in 21 games.

She matched her career-high of 24 points in a road game at her former school on Jan. 3, 2024. Smith was held to a season-low eight points when Wabash hosted Moberly a month prior. Smith's collegiate career-high entering this season is 28 points, which she scored on the road at Vincennes University on Feb. 14, 2024. Smith's teams have been successful when she is on the roster. Wabash Valley College also picked up 29 wins with Smith in the fold. The Warriors opened the year on a six-game winning streak before losing to the same Mineral Area College that Smith defeated to win a region title the year before.



Eastern New Mexico guard Aaliyah Smith dribbles the ball during a game with the Greyhounds during the 2025-26 season.



Eastern New Mexico guard Aaliyah Smith drives down the court with the ball during a game against the University of Texas at Tyler on Jan. 31 at Steve Loy Family Foundation Arena in Portales, New Mexico.

Wabash Valley College later won 18 straight games, including the NJCAA DI Region 24 championship against Vincennes. The No. 2-seeded Warriors made it all the way to the national semifinals, where they lost to the eventual champion, No. 3 Northwest Florida State College. Smith's strong junior college career earned her an opportunity to play at the Division II level with Eastern New Mexico last season. She averaged 10.7 points in 20.4 minutes per game with the Greyhounds, second only to senior forward Chloe Dallas (13.6 points). Smith scored the most total points

on the team with 320. She played 30 games and started in half of them, including the final five games of the season. Smith maintained her score-first mentality, but also made a big jump as a passer. She led the team with 76 total assists, 24 more than any other teammate. Smith was at her best as the season reached the closing moments. She scored a season-high 23 points twice within the final five games of the year. She first hit the total in the penultimate regular season game against the University of Texas Permian Basin on Feb. 26. Smith

again had 23 points in a semifinal loss in the Lone Star Conference Tournament against No. 1 seed Texas Woman's University. Eastern New Mexico ran into the top overall seed Texas Woman's Pioneers again in the first round of the NCAA Division II South Central Regional tournament, losing 68-49. Smith scored a team-high 11 points in the defeat, which closed out the Greyhounds' 20-11 season. Smith has totaled 919 points across her college basketball career. She will aim to maintain her scoring level as she enters the Division I ranks this season.

FLL

FROM PAGE B1

outs. Weston Callan was credited with a steal of home to reach double digits. Jaxen "Boo" Begay also stole home before Almendarez closed his stellar night with a two-run single to make it 13-0. Van Dyke had the same result in the next at-bat. The Flagstaff All-Star 10s were sent to the elimination bracket after taking a 7-3 defeat against District 5 (Tucson Area — North) champion Canyon View Little League on Thursday. Canyon View broke a 1-1 deadlock with a five-run bottom of the fourth inning. Despite only registering two hits, Canyon View scored five earned runs and only struck out twice against three different Flagstaff pitchers. Each side scored a run in their first go-around at the plate, but were then held hitless until the fourth. Flagstaff opened with a leadoff single and stolen base by Hudson Bruce. Tyler Schmidt continued his strong presence from Wednesday with an RBI double to give Flagstaff the early lead. Canyon View knotted the score in its half of the first thanks to an infield error that would have ended the inning with two outs. Almendarez took a bulk of the pitching load, going three full innings and allowing just one hit. Butters tossed 1 1/3 innings before Martinez came in to get the last out of the bottom of the fifth with a strikeout. Flagstaff's offense reappeared in the top of the fourth with singles by Almendarez and Luke Schmidt, but couldn't bring them

home. Canyon View scored three runs before recording an out in the bottom of the fourth thanks to a leadoff double combined with a couple of hit batters and a walk. The All-Star 10s struggled to get the ball out of the infield late in the game, but defensive miscues put them on the back foot. Canyon View scored one more run to take a 7-1 lead going into the final inning. Flagstaff began to put together a rally in the top of the sixth thanks to a leadoff double by Begay and a single by Bruce. Begay stole home before a fly ball resulted in Flagstaff's second out. Bruce scored in the middle of Flagstaff's final at-bat, which resulted in a swinging strikeout to end the game. The Flagstaff All-Star 10s will now battle their way through the losers bracket. Their first test to stay alive in the tournament was set to come on Friday against District 8 (Cochise and Santa Cruz Counties) champion Douglas Little League. Douglas lost its tournament opener against District 3 (Phoenix Metro Area — East) champion High Desert Little League on Tuesday, 6-4. Canyon View advanced to the quarterfinals to play District 13 (Tempe and Chandler) champion Ahwatukee Little League on Saturday at 5:30 p.m. Ahwatukee defeated District 7 (Mesa and Apache Junction) champion Four Peaks on Thursday, 14-4. If Flagstaff survived its elimination game on Friday, it would play again on Saturday at 7:45 p.m.

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FROM PAGE B1

point before Camp Verde scored its final two runs with two outs in the sixth. The Flagstaff All-Star 10s went a combined 4-2 across the district and state tournaments. After going undefeated and outscoring its district foes 45-28, the team was outscored in the state tournament 15-8. Camp Verde staved off elimination following its winners

bracket loss to District 8 (Cochise and Santa Cruz Counties) champion Mt. Graham Little League. Camp Verde stayed alive yet again on Thursday in an elimination game against District 4 (Pinal County) champion Maricopa, which eliminated Catalina Foothills with a 15-3 win on Wednesday, and was set to play District 11 (Phoenix Metro — West) champion Avondale in the losers bracket semifinals on Friday.