

## HIGH COUNTRY RUNNING

# The Cocodona 250 'Golden Hour' ukulele player

BY NEIL WEINTRAUB  
Special to the Daily Sun

Last week, anyone who wasn't sleeping under a rock knew that the Cocodona 250 race was in town and how Dr. Rachel Entekin made international news by setting the overall course record in an unbelievable 56 hours, nine minutes and 48 seconds. Hats off to her, to all of the participants and to the hundreds of volunteers who made it such a memorable event — including one unsung local runner who made the end of the race a little bit more fun. This story is mainly about him.

To help cheer on the back of the packers as they tried to beat the 125-hour "cutoff" finish time, I scheduled our Northern Arizona Trail Runners Association's (NATRA) Saturday group outing to coincide with Cocodona's "Golden Hour," aka the last hour of the race.

This year, when a record 31 NATRA runners assembled to cheer on the last of the Cocodonans during

their final miles behind Buffalo Park, there was one who really stood out. My friend Brian Stark arrived wearing rainbow-striped socks and strumming a ukulele, which he broke out on the last big hill to serenade the exhausted runners.

Over jaunty chords, Brian improvised motivational lyrics such as: "It's Saturday morning and I'm running out of time ... about to finish another one. How many belt buckles does it take to be done?" The reaction of the exhausted Cocodona runners could be described as confused enjoyment.

When I asked Brian about his reason for playing the ukulele, he told me: "I love both live music and trails. I also play the banjo, but that one's harder to run with. I've played banjo for runners and bicyclists at events before, and I like to show up in unexpected places. One time at a bike tour, I played at the top of one of the steepest climbs on the course and gave out 500 doughnuts for free.

It was a hoot seeing their reaction — free food, bluegrass and a much-needed rest!"

An accomplished ultramarathoner, in 1998 Brian ran coast to coast, unsupported, on the American Discovery Trail, covering 4,800 miles in 238 days or seven and a half months. In 2011, he set the fastest known time across Nevada on the American Discovery Trail, running 500 miles in just over 11 days. In 2021, he did the same across Switzerland, when he completed 348 miles in just over 10 days. Most recently, in 2024, Brian ran the length of Italy from near Milan through Rome to Pompeii on the Via Francigena.

Today, Brian is the education programs director for Meteor Crater Education Alliance, a local nonprofit spreading STEM education across northern Arizona through summer camps, school visits and field trips to Meteor Crater, and he runs with NATRA on Saturdays.

So, if you are out in the woods and hear a uke playing, look

for the colorful knee-high socks and a big, welcoming smile. It might just be Brian! Although for next year's race, he says he's putting his name in the Cocodona lottery, so perhaps he'll strum his uke all 250 miles.

**NEIL WEINTRAUB CO-FOUNDED NORTHERN ARIZONA TRAIL RUNNERS ASSOCIATION (NATRA) IN 2001 AND HAS VOLUNTARILY DIRECTED THE SOULSTICE MOUNTAIN TRAIL RUN AND BIG BROTHERS BIG SISTERS OF FLAGSTAFF HALF MARATHON/5K FOR THE PAST 25 YEARS. HE HAS ALSO HELPED PACE FRIENDS DAWN STONE (2021) AND LARRY PHOENIX (2022) TO REACH THE COCODONA 250'S HERITAGE SQUARE FINISH LINE, AND EARN THEIR WELL-DESERVED BELT BUCKLES!**

**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.**



COURTESY

Brian Stark dons rainbow-striped socks while strumming a ukulele, which he broke out on the last big hill to serenade the exhausted runners of the Cocodona 250.

## NAU

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of Bella Vista College Prep, where the two newest Lumberjacks were part of one of the top prep programs in the country.

Together, they competed on Bella Vista's National Team, which captured the Beach Ball Classic title last December in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina and compiled a third-place finish in the Power Conference with a 7-3 record at the elite Grind Session World Championships in March.

Toukam, a 6-foot-8 forward from Bafoussam, Cameroon, averaged 10.3 points and seven rebounds per game in his final prep season. He was particularly active on the offensive glass, averaging nearly three offensive rebounds per contest.

"Lucas has tremen-

dous length, versatility and upside, and we're excited about his long-term future," Burcar said. "Lucas has great defensive versatility and competitiveness to keep possessions alive."

Mautz is making his way west from St. Michaels, Maryland where he was a two-time All-North Bay-side First Team selection at St. Michaels High School. As a senior, the 6-foot-3 guard averaged 22.3 points, 13.6 rebounds and nearly four assists per game, while totaling 18 double-doubles in 21 games and setting the school's all-time scoring record with 1,407 career points.

"Johnny is an explosive scorer and competitor who impacts the game on both ends of the floor," Burcar said. "Johnny can score at all three

levels, while also showing the ability to create for others and make winning plays."

The three incoming freshmen join an NAU roster that returns three starters in Ryan Abelman, Chris Komin and Brennan Peterson.

### Women's golf

The 2025-26 women's golf season drew to a close as NAU completed its final round at the NCAA Waco Regional on Wednesday.

The Lumberjacks were disqualified during Tuesday's round after senior Lizzie Neale withdrew due to injury, leaving the team with only three players. Amy Hodgkins, Lydia Lin and Frankie Dezis were able to continue competing as individuals.

This marks just the second time in

NCAA women's regional history that a team has been disqualified after being unable to field the minimum four players. East Carolina was forced out of the 2018 NCAA Austin Regional after it had just two healthy players for the second round. Three Pirates were among those stricken by a virus believed to have originated from water coolers on the course.

SMU topped the leaderboard, finishing with a team total of 17-under. The top five teams qualified for the NCAA National Championship, scheduled for May 22 to 27 at Omni La Costa Resort & Spa in Carlsbad, California. Joining SMU was Texas A&M, Baylor, LSU and Tennessee. Vanessa Borovilos of Texas A&M earned medalist honors, shooting 66-69-65 for a 10-under

total and a four-stroke victory.

All three Lumberjacks shot a 3-over 73 in the final round. Hodgkins was the top finisher with a 54-hole total of 3-over (72-68-73), tying for 24th place.

Lin finished at 8-over overall and tied for 39th place. She opened the final round with a birdie on the par-5 10th hole and added another on the 357-yard par-4 17th.

Dezis had three birdies to close out the tournament, including one on her opening hole, another on hole 12 and a final birdie on hole nine to end the event. Her three-round total of 12-over par tied her for 48th place, moving her up two spots on the leaderboard from Tuesday.

Between them, the Lumberjacks tallied 127 pars and 17 bird-

ies. They tied for fifth with Oregon in par-3 scoring at 3.10 (+4), ranked seventh in par-4 scoring at 4.23 (+29) and seventh in par-5 scoring at 5.00 (E).

NAU won three tournaments during the season, including its 10th Big Sky title, while achieving a No. 77 national ranking — the best in head coach Brad Bedortha's 18 seasons with the Lumberjacks. Bedortha was recently named Big Sky Coach of the Year, and three players earned All-Big Sky First Team honors.

The Lumberjacks will welcome three incoming freshmen to join three returning players for the 2026-27 season, which begins in September.

**STAYSON ISOBE AND ASHLEY CROFT CONTRIBUTED TO THIS ARTICLE.**



Ah-hola Priest by Milland Lomakema (Hopi)

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