

HIGH COUNTRY RUNNING

Memories of running the inaugural Soulstice Mountain Trail Run

BY SHARA BAILEY
Special to the Daily Sun

After reading Rich Boston's memories of when I paced him at the Leadville-100 in last week's High Country Running column, I found myself thinking about my own first high-altitude trail race: the inaugural 1997 Soulstice Mountain Trail Run. My running partner, Nancy Mahoney, and I were two of only a handful of women among 35 runners who gathered on a cool fall morning to do the race.

I was both excited and nervous about what we had signed up for. Nancy and I were not seasoned trail runners. But as graduate students in anthropology at ASU, we were already accustomed to dirt, fieldwork that tested our stamina and questionable life choices.

Our running partner-

ship began in Tempe in 1996, where we mostly trained for local 5Ks and 10Ks. Winter runs in Tempe were pleasant enough, but by May we were setting alarms for hours when no reasonable person should be awake, making our way along the Salt River before the desert sun asserted itself.

Somewhere along those predawn runs, we decided to run our first marathon. Naturally, we chose a big one — the New York City Marathon — which would take place the following November.

After the spring semester of 1997, I moved to Flagstaff, where my morning runs now took place in the cool, pine-scented air. Nancy occasionally made the drive north so we could do long runs without melting. During one of



Shara Bailey, Ph.D., studies the cast of the "Old Man" of La Chapelle in her office at New York University while wearing her Soulstice Trail Run shirt.

those visits, we heard about a new race: the Soulstice Mountain Trail Run; a challenging 12.25-mile course near Schultz Pass. With the marathon weeks away, we needed a 20-mile long run. The Soulstice race combined with running the 8 miles back to my house afterward would be perfect — putting us just over our 20-mile goal.

Race morning was

sunny but cool. Nancy, ever competitive, promised we would run together. And we did ... for most of it. Near the end, I stopped to tie my shoe on a rocky descent. When I looked up, I saw Nancy's ginger-colored ponytail swinging in the distance.

She continued ahead, earning herself a medal. Meanwhile, I settled into my own steady rhythm and was thrilled to finish

upright and breathing.

But we weren't done. After bagels and Gatorade at the awards ceremony, we headed back out for the 8-mile run home. We waved at fellow racers driving past us and quietly questioned our decision. After nearly 20 miles at altitude, most of it on uneven terrain, we collapsed in the park near my house before rallying for our second breakfast. We eventually hobbled over to Brandy's and ordered with the confidence of women who had burned several thousand calories and earned every bite.

Reflecting on this time, what stays with me isn't just the miles we ran that day. It's the memory of standing at that start line — one of only a few women at the beginning of a race that would grow far beyond those 35 run-

ners in the pines. I didn't win a medal. But I was there, running near 8,000 feet, part of something new. And that is a finish I will always treasure.

Byline: Shara Bailey is a professor of Anthropology at New York University and a longtime distance runner. She spent nine years in Arizona — three of them in Flagstaff — while earning her Ph.D. She still misses the high-altitude trails, the ponderosa pines and Brandy's Swedish oat pancakes.

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.

EAGLES

FROM PAGE B1

on the Red Wolves, giving them no space to shoot and contesting every shot. Flagstaff allowed just five points in the second quarter.

The Flagstaff offense was also on display as they scored 22 points in the second quarter. The Eagles made six 3-pointers in the first half and went into halftime up

by 25 points, 39-14.

Edgewater started the second half with a 3-pointer from the left wing, continuing Flagstaff's shooting dominance. About 20 seconds later, the Eagles found themselves up by 30 points after a layup.

The Eagles continued to build on their lead in the third, going up by 35 by the end of the quarter, 61-26.

The fourth quarter

was played under a running clock with the Eagles holding a big lead. With the game in hand, Flagstaff only scored four points in the fourth quarter. The Eagles already had their sights set on the next round.

The Eagles will head to Surprise, Arizona, to take on the No. 4 Paradise Honors Panthers in the quarterfinals on Saturday at 6 p.m.

Johnson said he expects the matchup to be

difficult.

"They've been tough throughout," Johnson said. "We got to meet them with that toughness and exceed, and then we got to be able to execute and we can't play afraid."

The winner will advance to the semifinal round to face the winner of No. 1 Salpointe Catholic and No. 8 Cactus Shadows on Tuesday, with the higher seed hosting.



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Flagstaff's Lexi Neal (1) dribbles the ball during a first-round state tournament game against Walden Grove on Thursday at Flagstaff High School.

PANTHERS

FROM PAGE B1

the night as undefeated champions in their respective regions. Coconino went 12-0 in the Grand Canyon for its first region title since 2021-22. Dysart, which went 10-0 in the Black Canyon Region, has not lost a region game since 2022 and has won the region crown in four consecutive years.

Making their 11th straight playoff appearance, the Demons had the poise and experience to start yet another postseason run.

"I think they have more postseason experience than us, and unfortunately, that showed through at the very end," Elliott said.

Demons senior forward Santiago Leyva came in as the player to beat. The 4A Conference leader with 16 double-doubles this season was held to just 12 points after averaging 19.8 throughout the year. He scored 25 points in Dysart's Open Division loss to 6A Basha last Wednesday, making him the focus for Coconino's defense.

"Despite the result, he lit up Basha in the Open," Elliott said. "For him to have 25 against a team like that, we knew we had a tall task."

Coconino senior Gavin Greene picked up four hammering blocks to keep the visitor's interior scoring at bay. He hit a pair of 3-pointers in the second quarter to quell Dysart's biggest run.

The loss for the

Grand Canyon Region Defensive Player of the Year weighed heavily on him after Coconino's most successful season in his career.

"I think we worked really hard this whole year, and I think we saw that pay off a lot," Greene said. "I think we built good relationships with each other. We're a good team. I had fun playing this year."

Greene ended with 12 points, with 10 coming in the first half.

With Leyva contained, Dysart turned to their second-leading scorer, freshman guard Jordan Cruz. He scored eight points in the first quarter to match Coconino's output. Cruz hit one of a handful of running floaters to give Dysart a 12-8 lead after the first quarter.

The Panthers opened the second quarter with consecutive buckets to tie the game at 12, only for the Demons to rally with a 12-0 run to force multiple Coconino timeouts and double-up the host.

Elliott called his third timeout of the quarter to draw up one play before halftime. What could have been a six-point deficit at half ended up as an 11-point difference thanks to Dysart sophomore Malik Ayers ripping away a loose ball and finding Cruz for an open layup as time expired.

"That zone gave us trouble," Elliott said. "We've seen that zone before, but they extended it and they took away our reversals, which took us

some time to figure out."

Nelson went on his run of eight unanswered points to cut the lead to 33-28 less than 90 seconds into the second half.

The Panthers cut the lead down to one with 3:20 left in the third quarter, but the Demons again snatched their momentum. A 10-0 Dysart run near the end of the quarter outweighed Nelson's 13 third-quarter points and gave the Demons a 44-37 lead with eight minutes to play.

"He doesn't shy away from the big moment," Elliott said of Nelson. "Whatever he decides to do, if he takes that attitude toward it, it's going to be fantastic for him."

Like clockwork, another Coconino run got the team within striking distance, but the Demons scorched the Panthers on the defensive end and limited shooting opportunities. Demons head coach Keegan Cook called a timeout with 3:47 remaining and his team up 52-44. The Panthers went the next two minutes without points until senior guard Fitz Guinan hit two of three free throws after a foul.

Nelson hit a corner 3-pointer with 31.5 seconds left to close the gap to 52-49. He fouled out just before Coconino's final inbound.

"We tried to keep him on the court in case we got a steal," Elliott said.

Cruz sealed the game with a free throw after Navarra's



HATTIE LOPER, ARIZONA DAILY SUN

Coconino's Gavin Greene (13) secures a rebound during a second-round 4A Conference state tournament game against Dysart on Wednesday at Coconino High School.



HATTIE LOPER, ARIZONA DAILY SUN

Coconino's Fitz Guinan (20) shoots the ball during a second-round 4A Conference state tournament game against Dysart Wednesday at Coconino High School.

steal. Cruz ended with 20 points to lead the Demons for the fifth game reaching that benchmark for the freshman.

Elliott has looked to Cook for a while. The two played for the same high school basketball coach in Washington state, albeit at different high schools.

Cook got the upper hand against a fellow branch in a Washing-

ton coaching tree.

"It's funny, we both teach AP Econ," Elliott said. "We went to a training and we figured out he's from Washington, I'm from Washington, and we actually had the same head coach in high school. We just didn't know it."

Dysart has now gone four straight seasons with at least one playoff win.

The Demons, who finished 17-1 in the regular season, advanced to the quarterfinals of the 4A Conference Boys Basketball State Championship Tournament to face the one team it lost to this season. Dysart was set to play No. 1 Deer Valley in Glendale on Friday, which beat the Demons on Dec. 2, 2025, 69-49.