

HIGH COUNTRY RUNNING YEAR IN REVIEW

Racing reveals our true selves

BY KAREN LONDON
Special to the Daily Sun

We are never more ourselves than when we race. Racing definitely shows people's character through their conduct and sportsmanship, but that's not what I'm referring to here. What I mean is that our entire approach to a racing experience is one way we show up as our authentic selves and reveal who we truly are. Take for example the Thanksgiving races our family ran this past year. Here is how participating in these races was right on brand for us.

We competed in two races

At track meets, we tend to sign up for as many events as possible, but it's rare to have that opportunity with

community runs. In this case, it was, and we did a 5K, followed by a pie mile relay an hour later. Think beer mile, but as a relay and with pie. Each runner had to eat a piece of pie and then run a lap around the track, and only once tagged could the next runner begin to eat their piece of pie and then run their lap.

We chose to squeeze the races into an imperfect travel schedule

We registered for these races as soon as our plans to spend the holiday in Santa Cruz, California, formed, even though our travel plans were not conducive to good racing. The day before, some of us drove from Flagstaff (11 hours, 726 miles of driving), while others traveled

from Ithaca, New York — which involved a six-hour drive to the airport followed by a cross-country flight, arriving well after midnight, followed by a 1.5-hour drive to Santa Cruz. The travel may not have been ideal for performance, but racing together is a way we have family time, and it's what we choose to do on vacation, no matter how inconvenient it may be.

We're into the races before, during and after them

We take being prepared for our races very seriously, and there's more to it than just training for fitness. There is developing our race plan, checking out the course ahead of time and doing anything else that will help us perform better

on the day. In the case of the pie relay, that included practicing eating a piece of pie as fast as possible. The videos we shared with each other speed-eating pieces of pie were not attractive, but they were useful and allowed us to strategize. We considered carefully who ran which leg of the relay to maximize time in lane one and our racing strengths. We cheered each other on with enthusiasm, and we all raced hard. We discussed the races endlessly and watched video of it like we were football players watching film.

We invoked Flagstaff

"Altitude Sickness" was not a problem we faced during either of these races — it was the name of our relay team. And by choosing



Karen London (right) poses with her husband, Richard Hofstetter, and their sons, Brian Hofstetter and Evan Hofstetter after the Santa Cruz 2025 Easy as Pie Relay on Thanksgiving.

a name that reflects our Flagstaff home (not just the tendency of some members of our family to vomit as a result of running hard), we showed yet another part of who we are — people who absolutely love Flagstaff and the running community here.

Karen London has been living and running in Flagstaff since 2005 along with her husband, Richard Hof-

stetter, and their sons, Brian Hofstetter and Evan Hofstetter. They are the proud winners of the Santa Cruz 2025 Easy as Pie Relay. Rachel Smith is a mom of two amazing daughters, a professional runner and the coordinating editor of this column. She wishes you all the best in 2026 and asks you to share your running-related story to the column by emailing her at rachscheid18@gmail.com.

SOCCER

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control." James had his biggest save of the day with about six minutes remaining in the match, stopping a fiery Soto shot to force a corner kick, which he also saved.

Panthers junior Austin Rath used his speed and athleticism to score the first goal 15 minutes in. He got past the defense to set up a one-on-one opportunity with Eagles junior goalkeeper Dojo Coleman. The keeper ran out of the goal box trying to play a high-bouncing ball from a long Coconino pass. Rath saw him coming up and flicked the ball over his head and placed a high-arching shot into the net.

"I asked for the pass and got it," Rath said. "I got a good touch, and then I saw the keeper come out. I chipped it up and saw it go through and was lucky enough for it to go in."

Flagstaff upped its tempo trailing for the first time since its 5-0 loss to Saguaro in December. The Eagles earned their first corner kick of the match just before Rath's goal, but Miguel Barbosa headed the kick away to snuff out the set piece.

Despite allowing



PHOTOS BY HATTIE LOPER, ARIZONA DAILY SUN

Coconino's Michael Robles (8) and Flagstaff's Joed Rodriguez (30) eye the ball during a crosstown rivalry match on Wednesday at Coconino High School.

both goals in the first half, the Eagles had most of their better looks at the net in the first 40 minutes. Junior Vander Fernandez had a couple of shots from the left side of the pitch go just wide. He received a cross and laid it perfectly for Soto right in front of the goal with just over 10 minutes left in the half. However, Jackson Gibson jumped in front of Soto's shot — which could have been the equalizer.

Coconino extended its lead and gave itself some breathing room right before the half when it yet again utilized the top of the net to score. Francisco Soto found an open shot and kicked it into the top shelf of the net with 2:03 left on the

clock. "I feel like everybody, the whole team, was nervous," Soto said. "But we all knew that as long as we played well and just gave it our all, we'd come out on top."

To go up two scores entering the break was a huge advantage for the Panthers, but Carrillo's mind went straight to finding ways to ensure his squad kept that advantage.

"I hate the 2-0 score, because if they score, they gain momentum right off the bat," Carrillo said. "For us, it gave us a little bit of a cushion in making sure that we can continue to play and continue moving the ball."

The Panthers did not take the lead for granted, opening the sec-

ond half with a blazing run to the net stopped by a Flagstaff defender after Coleman had to move out of position to stop the attack. Coconino earned a corner kick just a few minutes into the half. Coleman punched the ball away and picked it up after it bounced off a few Panthers players.

The Eagles got the ball on their scoring side, but it rarely stayed there for long before the Panthers cleared it away.

"Same thing we did in the first half — match their level of physicality, match their level of energy, making sure that we win everything," Carrillo said. "Sometimes we come off playing scared. That was the message. We cannot

play scared against these guys."

A Flagstaff corner from senior August Fahy was placed right on senior Carson Boettcher's head, but his header went wide to the left with just over 12 minutes to play.

The missed corner started a stretch of set pieces for Flagstaff. Panthers senior AJ Ragan received a yellow card after hard contact. The ensuing free kick from Fahy went over the crossbar for a goal kick.

Coconino was hit with another yellow card with five minutes to play. Eagles senior Gael Castruita's free kick was deflected back his way. He got called for a yellow card for pushing a Coconino player while chasing the ball.

Flagstaff had gone 12-0-1 in the previous 13 matchups, outscoring Coconino 29-2 in those 12 wins. A draw just nine days after Coconino's last win in 2014 began a decade of dread on the east side of town. Coconino went 9-1-1 that season, only to fall to 6-7 the following year in 2014-15.

To have both the girls and boys losing streaks against Flagstaff come to an end just one day apart from one another was a surreal moment for the school.

"We've been saying it for a while now," Car-

rillo said. "It just finally came along and finally came together this year. Coco has a lot of talent on the girls and boys side. We finally got to see it this year. We're both such young teams, so hopefully we can continue this streak against them in the future."

Flagstaff (3-3, 0-1 4A Grand Canyon Region) still has a lot of hope following this first loss in region play since Feb. 4, 2023, against Mohave. The Eagles were set to remain in town for three straight games, starting with their final non-region game against the 5A Chaparral Firebirds on Friday.

The Eagles will then host Lee Williams on Wednesday, followed by welcoming Prescott on Jan. 26. Jenkins said he would love to have another shot at the Panthers this year.

"This is a team that we could face in state," Jenkins said. "That's a matchup that we could see later on."

Coconino (5-0-2, 1-0 4A Grand Canyon Region) was set for a quick turnaround as well, hosting the Lee Williams Volunteers (2-3, 0-1 4A Grand Canyon) on Friday. The Panthers will be on the road for three games after that before their final match of the regular season against Prescott at home on Jan. 28.

NAU

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manager of NAU-TV and as one of the public faces of this great university," Strohm said. "As I step into the next chapter of my life in retirement, I'll be eternally grateful for the countless thousands of students, athletes, coaches, support staff, administrators, parents, families, alumni and fans who welcomed me into their lives and allowed me the privilege of being their 'connection' to NAU and their Lumberjacks. I'll always be proud to be a Lumberjack."

Men's basketball

A 14-0 Sacramento State run completely flipped Thursday

night's contest in the Hornet Pavilion upside-down and NAU never could recover in an eventual 83-69 loss.

The Lumberjacks (6-12, 0-5 Big Sky) led by nine, 44-35, with just under 18 minutes to play in the second half. A steal by Chris Komin led to a transition dunk for Traivair Jackson, forcing a Hornets timeout. However, it was all Sacramento State from there.

After Karl Poom gave the Lumberjacks their largest lead of the game at 50-40 with a straight-away 3-pointer with 16:50 on the clock, the Hornets blitzed the Lumberjacks with a 14-0 run over the next three minutes, during which they stole the lead — and the momentum. The run was

punctuated by a three-point play by Prophet Johnson, who scored 29 points on the night, off a Lumberjacks turnover. Sacramento State preceded Johnson's old-fashioned 3-point play with a set of 3-pointers.

Sacramento State (5-11, 1-3 Big Sky) landed its final haymaker later in the half to snap its seven-game losing streak. Komin kept NAU close with a driving layup, cutting Sacramento State's lead down to 65-60 with 7:29 to play, but the Hornets scored the next nine points. The Lumberjacks closed the game without a field goal for the final 2:28.

NAU came out of the gate hot, shooting 59.3% in the first half, only to struggle offensively in

the second period. The Lumberjacks only shot 32.3% after halftime and finished at 44.8% from the field.

Meanwhile, Sacramento State — which had lost five straight head-to-head meetings to NAU — shot 45.8% for the game. While the field goal percentages were nearly identical, Sacramento State drained 11 3-pointers to seven by NAU, and outscored the Lumberjacks by eight at the charity stripe.

Adding to those scoring advantages, Sacramento State was plus-10 in points off turnovers and plus-11 in second-chance points.

Despite the lopsided final score, the two teams were locked in a tight back-and-forth through the first 20

minutes, which saw six ties and three lead changes.

Jackson, who netted a career-high 18 points, started out with five of NAU's first eight points in a quick 8-2 lead for the Lumberjacks. After the Hornets took a 17-13 edge, the Lumberjacks responded with a 10-0 run capped by consecutive 3s by Poom and Brennan Peterson. Sacramento State erased the deficit for a second time and held a 34-32 advantage with 90 seconds remaining in the half before NAU closed with a flurry.

Although NAU shot the ball effectively in the first half, the Lumberjacks were outscored by six in points off turnovers, preventing an even larger halftime lead. It proved to be a

sign of things to come in the second half as NAU finished the night with 13 turnovers to only seven by Sacramento State, resulting in an 18-8 margin in points off turnovers.

Jackson scored 15 of his 18 points in the first half and has now scored in double-figures in three consecutive games, the longest streak of his career. He also grabbed a team-best nine rebounds. Poom was NAU's only other double-digit scorer with 14 points off the bench. Ryan Abelman recorded seven of NAU's 16 assists, setting a new career-high in the process.

Next, the Lumberjacks head to Portland State (10-5, 4-0 Big Sky) on Saturday for a 3 p.m. tilt at Viking Pavilion.