

PANTHERS 6 | TITANS 0

Coconino dominates for 2nd straight shutout

BY EIJA JENSEN

Special to the Daily Sun

The Coconino girls soccer team secured its first home win of the season with another shutout victory against the Arcadia Titans on Tuesday in Cromer Stadium, 6-0.

Just days earlier, the Panthers defeated the Tempe Buffaloes on the road, 7-0.

After losing 10 seniors from last year, Coconino enters the 2025-26 season with a young roster demonstrating their skills on home turf.

Panthers head coach Isaiah Veale acknowledged the team's adjustments following the graduation of several senior players.

"We're really just proud of the competitiveness that our girls have brought and the focus that they are trying to include everybody in the game," Veale said.

In a highly anticipated

home matchup against a strong opponent, the Panthers wasted little time generating offense. Junior and Northern Arizona University commit Saylor Smith recorded Coconino's first shot on goal early to set the tone. Moments later, with less than 35 minutes remaining in the first half, junior Corabelle Mercer scored the Panthers' opening goal.

"Building off each other helped me feel confident taking space, and I knew my teammates would be with me the whole time," Smith said. "That made it easier to find my shots and settle into a rhythm."

Starting the second half, freshman Rylee Boardman capitalized on a deflection from Arcadia's goalkeeper, maintaining composure to finish into an open net. Five minutes later, Smith added her second goal to take full control of the match.

Chants of "She's a

freshman!" erupted from the stands following Boardman's goal.

"It was really good, and I'm just glad that they're able to find me to create the opportunity for me to be able to do that," Boardman said of the play.

She scored her second goal of the match by slipping a shot past Arcadia's defenders and goalkeeper with 26:51 remaining in game time.

Even with Coconino's strong offensive start, junior goalkeeper Sydney Garcia impressed on defense. Her series of key saves kept the opposing team off the scoreboard.

Garcia read a play perfectly at the 25th minute in the second half, springing to deflect a well-placed shot aimed at the top-right corner over the crossbar.

"I just thought I needed to get it out so that we can stay in the game and keep a shut-

out," Garcia said.

Veale said he was impressed by how Garcia stayed focused while the offense maintained control of the match.

"She covered her post, she was on her toes and she did everything that she needed to do to make the save to keep her team in it," Veale said.

With 13 minutes remaining, a Coconino player received a yellow card for physical play during a defensive collision, sparking tension on the field. Earlier, an Arcadia tackle that hit a Coconino player's ankles rather than the ball went uncalled, increasing the intensity in the match's closing stages.

Undeterred by the earlier yellow card, Coconino continued to pressure Arcadia. The effort paid off when Mercer scored the final goal with 11 minutes to spare.

Younger players have stepped into bigger



HATTIE LOPER, ARIZONA DAILY SUN
Coconino's Rylee Boardman (13) drives the ball up the pitch during her team's home opener against Arcadia Tuesday at Coconino High School.

roles very quickly in the season.

"As a coach, it's one of the most rewarding things to see players stepping into a new phase where they're not just a part of the team but contributing to the team," Veale said.

Coconino (2-0) has outscored opponents 13-0 across its first two matches. The Panthers were scheduled to participate in the Ben Franklin Winter Classic over the weekend, then will host the ALA-Queen Creek Patri-

ots on Monday at 3 p.m.

"We want to be a team that works hard for each other, who doesn't stop fighting until the whistle blows, Veale said. "To see the players continuing to have that aggressive attitude, even in a moment that maybe doesn't look like anything is going to come out of it, and then being there to follow it up is a huge thing. It just means they're not giving up on plays, and that's something that we want them to be continuing to fight for."

SPARTANS

FROM PAGE 1

the end are what cost us the game."

The Spartans were down 52-48 with under two minutes to play when senior Kian Khatibi put up four quick points to tie it. NPA even forced a turnover, but it next gave the ball right back to Winslow with 17.5 seconds left.

Out of nowhere, Khat-

ibi fouled a Winslow player, for which he was called for an intentional foul. From there, Winslow sealed the game at the foul line to win, 56-52.

Broncos 52, Spartans 48

Less than two hours later, NPA took on the Parker High School Broncos, who had control for most of the game.

Hanson said there

was some fatigue in their second game and he had to rely on his bench.

"What I saw in our second game was we had tired legs, but we still found a way to compete and make it a really challenging game and make it interesting at the end," Hanson said.

The Spartans kept fighting back and cut the lead to four with under 90 seconds to

play.

Pickup finished the game with 17 points and five rebounds. Junior Kaiono Saucedo also got more minutes on the court. He scored 13 points to help the Spartans make it a game late.

The one issue Hanson mentioned from both games was rebounding. Both Winslow and Parker capitalized on second-chance points.

"We're not used to

playing bigger schools," Hanson said. "We're used to being able to just use our sheer athleticism to jump up and grab offensive rebounds against these clubs. We have to do a better job of seeking contact as that ball goes into the air," Hanson said.

Despite going 0-2 on opening day, NPA still had a lot to play for in the rest of the tournament — which

continues Friday and Saturday.

Hanson said he was proud of his team and the way they have jumped from one tournament to another.

"I couldn't be prouder," Hanson said. "They're amazing new kids, an amazing group of guys. I'm super proud to be their coach today, better than when I saw them play in the last tournament," Hanson said.

HIGH COUNTRY RUNNING

Running mentors make a Big difference

BY NEIL WEINTRAUB

Special to the Daily Sun

This past Nov. 13 at the Big Brothers Big Sisters of Flagstaff (BBBSF) Big Brunch fundraiser, I had the honor of sharing my "why" for being a "Big" volunteer over the past 25 years. I spoke about the profound influence two of my own mentors had on me — my New York neighbor Abe Simon and Flagstaff's Nat White, both pillars of their running communities.

After the fundraiser, I found myself wondering: What makes runners such wonderful mentors? To explore this, I reached out to several runners who volunteer as mentors with BBBSF and Girls on the Run of Northern Arizona (GOTRNA).

Veterinarian Tereza Rumfola, a Big Sister to Tatiana in BBBSF's community-based program, told me: "It was one of the most meaningful parts of my life. I've always loved how closely their mission — helping young people realize their full potential through one-on-one mentorship — aligns with the values we cultivate as runners: consistency, encouragement, resilience and showing up even on the hard days."

Rachel Smith, a Big in the BBBSF program for seven years before graduating out due to her Little turning 18 years old, says "becoming a Big was one of the best and most meaningful decisions of my life. Watching my Little sister grow from an 11-year-old girl into an almost 21-year-old woman and getting to be a part of her journey through various life stages and highs and lows has been a true gift. Like running, mentoring



COURTESY

A handful of runners, who all mentor in the community through a variety of ways, pose at a race event benefiting Big Brothers Big Sisters of Flagstaff.

teaches you the power of showing up, striving to be your best self and helping others strive to be their best, and the beauty of connection."

A professional runner and mom of four daughters, Sara Hall recently became a Big Sister in BBBSF's community-based program after witnessing Rachel's special relationship with her Little through the past 10 years. Sara says, "now that I have just two daughters living at home, with one on her way out in a few months, I was feeling more capacity to be able to pour into others, and I've been wanting to get more directly involved in the community. So I was excited to join the BBBSF program!"

On why Sara believes running pairs well with mentorship, she states: "I always felt that, especially with my own daughters, I was constantly reminded about what it takes to daily pour into someone else through the ups and the downs, the hormones and moods, and to keep being a consistent presence in someone's life — just as running teaches you how to weather all the good and bad days, and the value in continuing to show up through it all."

Second grade teach-

er Diane Immethun has been a GOTRNA coach at Cromer and DeMiguel elementary schools for the past 10 years. She shared: "I started coaching to share my joy of running and the sense of community it brings me. GOTRNA isn't just about running; it's about building confidence, empathy and friendships while keeping the girls active and happily developing social and emotional skills. It's such a thrill to watch them cross the finish line of their hard-earned 5K, soaking in the cheers and feeling that incredible sense of pride in their accomplishments."

If this column inspires you to mentor or coach, BBBSF and GOTRNA can always use volunteers. Learn more by visiting gotrna.org and/or flagstaffbig.org.

Neil Weintraub has been a Big Brothers Big Sisters of Flagstaff volunteer mentor for the past 25 years. Neil and his not-so-little Little brother, 14-year-old Zach, recently celebrated their fifth year of being matched. **Rachel Smith**, is a mom of 2, professional runner and treat-lover, is the coordinating editor of this column and would encourage you to send articles to her email at rachscheid18@gmail.com.

NAZ ELITE THIS WEEK

3 to take world stage in

Two NAZ Elite athletes will represent the US on home soil

BY MIKE HARTMAN
Associate Editor

With the 2026 World Athletics Cross Country Championships set to take place on United States soil, NAZ Elite sent a crew to Portland, Oregon, hungry to make a spot on Team USA last week.

Moreover, the world championship race will unfold at Apalachee Regional Park in Tallahassee, Florida, creating an especially enticing situation for NAZ Elite runners who went to school at Florida State.

Wesley Kiptoo and Ahmed Muhumed pushed their legs to the limits for NAZ Elite Dec. 6 to finish third and fourth, respectively, at the USATF Cross Country Championships on a muddy and rolling Glendoveer Golf Course.

Their results earned them spots on Team USA, while teammates Bob Liking and Olin Hacker produced strong showings against the field, which saw 122 total finishers on the men's side. Liking, fresh into his rookie season with the team, claimed 10th place with a time of 30:16 on the 10K course, while Hacker came in 13th in 30:32.

"We did feel like we put forth the best performance of any team that was there," NAZ Elite head coach Jack Mullaney said in an interview Wednesday.

He added: "Our guys went out and executed and made people earn

it, and we're fortunate that we got two guys on the team."

Despite taking a spill in the mud with a few kilometers to go, Kiptoo recovered and finished hard for a time of 29:27, losing a spot due to the fall.

The goal, Mullaney said, was for his runners to make their way to the front, secure a spot there and push hard all the way to the finish. By the midpoint mark of the race, the top six runners had separated themselves from the trailing pack.

"I kinda knew that whoever was in the top six around 3K to 4K, that was probably going to be the team. And that's kinda how it played out," Mullaney said.

Muhumed clocked a 29:33 for spot on Team USA, which also is comprised of title winner Parker Wolfe, who crossed the finish line in 29:16.4, and fifth-place finisher Nico Young, who came in at 29:41.6. Also making the six-man team was runner-up Rocky Hansen and sixth-place finisher Graham Blanks.

"I think the race really favored someone who is really strong, really tough and was really ready to put themselves in it and in a pretty dark place early on and survive. To their credit, they did that," Mullaney said.

Mullaney said the crew the U.S. is sending to worlds is possibly the strongest ever.

NAZ Elite sent two Americans to last year's World Athletics Cross Country Championships in Bel-

grade, Serbia, where Muhumed placed 36th for Team USA on the men's side and Abby Nichols finished 33rd on the women's side for the country.

In addition to Kiptoo and Muhumed running at worlds in 2026, NAZ Elite announced that it will be sending Adrian Wildschutt, who will be representing South Africa at cross country worlds.

Worlds is scheduled to take place Jan. 10, 2026, in Tallahassee, where both Muhumed and Wildschutt attended school and did much racing while at Florida State.

The U.S. will host worlds for the first time in over 30 years.

"Any time anyone on our team can represent their country at a global championship, we're going to try to be in the mix for that, and it worked out well that we had a great group of people who could train together and prepare for it," Mullaney said of the crew that went to the USATF championship race to try to make U.S. team. "And I give the guys a lot of credit. They worked hard the last couple of months and at a time when you could maybe catch some people not at the top of their game because they are coming off a different world championship or a fall marathon or something like that."

Mike Hartman is the associate editor of the Daily Sun, a role he moved into after working as the sports editor, a sports reporter and a page designer. He can be reached at mhartman@azdailysun.com or (928) 556-2255.