

HIGH COUNTRY RUNNING

A love letter to triathlon and the Flagstaff scene

BY RYAN STEVENS
Special to the Daily Sun

Running is only a third of triathlon. And this is a running column. But hear me out: Flagstaff is no longer just the running capital of America.

Every runner reading this column knows that Flagstaff is so much of a running mecca, you can go anywhere and see some of the greatest runners in the world.

I came to Flagstaff in 2006 in search of a new beginning. Running motivated me to choose our beautiful high country city. By 2006, though, I had recast myself as a triathlete.

I still ran. Running in Flagstaff delivered a beautiful life. Running took me to the mountains and introduced me to my best friends. Running brought me to Chris. (Thanks to him, I will never be the fastest runner in my household.)

But if I'm being honest, I'm most grateful for

triathlon. So, fellow runners, what if you reach beyond the running trails? Come to the NAU pool, and you'll see Olympians you've never seen. Because they don't run track or the marathon. They swim. Fast.

It was during a morning Masters Swim workout, many years ago, coached by the venerable Liz Hobbs, when I realized I was swimming one lane over from a world record holder in the 100-meter backstroke.

That will wake you up at 6 a.m.

But don't stop there. Hop on your bike and pedal out Lake Mary Road. Sure, you'll see runners of the highest pedigree (like Boston Marathon champ and record-holder Sharon Lokedi) cooking a workout at a five-minute mile pace. But keep pedaling. You'll probably see an Ironman World champion, too.

When I look around

the Flagstaff athletic scene, I see beyond running. I see world-class triathletes everywhere. (One of them is nice enough to coach me.) And they welcome us locals to swim, bike and run with them.

In 2019, I quit triathlon. I thought I had freed myself from the logistical stress of training and racing. But I had inadvertently deprived myself of living my best life ever (BLE). In the last couple years, with a fresh mindset, I started swimming again. It was a reawakening, going back to the pool. You can guess what happened next. I pulled the bike out of the shed.

What you might not guess is that I started running more — and faster. Because in triathlon, one sport feeds into another. Each one blossoms exponentially, if you lean into all three.

Another thing happened when I came back to triathlon. I started training with new friends — in all three sports.



COURTESY

Ryan Stevens competes in the Ironman 70.3 St. George triathlon in May, where he qualified for the Ironman 70.3 World Championship in Marbella, Spain, in November.

And I made an unlikely friend whose military training overlapped with my triathlon training, and his goal-driven approach lifted me toward my goals, too.

Triathlon, it turns out, always has a trick up its sleeve.

I'm profoundly grateful for all the people to whom running connected me — and for that

wild tri-sport, the one where running is just a third of the race.

Dive in, pedal hard and then, finally, my High Country Running friends: lace up your running shoes. You might just see running in a whole new beautiful way.

Ryan Stevens is a Flagstaff triathlete and lawyer. He moved to Flagstaff and is

married to Chris Gomez. Ryan is a regular competitor at the Mountain Man Triathlon, where he won the Olympic distance race on July 13. Every day he wakes up in Flagstaff, he still feels like he's on vacation. 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!

SOCCER

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the season. The team allowed 22 goals while scoring just 16, half as many as it scored in 2023. It was the first time in two decades that the team scored fewer goals than games played.

Berrios said that would be a point of emphasis this time around.

"We're very good going forward," Berrios said. "We're very good in the attacking third. Last year, obviously, was a tough year for us after two very good seasons. Last year we just couldn't put the ball in the net."

Home-field advantage will also be a focus for the Lumberjacks, who went 1-3-4 in Flagstaff last season, marking the team's first losing season at home since 2012. Berrios called the team's losing home record "unacceptable."

"I mean, we're at 7,000 feet," Berrios said. "We have a great stadium and we have to protect it. We've been talking about it since the kickoff meeting. In the past, we've been very good here."

The addition of assistant coach Freddy Douglas to the staff is meant to help NAU's attack. The former head coach at Division II Menlo College has given Berrios a new perspective on how the team looks while coaching.

"It's fun having somebody that you can trust and has been around the game so long that I'm comfortable taking a backseat sometimes to kind of evaluate the players when somebody else can coach," Berrios said.

NAU's offense will get the shakeup it may need to return to its scoring ways. Half of the eight players who scored at least one goal last season are gone, including Haylee Phoenix, who scored a team-high five goals.

Junior forward Micala Boex is the only returner from last year to score multiple goals. After missing her freshman year due to injury, she scored three goals in her first year of play. She scored the game-tying goal on a penalty kick in the Big Sky Tournament quarterfinal against Sacramento State before the

team lost in a penalty shootout.

Berrios is a big believer in Boex, and said the team will go as far as she goes.

"Micala Boex has the ability to be one of the best forwards in the conference," Berrios said. "If she has the year that we think she can have, it's going to be fun."

Other players are looking to take it upon themselves to get back on the scoring sheet. Avery Ott is one with the potential to do so.

The midfielder from Colorado took the team by storm by scoring four goals in her freshman campaign in 2022. She has scored three goals across her sophomore and junior years.

"I'd love to score more goals than I have in previous seasons," Ott said. "I've scored four goals in a season, so I'd love to score more than that in my senior season. That's a tangible goal I have."

Ott is well aware of the run she went on as a freshman and how long it has been since then. Now, in her fourth year with the team, she sees a chance to be a leader and help others reach the heights she hit early on.

"I think now I've kind of grown into a spot that's kind of more established," Ott said. "So, kind of getting back to goal-scoring, assisting teammates, helping everyone be better and all that good stuff."

Berrios sees the potential this iteration of Lumberjacks has on the attack with leadership from Ott and others.

"We're seeing kids be super dynamic in front of goals, scoring the goals, feeling comfortable in front of the goal and keeping their composure," Berrios said.

Protecting the net

While the offense is getting some needed retooling, another area that is in for a major overhaul is the goalkeeping position. Gone is Trinity Corcoran, whose 19 career shutouts are the second-most in program history.

In 2022, she had the fifth-highest save percentage in all of DI (.881) and accumulated nine shutouts while only allowing 10 total goals en



HATTIE LOPER, ARIZONA DAILY SUN

Members of the Lumberjacks women's soccer team run during a practice on campus on Wednesday.

route to being named Big Sky Tournament MVP.

Corcoran had the 19th-best save percentage in the country (.857) in 2023 and the 35th-best in 2024 (.832).

Also gone is Natalie Manzo, who stepped into the scene as a freshman in 2021 with highlight-worthy saves across her 16 starts.

With both of them gone this year, NAU has spent the past eight months looking for its next stalwart shot-stopper.

"I think we have some good goalkeepers that came in and can step in for sure," Berrios said. "I think it's a situation where they have to come in and prove themselves. It happens quick."

Berrios and assistant coach Chris Campbell, who works directly with goalkeepers, will have their work cut out for them when selecting a regular starter.

Every goalkeeper on the roster this year is new. A strong candidate for the starting gig is junior Lexi Saveski, who comes back to Arizona after two years at California Baptist. She was a four-year varsity starter at Perry High School in Gilbert, where she played nearly 3,000 minutes and secured 31 shutouts.

Another goalkeeper who can make a case from the jump is freshman Reece Reichland out of Pinnacle High School in Phoenix.

The Lumberjacks back line has been working with the new goalkeepers throughout the spring offseason and into fall practice. Bos said she and the other

defenders are excited to build chemistry with the new group.

"Luckily for us, they're all vocal," Bos said. "I love when a keeper is telling me where to be, especially because I love to be vocal on the field as well, so it works both ways. I trust every keeper that we have."

Bos explained the intricacies of knowing what each goalkeeper likes and what they are good at, like when passing the ball back to the goalkeeper and when they throw the ball back to them from the box.

The preparation for the new season has been a long time in the making. The work for the fall season started quickly after last season's conclusion.

"We're building onto what we did in the spring," Berrios said. "I've been here since 2019, and I truly believe it was the best spring we've ever had from a development perspective and a mentality perspective."

Strong start

The team has been practicing twice a day in the week leading up to the season's introduction. In these sessions, the players are quickly learning how to adapt to what their coaches demand of them. Berrios and his staff are willing to call the entire team in the middle of a drill to get everyone on the same page.

Much of the preseason is spent on finding ways to mesh the newcomers with the returners.

With 12 new faces coming in this year, Berrios said he was pleasantly surprised with how

that process is going.

"You never know what you are going to get with freshmen, right?" Berrios said. "It's only the second day, three sessions in. Five freshmen are playing really well. They're making an impact in everything that we do — which makes us a deeper team."

He specifically mentioned Lily Nesland out of Irvine and Kaylee Muniz out of Phoenix as two freshmen who have really impressed so far. Muniz scored 68 goals and added 49 assists in 48 games for Boulder Creek High School, and was a three-time first-team all-region player.

Berrios and his staff spread their wings in the recruiting process after last year. On top of the handful of Phoenix recruits, NAU is bringing in freshmen from Tennessee, Utah, California, Washington, Virginia and Colorado.

After the two exhibition games against Arizona and ASU, NAU will officially start the season with another in-state matchup against Embry-Riddle on Aug. 14. It will host Nevada on Aug. 17 before finally hitting the road to play UC San Diego on Aug. 21.

"I want to balance it out," Berrios said about the nonconference schedule. "Embry-Riddle, I respect them a ton and they're very good, actually. I think it's just more about how we manage it in a way that we feel successes and failures and learn from both."

NAU soccer has put the pieces together to reset and quickly move past last season.

CARDINALS

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"Despite it ending in a heartbreaking loss, we truly saw one of the greatest postseason performances by a receiver ever," Cardinals. com beat writer Darren Urban said.

Although the Cardinals went from 2010 through 2013 without making the playoffs, as well as 2016-20, Fitzgerald's production remained the same, consistently recording Pro Bowl seasons.

"Any time we trailed, we knew we could count on 11 to make a big play," Floyd said. "I will never forget the 2015 playoff game against Green Bay. He was Superman."

Besides Super Bowl XLIII, the 2015 divisional round game against Green Bay was a signature moment for Fitzgerald and Cardinals fans everywhere. He recorded 176 yards receiving, including a 75-yard reception followed up by a game-winning touchdown in overtime.

The primary argument against Fitzgerald's first-ballot candidacy include that he never led the league in receiving yards in a season. Marvin Harrison and Terrell Owens were also not first ballot Hall of Famers, and both receivers have more first team All-Pro selections than Fitzgerald. Owens had a large number of consistent seasons later on in his career, similar to Fitzgerald.

Based on era-adjusted stats for every first ballot Hall of Fame receiver, many believe Fitzgerald has a good argument for meeting the criteria.

The main question is whether the 50-member Hall of Fame voting committee agrees that Fitzgerald should be inducted on his first try.

"You have to look at the stats and consistency," Urban said. "Nine 1,000-yard seasons and played at a high level until the final seasons of his career, that should be an indicator of him being on the first ballot next year."