

Running Up the Mountain: Northern Arizona Altitude, Lumberjack Attitude, and the Building of a Distance Dynasty

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Running Up the Mountain is a fascinating insiders' account of a collegiate cross-country team's improbable rise.

Matt Baxter and Ron Mann's inspirational sports history book *Running Up the Mountain* covers the growth of Northern Arizona University's long-distance running team from obscurity to preeminent sports dynasty.

This is an insiders' account of the collegiate cross-country team's unlikely, decades'-long rise in Flagstaff, Arizona. They began as a small athletic department and developed an improbable culture of success, leading to multiple national titles. And as the program grew, the Lumberjacks also produced generations of accomplished runners, some of whom competed in the Olympics.

Along the way, the team faced challenges including a lack of name recognition, subpar facilities, and a dearth of trainers, as well as perceived disadvantages like altitude and the difficulty of recruiting in-state athletes, who tended to gravitate toward bigger public schools. Later, it added state-of-the-art facilities with a long indoor track to its list of advantages. Still, there were persistent challenges, both when it came to finding reliable fifth men to round out the team and in regards to the college's rivalry with Brigham Young University.

Baxter and Mann also share fascinating anecdotes from team members' vantages, as with eating traditions like ordering desserts for the table (a ritual that started at the Iowa State Classic) and driving an hour out of the way to eat at a restaurant in Gatlinburg, Tennessee—part of the experience of being on the road. There are standout details as well, as of the giant fiberglass Muffler Men that were decked out to look like Paul Bunyan and that flanked a stadium entrance. Runners, coaches, and others are recalled in striking terms and with some direct quotes. And Baxter and Mann muse on the psychological challenges that runners face and on what keeps athletes pushing toward the finish line. Some of the book's details are too minute for general audiences, though, as when it recounts coaches' career calculations when considering job openings at other schools.

Memorable turns of phrase intermittently illuminate the otherwise straightforward prose, as when the book speaks of "getting within breathing distance of a national title team" and notes that Coach Mann "smoked more cigars than Archie Bunker." There are also intriguing explanations, as of the stress of breathing in frigid air (the book notes that winter weather in the mountains is not ideal for endurance athletes), that help to contextualize the book's sketched-in desert landscapes and cross-country scenes. And all of these pieces build to the book's exciting conclusion—a moment of triumph achieved by overcoming adversity via hard work, training, and perseverance.

A rousing history of an underdog team, *Running Up the Mountain* charts the rise of a winning long-distance running program.

JOSEPH S. PETE (October 28, 2023)

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