

SENIORS

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NPA junior Eva Madsen led the Spartans with a sixth-place result at 20:34.89, while Coconino junior Savanna McKerracher paced the Panthers with a 21:12.54 time that was good enough for eighth overall.

McKenna Marino was NPA's highest-placed senior in the girls race, finishing 15th with a time of 21:41.15.

"I was really happy to race today," Marino said. "It's sad that this is my last year. It was really fun to race today."

The boys race looked to be a lot closer as the lead runners crossed over into the last leg of the race in a dead heat.

Bland led an Eagles three-headed monster with sophomore Uuts Masayumptewa and junior Ezra Varley. Junior runner Yohanes van Meertan, who won the city meet as a freshman with NPA in 2023, did not run the race on Wednesday.

"We wanted to do something where we kind of start out conservative so we can run with a big pack of the team at first, and then kind of free-for-all it in that last mile," Bland said. "We were laughing and joking with some of the Coco kids, too. It was fun and games for a little while."

As Bland was coming to the finish line, the arch that marked the end of the race began to deflate. Nearby coaches and officials rushed to keep the arch high enough for Bland to get across the line without trouble.



PHOTOS BY HATTIE LOPER, ARIZONA DAILY SUN

Flagstaff senior Alex Bland takes first place as the finish line arch deflates from a faulty generator during the Flagstaff Cross Country City Meet boys championship race on Wednesday at Buffalo Park. Bland finished with a time of 15:44.34.

He put his arms up in disbelief as he came to the line but acknowledged how beautiful the moment was.

"I think that was really symbolic," Bland said. "All the coaches jumped in there and saved it. It was great."

Flagstaff took the top seven spots in the boys race. Bland and Masayumptewa (16:02.90) maintained their 1-2 running order, but junior Jacob Medina pulled away in the final seconds to take the final spot on the podium with a time of 16:17.72. Varley finished fourth just behind at 16:21.70.

Sophomore Kenyan Lee (16:47.16), senior Elijah Talkalai (16:52.88) and senior Cedric Johnson (16:53.93) rounded out the top-seven sweep for the Eagles.

Coconino sophomore Mile Seumptewa led the Panthers with an eighth-place result at 16:58.52. BASIS Flagstaff junior Miguel Rodriguez-Rosero got close to besting Coconino's top finisher, but crossed the finish



Flagstaff senior Taylor Biggambler is No. 1 as she crosses the finish line with a title-winning time of 17:40.21 during the Flagstaff Cross Country City Meet girls championship race on Wednesday at Buffalo Park.

line two seconds behind in ninth. NPA senior Emilio Haubert continued the trend of a two-second stagger between top team finishers with a 17:02.04 time for 10th.

Daron Cooch-yamptewa led Coconino's three-deep senior class with a 28th-place result and a time of 19:56.24. He said the chance to lead his classmates in his final home meet was a memorable moment.

"It means a lot just because I've run up here the past four years," Coochyamptewa said. "Just being

around friends and family that came from all over just to watch, it means a lot."

This year's meet was a good measuring stick for each local team as the cross country season begins its final stride. Coconino will return to action the soonest at the Bradshaw Mountain Invitational on Saturday. Flagstaff and NPA will compete in Boulder Creek's second home meet on Wednesday. BASIS Flagstaff will next appear at the East Valley Invite at Frontier Family Park in Queen Creek on Oct. 22.

HIGH COUNTRY RUNNING

'Oh, deer!' When you see an opening, take it

BY MYLES SCHRAG
Special to the Daily Sun

Drama unfolded in the northwest part of Buffalo Park on Saturday morning, Sept. 20. It wasn't the 16 teams battling for a team title at the Four Corners Invitational, hosted by Flagstaff High School, or any individual rivalries or sprints to the finish. In fact, I don't think anybody else saw this suspense play out.

One runner from down south did manage to find enough breath to point out to his competitor, "There's a deer!" But even he missed the other three deer that had managed to find a gap to jaywalk between the boys varsity race leader, FHS state champion Alex Bland, and all his pursuers.

That trio was safely inside the loop at Buffalo Park. The problem was their littlest family member was stuck on the outside. They were watching him — I'm pretty sure they were staring him down, annoyed, because now they were all stuck waiting for him to figure out a way to cross. The problem, of course, was that by not being bold, he now had to navigate the bell curve of runners, the high-traffic middle of the pack, to work its way through the course.

He was clearly anxious. He looked ready to make a dash for it a couple of times, but like

a cautious Frogger player, thought better of it. Suddenly, he bounded toward the east, thinking he might find an opening as the running herd thinned out toward the back. That was a smart move. It still took a couple more minutes, but he eventually willed himself to cross in front of some of the last varsity boy runners. He quickly trotted over to rejoin his clan.

From where I stood, it seemed quite clear they were patiently standing, content to let him regale them with the tale of his glorious sprint until they all receded into the woods. Watching the whole thing unfold was better entertainment than Netflix.

They didn't stick around for the medal ceremony to see that Bland had won with a time of 15:34.27 and the Flagstaff boys cruised to the team victory with 25 points. Neither did I. But we all had a morning run to remember, and the deer family got the park back to themselves until the city meet.

Myles Schrag is a former coordinating editor of High Country Running and is a cofounder of Flagstaff-based Soulstice Publishing. Rachel Smith is the coordinating editor for the High Country Running column. You can email her at rachschneid18@gmail.com to contribute to this column.

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