

Mystery in the aspens: How did a running dynasty take root in Flagstaff?

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FLAGSTAFF, Ariz. — Three minutes before the weekly mental training session, motorized curtains drop and gradually erase the panorama of pines and aspens crawling up the side of Humphreys Peak. The lights go down. No vista of 12,000-foot mountains set against blue sky over the next 20 minutes. Only a smiling performance psychologist on the auditorium screen for the athletes in the first four rows, the lissome caretakers of a modern college sports dynasty, snacking on health bars and yogurt after a lift, ready to meditate.

Breath is meditation's most basic focus, they're told. For many cultures, breath is known as spirit. It's a sermon to believers: The closed eyes and quieted minds in the room belong to Northern Arizona's cross-country team, a group that obsesses over oxygen and generally has mastered what to do with it. The program has won six of the last seven men's NCAA championships. It finished second the other time. Meanwhile, on this particular Wednesday in October, the school has the nation's No. 1 men's team and No. 1 women's team. That hasn't happened anywhere in 15 years.

As long as you're breathing, intones Shannon Thompson, the performance consultant running the session, *there's more right with you than wrong with you.*

From the top row, Mike Smith watches with a hand on his chin and a black Adidas hat pulled low. His first job was teaching elementary school. Never expected to do this. Too many weekends at meets. He wound up as an assistant for Northern Arizona's first championship

team and has directed the program to its next five titles as head coach. He's a guy who has Navajo sculptures, a quote from Paracelsus and a book about John Wooden on display in his office. He's a seeker. In this job, he's after the way to protect something by letting it go.

After the meditation ends, Smith takes a seat in front of his team. No one has said anything about the new national rankings, and he congratulates them. Rankings fool you into thinking something is done, he says. They make you daydream about outcomes. And outcomes don't help you inside the race.

“Someday you'll be at the Olympic trials, and you want to be the one to start by not trying to make the Olympic team,” Smith continues. “That's the hack. That's the cheat code. Because when you're not trying to make the Olympic team, you're left with just racing the race. You want to spend all your time thinking about what you're going to do, not what's going to happen. That works. I'm positive that works.”

Smith closes by telling everyone to enjoy the nice weather before it turns. It's about a month before Northern Arizona races for a seventh national men's championship. The Lumberjacks have as much or more talent than anyone. But if they win, if the dynasty reaches another peak in the distance, that won't be why.

They'll win because they don't need to.



The narration of this program's rise to dominance truly begins with whatever tectonic smash-up created the San Francisco Peaks, followed by some 11th-century volcanic eruptions that left fertile ground to settle halfway up.

But that's a very long story.

Instead, start on Oct. 18, 1963, when the International Olympic Committee awarded the 1968 Summer Games to Mexico City. Sports scientists in the United States had less than five years to figure out how to optimize training for extreme altitudes; the host city sat 7,350 feet above sea level. The first step, naturally, was identifying where to train. They opted for a city in the mountains of northern Arizona, mainly for reasons spelled out on an Interstate 17 road sign greeting visitors to this day:

ELEVATION 7000.

The human body makes more red blood cells to compensate for the lack of oxygen at altitude. And those red blood cells travel with you when you drop down closer to sea level. And more red blood cells mean more oxygen delivered to muscles.

And so, over time, a lumber town bisected by legendary Route 66 became a destination for endurance athletes. According to the city's website, since 1996, athletes who trained in Flagstaff have won 356 Olympic medals. The altitude and extensive dirt trails – soft surfaces crucial to mitigating the force a runner's body creates and absorbs with every step – make the place an ideal cross-country incubator. "All I wanted to be was a runner," says Northern Arizona senior Drew Bosley, a three-time All-American who finished third in the NCAA cross-country championship meet in 2022. "That's really all I'm interested in. Anything that gets in the way of that, I'm not as interested. I'm not saying I don't care about school. I'm not saying I don't care about my friendships, my family relationships, romantic relationships – I do. But my job is to be a runner. Plain and simple, I felt like I was going to be able to do it the best here."

Which explains a lot, but not why a men's cross-country program, established in 1970, in the perfect spot to establish a cross-country program, took more than four decades to literally run to a national title.

That, of course, required putting one foot in front of another. Northern Arizona men's cross-country has had moments almost from inception –

an All-American (Richard Silney) and the first of 32 conference titles in its second year, in fact – and it posted 16 top 10s in the national meet before the first title breakthrough in 2016. When Eric Heins arrived as the new head coach in 2007, though, the men had failed to qualify for consecutive NCAA championships. He managed roster size to make sure he had enough gear to outfit his athletes properly. It took five years and a change in athletic directors to add a third full-time assistant. A program of plenty, it was not.

“We definitely lived the mantra that we were blue-collar,” says Heins, now the head coach at Indiana. But he inherited talent like Lopez Lomong and David McNeill, who’d become Olympians. More top athletes – runners who didn’t crave power-conference glitz and simply wanted to run – kept coming as word spread about Flagstaff’s training advantages.

And on Nov. 19, 2016, Northern Arizona captured its first men’s national championship in Terre Haute, Ind., on a course built over a reclaimed coal mine.

The second- and third-place finishers? Four-time champion Stanford and defending champion Syracuse. “They just kept taking swings at the big guys,” Smith says, “and then one of them connected.”

Smith recorded the celebration in the team tent, the athletes screaming and laughing and collapsing in joyful catharsis. This had a weight all its own. The previous spring, Heins informed administrators that his wife had been hired at Space Center Houston. He planned to resign. A compromise followed: Heins would stick around for one more semester while his successor – Smith, plucked from Georgetown – served as an assistant to familiarize himself with the program.

The choice bridged eras and perspectives: Smith led the Hoyas men’s team to a 10th-place national finish in 2015, but he’d also previously lived in Flagstaff for six years after a brief stint as a schoolteacher, working at Northern Arizona’s Center for High Altitude Training among assorted other odd jobs. (The center closed due to lack of funding in

2009.) He understood the place. He understood the potential. He also started with nothing to build on the men's side and everything to lose. "When I think of 2016, I think free of expectation. And then everything after that is now like the piano on your back," Smith says.

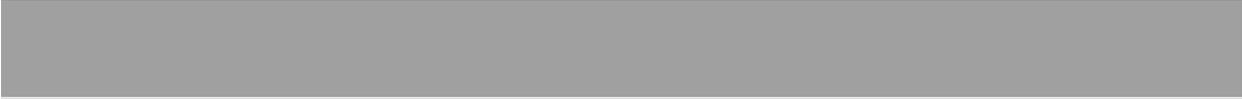
A collapse waiting to happen, if the space between achievement and expectation isn't filled with something substantial.

At Northern Arizona, resources have matched intent, about as well as can be expected for a school without power conference media rights money. (For example: Heins estimates his operating budget – not including salaries – was \$350,000 upon his departure. According to [a Mile Split report](#) in September, LSU and Georgia both spent in excess of \$200,000 on cross-country recruiting alone in 2021-22.) Where once Northern Arizona coaches combined titles to pay full-time assistants enough to stay, Smith's overall track and field staff comprises five assistants, three dedicated to distance running.

Flagstaff remains Flagstaff, with abundant geographical and biological advantages – "You can't buy that," as Smith puts it – but now there are resources not exactly native to the area, such as a \$47 million Student-Athlete High Performance Center opened in 2022. While that 72,000-square-foot facility serves all of Northern Arizona's athletes, it's no accident that cross-country championship trophies are a lobby centerpiece.

Nor is it coincidence that a leading-edge altitude simulation chamber overlooks the weight room. The chamber is outfitted with seven high-end Woodway treadmills and the technology to change the room's atmosphere to mimic conditions from sea level to 12,000 feet. "If it wasn't for the success or the potential for success of our cross-country program, we could have used that money elsewhere in the building," athletic director Mike Marlow says. Next on the wish list is an intermediate training loop that might replicate the hills and curves of a national meet, which Marlow hopes is part of the university's next capital funding campaign.

Without talent, though? It's furniture and landscaping.



In the fall of 2017, Dick Quax sat in his living room in Auckland, New Zealand, watching a broadcast of the NCAA men's cross-country championship. The scene prompted the former world-record holder in the 5,000-meter race to call his son, Theo, into the room. Matt Baxter and Tyler Day, fellow Kiwis, hammered the race from the front for Northern Arizona on a blustery day in Louisville, Ky. "It was the coolest, manliest (thing)," Theo Quax says now. "Like you *cannot* hurt these guys."

Success has been a snare for Northern Arizona, as it is anywhere. The program trains in one of the best places on the planet to do so, yes. It also overloads those dirt trails with some of the best talent in the world.

Two years after being gobsmacked by Baxter and Day, Theo Quax was racing for the same program in the NCAA championship meet. And looking in places far and wide hardly has been the only gambit. In both 2019 and 2020, Northern Arizona welcomed the No. 1 distance running prospect in the United States. Commitments from Bosley and Nico Young weren't the stuff of "SportsCenter" segments, but they rattled the relevant cages. "Drew and Nico are top recruits and monster athletes and baller leaders," Smith says, "and them coming here changes everything for us."

Young was a thunderclap. Even though he evolved into the national cross-country Gatorade Player of the Year as a high school senior, those around him preferred that he make a college choice leaning on academic prestige. Young was headed to Stanford before a coaching change spurred a reevaluation. "I had to make a decision on whether I wanted to go all-in on this sport, or not," Young says.

With his pledge, Northern Arizona's distilled, niche pitch – *You want to run, and be about running? Come here* – received the ultimate validation.

Young has individual finishes of fourth, 11th and second in three national championship meets. At least one key component of current and future contenders – sophomore Colin Sahlman, who competed in the NCAA meet as a true freshman – is in Flagstaff more or less because Young set an example of how the program bolsters athletes looking to make running their career. To that end: Young is closing in on 60,000 Instagram followers and fans follow him around at meets in which he's not even competing, hoping for a picture or an autograph. He almost assuredly soon will join Bosley – who has signed with Adidas – as a beneficiary of a name, image and likeness deal.

“(Smith) has now recruited elite, elite, elite-level talent out of high school and made them better,” says Chris Miltenberg, North Carolina's director of track and field and cross country, who was Smith's roommate at Georgetown. “He's also taken guys that weren't elite out of high school, and developed them into elite college guys. Doing those two things concurrently is actually way more difficult than it sounds.”

It is true that, twice now, Smith has taken over programs immediately after a national title: First the Georgetown women's squad after its 2011 championship, then again after the first Northern Arizona men's triumph five years later. Some coaches, mostly those well-blistered from decades of toil in the sport, wonder how much of this is genius and how much is falling into a gold mine.

They might want to look at the group dancing on the track in mid-October.

On a 70-degree afternoon in Flagstaff, the kind of day that makes you wonder why you're ever anywhere else, Northern Arizona's women's cross-country team is in between interval training laps, listening to Ke\$ha tell them to “don't stop, make it pop” via a portable speaker the size of a mini-refrigerator. And they're bobbing heads and pumping

arms as the men return from a pre-workout warmup run. “They’re there to work hard for each other,” junior Elise Stearns says of the men’s side. “And so are we. But we definitely have a different way of going about it.”

From 2009 to 2018, the women didn’t even qualify as a team for the national meet. Smith smiles when he thinks about those early nights of recruiting calls in his tenure: A men’s prospect, eager to hear the pitch ... followed by a women’s prospect saying thanks, she’s good. “In the same half-hour,” Smith says. The men’s team was but a reference point. Northern Arizona’s coaches had to find buyers for nothing more than a vision. “Being part of something that’s more established – that has its benefits,” says Stearns, who finished fourth at the NCAA championship meet in 2022. “But being part of something that has to build a little bit? That was going to be more exciting.”

Now it’s a team that posted the lowest women’s score ever – 15 points – at the latest Big Sky Championships. There’s nothing providential about it. The women are something all their own, going after everything.

The rhythm at Northern Arizona is the same as it is on campuses across the country. Wins beget wins. Talent draws talent. The only difference is context. “You want to be challenged,” Bosley says. “You want to be pushed to get to somewhere you couldn’t go alone.”

And yet after six championships, they’ve learned the same way doesn’t bring you to the same place. Not every time, anyway.

That’s the mystery out there in the aspens. That’s what Mike Smith wants everyone to look out for: the path you don’t expect to take.

Theo Quax and Kang Nyoak compete in the Lumberjacks’ home meet, the George Kyte Classic, in September 2023. (Courtesy of Northern Arizona Athletics)

As Buena Vista Social Club provides background music via a Bluetooth speaker crafted to look like a vintage boombox, Smith gets up from his couch to address the bear on the other side of the room.

It's a sculpture on a shelf with assorted stones and other similar figures. Kachina dolls, he explains. Hand-carved and hand-painted Native American art. "They're pretty sweet, man," Smith says. It's important to him to think about the people who were here before. The mountains are spiritual places for the Navajo. His job, as he sees it, is to coach in a facility that's basically been a church for thousands of years.

Mike Smith is from Massachusetts, the son of a single mom who was a physical education teacher. He ran at James Madison, transferred to Georgetown, majored in English and thought his roommate's aspirations to coach sounded terrible. He lived for a year in San Diego training to be a pro, spent two years teaching fifth-graders at Simon Elementary School in Washington, D.C., and got his first coaching job with zero experience, hired by his college coach. Now he has championship rings and kachina dolls and sounds like the shaman proprietor of a surf shack.

"Most of the people we went to school with were looking to go to Wall Street or Capitol Hill or medical school or law school," Miltenberg says. "From the day I met Mike, it was so clear he wanted none of that conventional path at all."

That begins to explain why a modern college sports dynasty runs on the idea that it is not racing for championships. Of course Northern Arizona likes winning. Of course its coach, who'd get annoyed when his mom beat him in H-O-R-S-E, likes winning. But the fine line between want and need, Smith would tell you, is actually a tripwire.

He read the book on Wooden and listened to CEOs and paid rapt attention to "The Last Dance" during the pandemic, but not in pursuit of tips to achieve a result. He's after the essence of how to think this game. How to make a result happen long before it happens, by properly framing what's next. "Two hundred fifty guys will get on the line in the national championship," Smith says. "I don't coach them. I don't know

them. But a lot of them are trying to conquer something way bigger than the race. And that doesn't work real well in the race."

He knows because he ran that race years ago.

Smith has met his father, but they don't know each other. Not really. Smith couldn't tell you if the man even has the faintest idea his son is a coach. Smith can reckon with it these days, as a new father himself. As a young person, it made him question his worth without even knowing he was. "Hard s—," as he puts it. When Smith ran, he ran to be good enough. To be valued. He chased a specter and never caught up. "I put so much pressure on myself in these races," Smith says. "It breaks my heart to say it, but I was thinking – or that kid was thinking – dude, if you win the state meet, he's going to come back. If you win the NCAA meet, he's going to be just, like, in the driveway waiting for you."

It is the important stuff he got wrong. "He's not very shy about that: Your life influences the way that you run and vice versa," sixth-year senior Brodey Hasty says. Could be someone like Santiago Gomez-Prosser racing with rage and impatience but then reconciling it and more or less winning the NCAA meet for the Lumberjacks in 2022. Could be someone like Young believing he had to succeed to amass media attention and followers and popularity. Smith's counsel is the same. The race cannot be about being loved. The race can only be a game.

"If you don't make your entire world about it," Quax says, "it's not like you can screw it up, you know?"

It's why Northern Arizona wins.

There is no talk about times. No talk about championships. There is only the range of outcomes. A controlled framework of expectation to cut a race down to size. "Their individual race is conducted through the motivation of what's best for our team," Smith says. "So that's to say, when it's not going well for you, no one gives a s—. Because it's not about you."

If you can't finish fourth? Finish fifth. Can't finish 25th, as planned? Finish 26th, not 106th. Run the race you're supposed to run, because five teammates rely on you to do it. "In distance running, you need to believe that," Bosley says. "There's no timeouts. There's no halftime. There's no break where the coach can kind of realign you. When the gun goes off, all the eyes are on you, and you're exposed, and you're with yourself, your thoughts and the six other guys that you line up with. And that's it."

It makes the epic seem small. It replaces a burden with a purpose.

It has worked even when it didn't. That second-place finish in 2019 – the blip between three-peats – triggered a thorough review of what matters. "We actually started to see training and racing as a thing that requires us to be together and do together," Hasty says. By the national championship meet in 2021, Hasty walked past opposing team tents full of athletes sitting alone, headphones on. Northern Arizona's tent, meanwhile? Phil Collins' "In The Air Tonight," blasting at full volume. The Lumberjacks finished 45 points ahead of second-place Iowa State. "What are you doing?" he says. "All you guys have to race for each other in like eight minutes, and you're choosing to self-isolate as opposed to getting ready together."

Last fall, Northern Arizona stumbled through the regular season. At the Nuttycombe Invitational in October – the last stop before the postseason – it finished a distant third, 91 points behind first-place Stanford. When it tied Oklahoma State atop the national meet a month later, the team score of 83 far exceeded expectations. A hell of a team race on the one day that matters.

And in the moments before the Lumberjacks discovered they had the tiebreaker, in the time they thought the other side won, they celebrated. "I was just as proud of our guys when I thought we got second as when I found out we got first," Sahlman says. "The trophy is nice. Don't get me wrong. It looks good out there. But it doesn't really matter as much as giving your all in the pursuit of something that's bigger than you."

And now Northern Arizona brings two formidable groups to the NCAA championships on Saturday in Charlottesville, Va. Their finish line is the same.

So is what lies before it.

That's why Mike Smith has everyone in a dark auditorium, listening to a performance coach say meditation will help them see through the "weather" of a race. They'll be able to see it how they want to see it. Smith, too, talks about this state a lot. Sometimes he calls it going to sleep. Sometimes he says it's like locking yourself in a small white room with no windows and doors and staring into a mirror and seeing your reflection or God or whoever.

And it's not about the way out. It's about the impact of every step to get there.

(Illustration: Sean Reilly / The Athletic; photos: Courtesy of Northern Arizona Athletics)