

## HIGH COUNTRY RUNNING YEAR IN REVIEW



COURTESY

The author, right, poses for a photo with fellow High Country Running contributor Niel Weintraub.

## The running is secondary

BY HOWARD BROWN  
Special to the Daily Sun

Poet and lyricist Robert Hunter once asked — and urged — “Long-distance runner, what you standin’ there for? Get up, get out, get out of the door.” His words beg a deeper question: what is it that actually gets us up and out the door?

What motivates us on cold winter mornings when it’s still dark and the coffee hasn’t brewed yet? Or after a long workday, when part of the brain just wants to shut down? Or during a short lunch break, or on a Saturday morning when even the dog wants to sleep in?

Certainly, running itself — with its well-documented physical and mental benefits — is a powerful motivator. But there must be something more that draws so many of us out the door and onto the road or trail.

There are the places where we run: forests, mountains, red rocks, beaches. There are cold winds and warm rays, wet snow and dry heat, refreshing rain and

gritty dust. There are rocky scrambles and sandy paths, streams to cross and obstacles to leap. Sometimes our focus is narrow, eyes fixed on our feet to clear the next rock. Other times, we take in the scenery — or, if running with an archaeologist friend, learn the history beneath our steps.

There are group runs with old friends and new, and solitary runs where our own thoughts keep us company. In groups, there are words of encouragement, often offered exactly when they’re needed most. There are conversations that reconnect us to the past and dreams that reach toward the future. Alone, there are daydreams and meditations, reflections and reckonings, and moments of remembering those who no longer run beside us.

There are days when it feels like we could run forever, and others when it’s a strain to put one foot in front of the other. There are runs of straight lines and runs of endless meanderings. There are injuries — physical and mental — that

bring us to a halt, and there are periods of recovery and patience that eventually return us to motion, with renewed clarity and fresh legs.

So what gets us up and out the door? Yes, it’s the running — but sometimes the running is secondary. Those who already run likely know the answer. And for those who don’t yet, the answer may still be waiting out there.

So what are you standing there for? Get up and get out of the door!

**Howard Brown** has lived in Flagstaff and has been running its environs for 26 years. He is a proud father of adult children and a practicing attorney. Along with local runner Daniel Maestas, Howard has run (and finished) all 24 Soulstice Mountain Trail Runs during the race’s NATRA era.

**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 [rachschnid18@gmail.com](mailto:rachschnid18@gmail.com).

## EAGLES

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managed three corner kicks in the first half, including a pair within two minutes of each other. Welker rolled a slow shot after receiving the third corner kick, which Stewart harmlessly picked up.

Set pieces became a priority with conditions making it difficult to build up runs and scoring chances. The Eagles maintained control throughout the first half, even with the weather conditions changing regularly. Light snow made its way over the field with about eight minutes left in the first half.

Stewart made a diving save right around the eight-minute mark. Flagstaff had one of its better chances to score right at the end of the half on a free kick that rolled wide to the right.

The hardest rain and snowfall came right at the end of the half and throughout the break. It happened to lighten up right as the whistle blew to start the second half. Much of the rest of the match was played in dry air.

Looking to break the stalemate early after the break, Flagstaff made two quick breakaways toward Eastmark’s goal. Stewart ran forward from her box to stop the second chance.

Stewart neutralized more corner kicks and shots from the Eagles. Her biggest stop of regulation came with around 14 minutes left on the clock when she knocked away an initial shot from junior Bri Gallardo. Freshman Anaya Abdallah got the ball and took a shot off the rebound, but an Eastmark defender covered Stewart’s back and knocked the ball away.

Flagstaff had one last chance to take the match away in the final seconds of regulation. Sophomore Lyris Cortez placed a leading pass to Welker, who got turned around covering it off a deflection. Welker set her feet and took a shot out of a spin move that Stewart had to dive to stop. Eastmark cleared the ball



HATTIE LOPER, ARIZONA DAILY SUN

Flagstaff’s Samantha Negrete-Deniz (10) launches a corner kick during a match against Eastmark at Flagstaff High School Wednesday.

away for a Flagstaff corner, but there was not enough time to set one up before the buzzer sounded.

Berry and Firebirds head coach Jason Best briefly met at midfield to discuss playing an extra 20 minutes, something the two teams did not do in last year’s season opener in Mesa that ended in a 0-0 draw.

Down 1-0 after Lockwood’s goal from distance to start extra time, the Eagles picked up the pace. Flagstaff drew a foul inside Eastmark’s box and forced a penalty kick with six minutes left in the first extra-time period. Sophomore Samantha Negrete-Deniz was tabbed to take the potential match-tying goal. Stewart read the shot perfectly and stashed it after diving to her left.

Berry shouted at Negrete-Deniz from the bench to keep her head up and get that goal back on the field.

“The bottom line is, in my career I’ve missed plenty of PKs, and that’s not a judge of someone as a player,” Berry said. “You’re going to miss PKs. You’re going to miss shots. It’s how you respond. I think she came and responded well and she played hard.”

Berry was emphatic with her team during the break between extra-time periods about the intensity needed to tie the match up. She asked for anyone to step up and put the team on their back to build any sort of momentum.

She also made a defensive change by putting just three defenders in the back, knowing that they needed to

be on the attack.

“We worked on possession in practice this week,” Berry said. “The girls possessed the ball well. They played hard. They were playing for each other. They were fighting on defense. It’s just the goals are not there.”

Eastmark read the defensive switch and kept the ball on its scoring side for most of the final period. It marked a complete shift in what was seen in regulation.

Flagstaff had a chance to knot it up with five minutes on the clock. A corner kick from Negrete-Deniz was knocked away from the net, forcing freshman Sloane Saul to take a shot while falling away. It hit the crossbar of the football uprights at Rick Smith Athletic Field, resulting in a goal kick.

Eastmark (3-1, 0-0 4A East Sky) was scheduled to hold its first home match against the Saguaro Sabercats on Friday in a rematch from the Coyote Classic Soccer Tournament in Phoenix last month. The Sabercats won that scoreless match in a penalty shootout, 5-4. Eastmark will then host Casa Grande on Jan. 16.

Flagstaff (2-3, 0-0 4A Grand Canyon) will have some things to work on before it next sees the pitch at home against crosstown rival Coconino on Tuesday to open region play. Berry said she wants to see the girls’ hunger to compete in that match.

“The girls are good enough to be winning games,” Berry said. “The girls are deserving to win games. We just need to see the ball hit the back of the net.”

## LUMBERJACKS

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points he had against Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University on Nov. 18. Jackson scored 12 points in the second half trying to close the deficit. He did most of his damage at the free-throw line, taking 10 of NAU’s 17 foul shots.

Burcar has been open about Jackson feeling more comfortable coming off the bench. That may have to change with the 6-foot-9-inch Davidson on the mend. Burcar said those conversations have already happened.

“I spoke publicly about how much I respect Traivar for saying that,” Burcar said of Jackson wanting to come off the bench. “He should start, and we’re going to have to take a look at that.”

Weber State hit the ground running thanks to junior Viljami Vartiainen, who scored 11 of his 16 points in the first 10 minutes. He took 11 3-point shots throughout the night. The Wildcats went 13 for 29 from range, including 7 for 15

in the second half to seal the game.

Weber State entered the game 10th in the nation in defending the 3-point line, holding opponents to shooting under 28% from range. The Wildcats held NAU to 6-for-25 shooting from beyond the arc (24%).

“For us to get 25 good shots up, that can be a little misleading,” Burcar said. “I think that we could have been an outlier and maybe banked 10 of those. You go 10 for 25, that’s a great shooting percentage. Now you’re shooting 40% and the game’s totally different. I wasn’t overly worried about that.”

NAU got into foul trouble in the early going. Its next leading scorer, red-shirt junior guard Ryan Abelman, picked up two fouls in the first five minutes. He went 2 for 10 from the floor and 0 for 7 from deep.

Other Lumberjack starters also committed early fouls that took them off the court. Campisano and red-shirt junior guard Isaiah Shaw each had two fouls with

eight minutes still left to play in the first half.

Weber State ended each half on fire, taking its largest lead of 15 with one minute left before halftime. The Wildcats went on an 8-of-10 shooting stretch and kept NAU off the scoreboard for the last 2:30 of the opening frame to take a 42-31 lead into halftime.

The foul trouble flipped the other way to start the second half. Weber State was called for six fouls in six minutes before NAU got called for a single one. After a combined seven free throws were taken in the first half, NAU took 14 in the last 20 minutes to chip away at the lead.

“We came out and were really aggressive,” Burcar said. “We got a bunch of free throws in the second half. We came out and we didn’t back down.”

Freshman guard Brennan Peterson picked up where he left off in his last home outing when he shot 7 for 7 from 3-point range against Benedictine Mesa. Peterson scored 15 points ex-

clusively from the 3-ball, making five of his first six 3-point shots.

“I’d say my confidence comes from the coaches, first of all,” Peterson said. “They all believe in me. They trust me.”

NAU went on a 6-0 run to cut the lead to 57-55 with nine minutes to play. However, Wildcats forward Malek Gomma got an and-one opportunity to jump-start a 19-10 run to end the game.

The Wildcats are also among the best rebounding teams in the nation, entering the night in the top 35 in both defensive and total rebounds per game. Ultimately, it was the offensive glass that hurt the Lumberjacks the most. Weber State hauled in 13 offensive rebounds, leading to 16 second-chance points.

“We need to get some guys who can go get us some second-chance opportunities so we don’t go on those two-, three- or four-possession droughts of scoring the ball,” Burcar said.

Weber State (8-8, 2-1 Big Sky) has won two



MARY TRUSH, NAU ATHLETICS

Northern Arizona Lumberjacks guard Ryan Abelman (11) moves around a screen during a game against the Weber State Wildcats Thursday in the Walkup Skydome.

straight conference contests since its overtime loss to Portland State last week. Picked to finish ninth out of 10 teams in the conference ahead of NAU, the Wildcats showed that they are already exceeding expectations. Weber State will head to Greeley to face Northern Colorado (11-5, 1-2 Big Sky) on Saturday.

NAU (6-10, 0-3 Big Sky) has dropped its first three conference games for the second time in three years. The Lumberjacks suffered just their second home loss of the year, and first in the Skydome. NAU will close the weekend against the

Idaho State Bengals (8-8, 1-2 Big Sky) on Saturday at 6 p.m. The Bengals lost to Northern Colorado on Thursday, 85-72.

“I’m not going to stop my belief in our team,” Burcar said. “We have not been outclassed in any of our games. We played two tough games up at Montana and Montana State. Weber State’s a good team. That was my message to the team.”

The Lumberjacks are one of three teams yet to pick up a Big Sky win. Eastern Washington and Sacramento State each sat at 0-2 in conference play as of Thursday.