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FEATURED

Creating a champion: the pressures of running at 7000 feet

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The trails surrounding the finish line at the George Kyte Classic on Saturday were laced with spectators – all there to see for themselves the spectacle that is NAU men's cross country.

Twenty-one minutes into the race, the crowd lined the last stretch in anticipation of a wave of blue and gold soon to turn the final corner. Though it was expected, the surprise when All-American Senior Drew Bosley appeared on the final stretch was palpable. With feathered hair

and an unbroken stride, Bosley crossed the finish line with a time of 21:32.

It was a vast improvement over his victory at George Kyte last year when he ran a 22:09.

“Buffalo Park is sacred to us, so we can run hard on it,” Bosley said of the four-and-one-half-mile course his teammates were set to dominate.

Junior Santiago Prosser finished in second with a time of 21:47. Then, in short order, the rest of the Lumberjack wave came in force. Junior Kang Nyoak and Senior Theo Quax capped their race eight seconds later to place third and fourth, while sophomore Colin Sahlman rounded out the top five with a time just over the 22-minute mark.

Sophomore Jack Scherer was the next NAU runner to place, coming in eighth behind the top finishers for UArizona and Arizona State. Sophomore Randy Espinoza was next, closing out the **top 10** and ensuring the Lumberjacks stacked the top of the table. Junior Riley Human was the only runner to not place in the top 10, finishing with a time of 23:27.

The Lumberjack runners celebrated the same success as last year, but acknowledged the George Kyte Classic is just one step toward a larger goal: the NCAA Men’s Division I Cross Country Championship on Nov. 18 in Charlottesville, Virginia.

The NAU men’s cross country has now won **three consecutive national titles** twice in the last decade. The team’s first stint was 2016-2018, when Matthew Baxter and Tyler Day led the Lumberjacks to victory. The most recent stretch concluded last season when Bosley and Nico Young placed in the top three at the National Championship hosted by Stillwater, Oklahoma. 2019 separated NAU’s winning streaks — though the team came close — finishing as the runner-up to Brigham Young University.

The record for consecutive Men’s Division I Cross Country Championships is **four**, set by the University of Texas at El Paso from 1978-1981, and again from 1990-1993 by Arkansas. Now, with a season rampant with high **national expectations**, NAU has a chance to tie that record and solidify itself as a legacy cross-country school.

Training at altitude

The process of becoming a top-tier cross-country runner, let alone a beginner, requires rigorous training that can include running more than 100 miles in one week.

At NAU, runners experience greater pressure than athletes elsewhere. Flagstaff's 7000-foot elevation makes it one of the highest-elevated college cities in the United States: It is one of few cities outside of Colorado that offer such conditions to prospective athletes who wish to find the hardest places to train.

Attempting to run a mile at elevation adds additional pressure that **pushes the body to its maximum capability**. There is less oxygen in the air at higher elevations, which decreases the amount the body can take in during intense exercise. Physically, it can become harder to breathe and recover, though the body can adjust.

Both body and mind need to be strong enough to ensure a runner completes their goals, let alone finish a race and stay standing afterward.

Bosley said his coaches preach a message with that in mind – mind first, body second, and your body follows your mind.

High-altitude training is the standard for NAU. Runners are expected to adjust and perform at a level higher than many other programs across the country. However, those expectations are no barrier to those who decide to take the path toward greatness.

Bosley is someone who ventured down that road. The three-time national champion has accomplished a lot as a Lumberjack, including **three All-American awards**, although he is still aware of the struggles that can derail a season.

“Running 10K's on grass at the highest level in the NCAA requires a lot of aerobic strength, a lot of miles, and from the beginning of the summer to the middle of October you cannot think of how your body feels,” Bosley said. “You just have to ignore that and get the work done.”

There are moments throughout every season — whether it be while training or in a race — that test the composure of each runner. It is in those moments of physical pain and mental unease when a champion is tested.

“Sometimes, it is not for everyone,” Bosley said. “This game can be too hard for people, but I think we are pretty good at it. We work well together, and I think we can push through those hard moments.”

As much as running is considered an individual activity, the NAU cross-country athletes value their team chemistry as the key to achieving long-term success. Completing a good team race and finishing high as a group, despite the roadblocks, is what matters most to Bosley and his teammates, he said.

Winning consecutive championships is a feat **not often seen in the sports world**. The NCAA's comprehensive list of champions shows this. The most recent team to win consecutive championships other than NAU was Connecticut women's basketball from 2013-2016. The longest Division I record belongs to Arkansas men's indoor track and field, which won 12 straight championships from 1984-1995. Louisiana State University's women's indoor track and field team holds the second-longest streak at 11 from 1987-1997.

Although it has been done, long-term success is uncommon at the highest level of college athletics. Athletes move to different teams, and often, creating a sustainable culture is not possible.

However, at NAU the cross-country culture is built on certain values that are not overlooked by coaches or players.

Redshirt senior Theo Quax has competed in Flagstaff long enough to experience the atmosphere that comes with dynasty building. The New Zealand native has been a Lumberjack since 2018 and has seen incremental improvements year after year; it is his connection and belief in the team that keeps him pursuing higher goals.

"It is values, it is beliefs, it is certain things we hold dear to us that we do not concede on, and that is very much instilled by the coaching staff and some of the older boys," Quax said. "That is really what drives this team. It is an amazing process, and it is such an honor to be part of."

The process Quax speaks of is centered on mental and physical toughness.

Lumberjack runners are training at a sub-four mile effort — the professional standard — meaning they are pacing themselves to run consistently at the same speed over a long-distance race. That would translate to a final time of 16 minutes if Bosley and Quax ran one mile every four minutes during a four-mile race, clocking 400 meters every 60 seconds.

It is a physical demand similar to that of Olympic runners.

In-season training involves faster paces, while summer training usually includes volume workouts, like running over 100 miles a week or doing aerobic exercise that increases the heart rate and allows the body to use more oxygen.

“This is a team where we all have some of the most demanding training in the NCAA, and that is kind of expected,” Quax said. “As long as you have a balanced lifestyle, it does not make it any easier, but you can absorb the training more.”

Runners can go years without seeing physical progress, falling into a rhythm that makes it hard to improve mile times. That can also lead to frustrating workouts when progression is not as expected. The Lumberjack runners address these difficulties with a simple mindset: belief.

“It is about having that belief in yourself, faith in the training and the coaching staff, and sometimes that faith is tested more often than not, but it is very rewarding,” Quax said.

NAU runners have an understanding that, mentally, the sport can have drastic effects on everyday life. There can be days where a majority of an athlete's time is spent training, attending double workouts and logging multiple miles twice a day.

“The biggest thing is not letting it take an emotional toll on you, just be steady,” Bosley said. “You got to be a rock, but you can't roll.”

Addressing Expectations

The men's team was unanimously ranked as the **No. 1 team in the country** via preseason polls. Six championships in seven years can put a lot of pressure on a team, but the Lumberjacks are more composed and confident than ever, and it shows.

“We kind of stray away from putting expectations on ourselves,” Bosley said.

Every season is a blank canvas of curiosity for the Lumberjacks. They may know they are the best, but each runner is competing to find out how great they can be. The team strays from putting external pressure on themselves, instead focusing on how they can improve and stay confident against NCAA competition.

“We do not like to talk about rankings,” Quax said. “We do not like to talk about expectations, all the other stuff people put on us, but holding true to ourselves and knowing what we need to do to get seven guys toeing the line at nationals and those guys know what they are doing, know what their job is. If we have that, we are going to be a very, very hard team to beat.”

The team's mentality is just as strong as their bodies, but perhaps the most important step to exceeding expectations is how they prepare for races. Bosley said the team practices a template for each race no matter what awaits them past the finish line. No race is as important as the last, and every opportunity to improve as a team is taken.

“The Olympic Final and the George Kyte meet is the same in my eyes,” Bosley said.

Every Lumberjack who participated in the George Kyte Classic showed improvement over the previous season. Prosser showed the most development, running faster by one minute and four seconds; Bosley cut down 37 seconds; Nyoak finished one minute and three seconds quicker, and Quax improved his final time by 30 seconds.

Such strides are not often shown year after year, but it proves to the watchful eye that NAU cross country is primed for another possible record-breaking season.

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