



Back to Back: A Season with the NAU
Men's Cross Country Team



Written by Matthew Baxter

Acknowledgements

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Introduction

November 19, 2016.

One last check through my backpack; spikes, socks, water, food, gloves, thermal, iPod, wallet, foam roller, and rope. I slump a strap over my shoulder and turn towards the door. Slowly my legs reluctantly take me closer to the point of no return. Glancing to my left I catch my own eye. The long mirror that graces this wall seems to reach for my soul as I pass it. My heart is now in my stomach. I lift my jacket top to unveil my race number. I am imprisoned in this moment as my name has been replaced by the number 390. I peek for my running shorts underneath layers of warmth. Although I have checked everything, every step of the way, this is the last one I will do. I turn for the door. Any sight of a loss of composure is now left behind in that room. I am ready. The door shuts with a thud. A final reminder of the safety I have left behind.

It is less than a year ago that Northern Arizona University won its first ever NCAA (National Collegiate Athletic Association) division 1 team title. For a university located in the small running town of Flagstaff, Arizona it was only fitting that their first National title was won for cross country. The 2016 NAU men's cross country team did the unthinkable by defeating teams with more money, faster recruits, better facilities, and more staff; squashing the idea that a name and money makes a winning team, these men won off pure desire to do so.

There are few teams who know the feeling of being ranked number one while simultaneously being viewed as an underdog; where proving your worth means little against a history of second places. The 2016 team went into their first major race as a big unknown. The workouts had been going well but there was no major indicator of what was to come.

Coach Eric Heins who had lead this team for the last decade, announced in the previous track season that he would be leaving the program. This tough decision was made through a strong commitment to supporting his wife who had received a new career opportunity in Houston. Coach Heins would see this team through to the conclusion of the cross country season. With many a podium finish under his belt but never a win, this team wanted to send Coach Heins out on a high note.

Fresh off a far from sizeable win against a Michigan B squad on the National's course in September, the NAU men lined up at Wisconsin ready to show everyone why they deserved to have been ranked number one this season. A strong showing from the team ended with a win for the Lumberjacks and the first glimpse of a team that would be a real threat at the National Championships.

The win at Wisconsin was a huge boost to the morale of the team. Suddenly anything was possible. The team headed to Idaho and perfect scored their Big Sky Conference race. In a Conference first, this team put six men across the line before the first runner of another team. Things were starting to look almost surreal at this point.

On to Regionals and the Lumberjacks had a less than ideal showing. Sickness resulted in only six men toeing the line. This race saw

some perform and others struggle, which was a worrying sign looking ahead to the National Championships in only eight days. Although the team still won the meet, it was in a less than convincing fashion. One that proved this team was not immune to adversity and that there needed to be a strong turn around if they were to have any shot at claiming the ultimate title.

With what felt like the weight of the world on their backs, the Lumberjack men headed to Terra Haute, Indiana for the NCAA Cross Country Championships. All the hard work that was put in over the past few months was about to be put to the test. For their final time that season, the men toed the line.

With some expected results as well as unexpected ones among the team, the men managed to pull off a monumental finish. For the first time in school history, an NCAA Division 1 team title was coming home with them. This was something that alumni, students, and the community could all claim to be a part of. The win was as much for Flagstaff as it was for NAU.

To be on a National Championship winning team carries with it the pressure of trying to repeat. With a new head coach guiding this team into the next cross country season, it is hard to not wonder how things will turn out. The only certainty is that there will be adversity along the way and this team will be tested mentally, emotionally, and physically.

Where to from here?

Winning the National team title was a new experience for me. I had never worked that hard for anything before in my life. Seeing guys crying and being totally vulnerable in that moment was a sobering experience. This is not just a sport for us. It means so much more than that.

There is no accolade that can accurately sum up our experience. Nobody can walk into the SkyDome on the NAU campus to see the National's trophy and even remotely understand what went into it. This was a season of heartache, pain, suffering, and euphoria. All for one moment; not the race or the victory ceremony, but that moment to ourselves when we were alone in a tent and told that we had won. A moment that is but a flicker of time. All the hard work was summed up in that moment. A trophy cannot show that.

With any moment such as that one, the urge to repeat it is unbearable. Suddenly I found myself back in a position where we are getting ready to do the impossible. To do what nobody thought we could even do once. As I write this my stomach knots. The thought of putting it all on the line and having it not eventuate kills me inside. Yet the only way to have a shot is to do just that. NAU will not line up at Nationals willing to setting for anything other than first. We have done it once and now we are going to put in the work to do it again.

Just like when the four-minute-mile was broken for the first time, the flood gates have opened to a new knowing of what is possible.

We do not have the most money, the best recruits, or the most fans. What we do have is a group of guys who are willing to do whatever it takes to be the best and a coach who is hungry for a National title winning team under his watch.

For the sake of all those who love the sport; NAU will try, as an undoubtable underdog, to do what we are told we cannot. To win in such a circumstance requires more than grit and hard work. It requires heart bigger than that of our competitors. That is what we have.

Exceeding the expectations of those who carry doubt would, in such a circumstance, require an exceptional showing. Producing a performance that silences the critics and emboldens the supporters. Toeing the line with confidence; running with passion; finishing with grace. Being able to show the world what it means to be a Lumberjack on the biggest stage, under the brightest lights, would be pure bliss summed up in a moment of surreal serenity. Such a moment would be dreamlike. Yet such a moment was lived. Dare seven men attempt such a feat again would be fit for a fairy tale. One that will inspire kids rather than scare them. Until such a day as they may toe the line against the Lumberjacks - then their nightmares will be validated, and their fears confirmed.

Format

The following is a dairy that I kept beginning on the 9th of August 2017 and concluding on the 18th of November 2017. It begins from the conclusion of the school summer break to the conclusion of the NCAA National Championships race. Last season there was some disappointment where no one had properly documented what occurred. Such an incredible moment deserves to be shared with those who are interested. I had a feeling that the 2017 cross country season was going to be special, which is why I decided to write about it. Almost daily I would detail trainings, team experiences, as well as my own emotional roller coaster. I tried to be as honest as possible to give the best overall detail into what occurred this season.

To articulate the following experience is hard to do with brevity. I have tried to paint a picture of the emotional brutality that this sport brings. The lack of forgiveness on the hard days and the limitless excitement on the good days all contribute to what makes cross country, or running in general, so special. Every day is not great, but those tough days are what make the good ones worthwhile. I hope you enjoy my pain and the suffering of this team.

Note: The following sections will begin with a brief outline of what each chapter is about. This will lead into a diary which concludes with a race recap at the end of each chapter.

IMPORTANT: This diary has been written from my perspective. Accordingly, none of the views expressed are a representation of the views of my team mates, coaches, NAU, or the NCAA.

Part I Preseason and the first race

August 9th – September 2nd

This first section consists of our build-up phase. The team is putting in big miles as we try to build strength that will carry us through till November. Tiredness and feelings of lacking fitness are abundant during this time. The building blocks are slowly being put in place and as our coach says, “how you feel doesn’t matter”.

My first entry outlines a commitment to cut out a lot of processed and sugary foods from my diet. This was easier said than done as it only took a few days for the cravings to really kick in. I do worry about any initial negative impacts this may have on my training.

Starting back in the weights room was a wakeup call to my body. This was a painful experience as it had been a while since I last lifted. I carried a lot of this initial discomfort into my first team workout. This is a time to show everyone the work you have done over the summer, but right now I am struggling to move.

The team is not working together how we would like. This is something that cannot be forced as we need to come together naturally. Right now, the morale is low and there is little support for one another in workouts. I hope we are not trying to compare this team to last years.

Our first race is always an interesting experience. There is a lot of uncertainty surrounding where our fitness is at. After this race it is clear the team is at a good place. For my own individual effort, there is a lot of work that needs to be done as we progress forward.

The first race

August
9th - Wednesday

Easy aqua jog with Emily. We discussed cutting back on the amount of sugar that we consume. It has been something that both of us have wanted to do for a while. Seems like we both have a reasonable amount of motivation to try and do it this time. This will mean no COOKIES, CAKES, LOLLIES, SWEET CHOCOLATE, ICE CREAM or PASTRIES, etc. I am anticipating this will be hard if we follow through with the plan, but I am interested to see the results. Considering we still have some of these foods in the cupboards, I think we will start tomorrow.

12th - Saturday

This morning was a 20 mile long run out Woody Mountain Road. We pushed the pace a bit and the body seemed to respond well. I am feeling fit which is a good sign this early in my build up.

17th - Thursday

I am having some issues with my left hamstring. One of the tendons is feeling tight and this sensation is not going anywhere. I will have to monitor this.

18th - Friday

All I want is some damn ICE CREAM!! The cravings are hitting me hard today, but I must resist.

22nd - Tuesday

This hamstring is being an absolute piece of shit. I had to skip my fartlek workout today and get in the pool instead.

Pool is closed! What is up with this? Post your hours online NAU!

24th - Thursday

My back is so incredibly sore. We had our first weights session of the season yesterday and I am battling right now. The only way I could get myself out of bed this morning was by slumping my body off the mattress then onto my feet. I cannot even bend down to tie my shoes right now. This is going to be a rough day.

25th - Friday

Our first workout as a team went surprisingly well. I was still feeling a lot of soreness in my hamstrings/glutes/back from weights in the warm up. Once the workout started that did not bother me as I assume the adrenaline kicked in. The workout was an 8 mile sub-T at Buffalo Park (7200ft) and I averaged 5:26 per mile; feeling like I could have carried on or gone a bit faster. I have not felt this comfortable in workouts during this time of the year before. Is it the cutting back on sugar or perhaps having a decent breakfast that my energy is coming from?

On a side note I am starting to look slightly leaner. More so than usual during this time at least.

26th - Saturday

Long run (18 miles) with the team up Waterline Road. Climbing to over 9000ft then dropping back down. Things got a bit hot and I started to dream of Blue Bell ice cream on the way back down. I always think that all I need to do is get 9 miles out/up and then the

downhill will be a cruise. Considering it is still an hour of running back down, the heat began to catch up with me. Thankfully, I survived.

29th - Tuesday

Coaches poll put our team as the preseason favourites.

There was a weird vibe amongst the team today. We had a workout of 6 x 1 mile reps at tempo pace. The reps got cut back to 5 because of how the workout was progressing. The atmosphere amongst the team was slightly off and we were not working together like we usually do. Maybe it is just because everyone is tired from school or the mileage. Either way we will have to change something here. The season will not go well if we are not working together.

The hard part about having a workout cut back is the unwillingness to stop. I will not let my guard down and believe it is over until I really know it is over. Even a coach telling me that we are done is sometimes not enough. About three of us still hung around the start line ready to go for our last rep. Then one of our coaches came over and gave the final stern word. "You guys are done". Well... I guess that means we are done.

30th - Wednesday

Weights this afternoon was hard yet satisfying. I slacked off a lot last semester in the weights room as I was not completely confident in how my body was responding to things in there. Now with some changes in the weights room, I am putting my confidence in the process and getting it done. I think this will be a vital part of gaining strength for this season.

31st - Thursday

My hamstring has held up for the past few days. Hopefully this means it is on the mend.

Treadmill hills this afternoon. 8 x 15 seconds on at 15% incline. This shit is hard. I don't know of anything else I have done up at altitude that mimics the oxygen debt I get into when doing these. My mouth gets bone dry and I spend the recovery sucking for air. On a positive side, I am looking forward to the strength that I will build through doing these.

September
01st - Friday

I had a dream last night that our men's team had just finished racing at Nationals and we were all standing around waiting to hear the results. I was looking at the guys and they appeared exhausted but satisfied that everyone had done their part. There was a real excitement that we might have just nabbed another team title. After continued delays with the results, we ended up having dinner and I never found out who won. By the looks on everyone's faces however, there was a knowing that everything we could have done we did do. If that did not get us the win, then I guess we never deserved it.

George Kyte Classic

02nd – Saturday

Race Day

The George Kyte Classic is a race that I find hard to get excited for. It is early on in our season and often we have done minimal work that prepares us for a race. As a team we look at this meet as a rust buster and an opportunity to get used to the whole race day routine again.

This is our only race in Flagstaff for the season. For us, having the opportunity to race in front of our community is a special experience. The support this community offers our team drives us throughout the season. We want to have a good blow out at this race for those who make the trip to come and watch.

I have spent the past week cancelling myself out for this race and blaming the mileage for letting my mind slip in this way. By the end of the warm down today I will be at 102 miles and that has instilled in my head a thought of not being fresh for this. In saying that, yesterday afternoon I have taken a shift in my focus for this meet. I want to give a good crack at the win. As a team we will do what we need to for the win there. No one is really talking about the individual side of things. We do not know where each of us are at fitness wise, so it is hard to make accurate predictions. Even with the tiredness in my legs right now, I think I can still move around this course at a good clip.

My goal for today is to stay as relaxed as possible until the time to pounce comes. Hopefully that first mile is not too crazy, but if it is I will be ready to calm myself back down after it. I need to ensure that I do not drive too hard on the hills as that is the easiest way to get into serious oxygen debt here at 7000ft. I need to push it on those flats, drive out of the corners, and make a move far enough out that a final kick is not on the cards. If it does come down to a kick, then I need to make sure that I am ready for it mentally and physically.

Time for some final preparations before heading to the course at 11:45am. Here we go. The season kicks off today.

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We left the locker room to Bonnie Tyler's *Total Eclipse of the Heart*. This is quite an eerie song when blasted and somehow fitting for the moment.

I have a lot of nerves pulsating through my body right now. The last race I did was in June where I placed 7th in the 10,000m at the NCAA Outdoor Track and Field Championships. During that time, I was at peak fitness and tapering. Now I am in the middle of a 110 mile week and I do not know what kind of racing shape I am in. My emotions are peaking a lot higher than they should and I am struggling to keep my breathing in check.

The start for this race is incredibly packed and there is barely enough room for each school on the start line. Without any defined boxes, we situated ourselves wherever we could find room on the line. I was a couple of spots behind the front line to allow some of our faster starters to get a clear path through.

The gun goes off and my adrenaline surges. I knew things were not going well when my hands were tingling and begin to go numb. The huge build up I had for this race is suddenly pouring adrenaline through my body in this moment.

There are bodies everywhere. I am pushing and shoving my way through as the same is being done to me. This is a very physical start because of how quickly the course begins to narrow. I worked hard at jumping for gaps in the crowd and cutting around the pack where I could. After 800m I had got myself in the third line to the front. I sat

comfortably in place as my team mates lead the pack through 3 miles at a controlled effort.

Today's plan is to have our team control this first section of the race before we all get after it over the last mile. My body is handling the starting effort well, but I am worried that the approaching gear change will not benefit me. When the change happens, I stayed still. I watched as my team mates begin to put a gap me. I am now facing a different challenge.

The front pack has cemented itself as it gets further and further away from my sights. I see Ryan come up on my shoulder as well as someone from UCLA. As we approached the final hill on the course I was passed by this UCLA athlete as he attempted to make a break. I was not going to let this happen. Conscious of the solid work that is being done by our guys at the front, I passed this UCLA athlete and for the final 800m all I did was push. I slowly increased my tempo to ensure I was tiring anyone behind me. It began to sound as though I was doing just that. I gave a final burst in the last 200m to the line, not willing to let myself get passed at this stage. Sixth place finish. Not what I wanted. I am exhausted and cannot think how things went so wrong out there today.

I am tired, but there is no time to stand around as our team got straight into an 8.5 mile warm down to finish off a 16 mile day.

After a race like this there is a lot of reflecting to do. Our team is looking strong which is a huge positive to move forward with this season. My own effort reflects a couple of errors. Firstly, treating this race as more than it was really hurt me from the start. It was always going to be hard, but I got more worked up than I do at the business end of the season. Keeping relaxed and trusting the process

is my learning experience here. Secondly, today I did not have the same fight that I often do in races. This is something that usually comes innate to me, but sometimes I feel for some reason or another that the situation does not call for it. Today, this was my downfall.

Overall, I am not concerned. I had a mediocre race here last year and ended up finishing eleventh at Nationals a couple of months later. Even so, I want to run better than I did last year. As the season progresses I will start to really attack these upcoming races. I feel most comfortable at sea level and on the grass, but that is no excuse to give a poor effort on any other surface. I will be sure to give my all at these important races. I am fighting not just for myself but for this team and I refuse to give up on these men. Our next phase begins now.

Part II Big miles and the first away race

September 4th – 30th

With our first race in the books, this next phase focuses on having a solid training block. We have 28 days till our next race in Louisville which gives us plenty of time to add in some big workouts and continue building strength. With the mileage still high during this phase, there will undoubtedly be some testing moments.

For our first time this season the team is starting to come together in workouts. It seems like George Kyte gave us the confidence that we have another strong team this year. As we hit a couple of tough workouts, there was no shortage of encouragement amongst the team. If we keep boosting the morale like this, I think we will be a force to be reckoned with come November.

There has been some curious interest in where our team will be ranked for the preseason. In the end, we could hardly be surprised with where they put us. On the other hand, I was surprised with where my individual ranking came in at.

As I am now deep into my sugar deprivation things are coming along great. My energy levels are better than they have ever been. I never thought that I could last this long without some of these foods. I just hope there is not a relapse in my near future.

The Greater Louisville Classic was always going to be a test for us. Our coach had prepared us for the fact that it was going to feel fast at the start. If we could hang on after that then our strength might see us have a great day.

An endless summer

4th - Monday

One of the great things about running cross country in college is the hype surrounding it. People are genuinely interested in how our team is doing. This adds excitement to the season and gives us more motivation heading towards Nationals. A potential down side to this interest is the pressure to perform.

National rankings are a fun part of the season. Regardless of their eventual accuracy, it is interesting to see where others think we should place come November. I expect that our team will be ranked number one out of courtesy for our efforts last season and because we bring back six of our top eight guys.

I think my individual ranking will be around 9th to 11th. I was not today at #11 so maybe tomorrow?

5th - Tuesday

Flo Ranking #10 not me.

We had our first workout since George Kyte today. The plan was to hit some short reps around Foxglenn Park. The ground at this park is designed to give us a real cross country feel as it is spongy, has a bit of length to it, and holds water in certain places. The reps are supposed to be at a comfortable effort to get used to being back on the grass. In the distance we can see Mt Elden which will be the spot for Friday's workout.

I was doing leg swings on the grass and felt a stinging sensation in my arm. It was almost like a prickle at first, but it continued to get worse. I sat up to look at my arm and saw the arse of a bee hanging from it. Well... this is a good start.

During this workout we began to really start feeling like a team again. I noted last week that we were not working together like we usually do. This time we were split into three groups and everyone was cheering on everyone. The men on the women and vice versa, one group on another, and especially within each group. We were pumping each other up.

Today was the first time it felt like last cross country season. Not that we need to be the same team as last year, but it is a good indicator that the supportive culture has not changed. This is a group of guys who can play together, but they sure as hell can put in the work together as well.

7th - Thursday

Flo Ranking #8 not me.

20.5 miles across my doubles today and I am feeling it. I followed my second run up with drills, strides, and treadmill hills. I should not be surprised that I am tired because this has been a big day. Thankfully I do not have to run up a mountain tomorrow. Wait...

8th - Friday

Flo Ranking #7 not me. It is starting to feel like I am doing the limbo - how low can I go?

On a playlist of *Ain't no Mountain High Enough* and *The Climb* we left the locker room for our first real test of the season. Today we are

running up Mt Elden. It will be a 12 mile total effort with about 5.5 miles of serious climbing. The group started together and began to slowly scatter as we progressed towards the top. I have run up here before which I think is a big advantage. Just knowing how long it will take to get to the top makes it easier to grind through some of the final discomfort. I find that so long as I remain focused and do not let my mind slip, then I will survive this.

The closer we get to the top signifies the higher we are getting in elevation. I try to rest on the parts where it slightly levels off as they are just long enough to catch my breath. We end up climbing from 7000ft to 9000ft and I begin to get into some serious oxygen debt as we are approaching the top. In the end it is Tyler and myself grinding away through the final section together with the rest of our team close behind. At the top, everyone looks how they should. As if they just ran up a damn mountain!

This hill never gets easier, rather if you are lucky, the pain is endured for a shorter period. Today was the fastest I have ever made it to the top. Running up Elden is a real mental effort. Your brain will give up before your legs do if you let it. On this day, we didn't let it.

After Elden, we headed straight back to the locker room to get ready for our National Championship ring ceremony. The guys were pumped and there was a lot of excitement in the air. As was a tradition last season, the shower curtains got ripped down in a sort of symbol of unity as we were getting ready to leave. Don't ask why, just accept it.

The ring ceremony was an incredible moment. We had the whole 2016 team back together to celebrate what was an incredible

achievement. As we left the ceremony I had a feeling that I was not quite satisfied with just one ring. I really want another.

9th - Saturday

Ranking #6 not me.

Today we followed up the mountain climb with a run at Aspen Corner. This trail begins at 9000ft, drops down, then we flip it to run back up again. It was a tough run on the legs, but the beauty surrounding this trail makes the pain easier to endure.

It is our National Championship banner reveal this afternoon at the SkyDome. I had the privilege of carrying our championship trophy on to the field during half time of the NAU football game. We had most of the 2016 team there to see our NCAA banner unveiled. Being recognised in front of our school and community is a special honour. Hoisting the trophy in front of everybody made this a moment one I will never forget.

On a side note, this student working at the football game managed to get on my nerves. He started out by handing me the Nationals trophy and saying, "don't drop it". Like no shit I am not going to drop it. I should be telling your arse that. He then remarked how nice our rings were which was kind of him. However, he followed that up with saying, "I didn't realise they gave rings for your sport". I was so close to drop kicking that guy the length of this field. Never belittle cross country my friend... never.

10th - Sunday

My sugar cravings are all but gone. I still see certain "bad" foods that I want to eat, but my ability to resist them is much stronger now. My

craving for sugar has been replaced with a craving to win shit!! I think it is about a month today that Emily and myself cut back on sugary foods.

My individual ranking came out this morning. FloTrack put me at number five in the NCAA. It is a nice acknowledgement, but I think I can do a little bit better than that (cocky much?).

12th - Tuesday

This afternoons workout was at Fort Tuthill which is a recreational area laced with trails and a couple of testing hills. The workout consisted of short recoveries with a fast first rep, a few 1 mile efforts, and finishing with a fast last rep.

The first effort was expectedly hard as was the first mile rep. I had a thought run through my mind that I am going to struggle if I feel like this for the rest of the workout. Thankfully I did not. I got into a rhythm and my body cruised through the next mile reps.

The last effort was supposed to be a real push. Even with that being the case, we had five guys battling it out right till the end. Everyone was busting their arse out there and no one wanted to fall off the pack. As we were coming up the final hill to conclude this last rep there was a logging truck coming down it. All I could see was plumes of smoke and a small section for us to get past. Not an ideal way to finish.

At the end of this workout Geordie remarked how he had goose bumps when he looked to his side and saw all of us there. A comment like that just got me even more pumped then I already was. I am looking to hit about 116 miles this week, but my legs still handled the pace. After we finished our last rep I shouted, "that is why we are going to win Nationals!!". We were high fiving, patting each other

on the back; just being good team mates. This was a great day and as a team we need to enjoy them when we have them.

On a side note, I heard a rumour that FloTrack ranked the NAU men's team number one in the preseason. If so, today we really showed why we deserved that ranking. It is a long season from here though and we need to ensure that we are running even better come November. It is all onwards and upwards from here.

13th - Wednesday

I was lifting heavy in the weights room today. All the other guys are worried I am getting too jacked. Now I am starting to think they may be right. This point was almost proven when one of our female sprinters asked if we could work out together because we lift the same weight. I am either doing something right or terribly wrong if this is happening. I guess only time will tell. For now, I am feeling strong and that is all that matters.

14th - Thursday

Today was not a good day. I was feeling tried and my motivation to get out and run was lacking. This is a day when we have a lot of drills and mobility work, so my mind needs to be on the task at hand. I had a momentary lapse of concentration when doing hurdles and smacked my knee on the last one. I had a moment to myself thinking why am I doing this shit? After that, I sucked it up and kept going.

15th - Friday

The workout today is 8 miles sub-T effort at Buffalo Park. And guess what? Our group will be let loose 45 seconds before Tyler who will

try to close us down. Wait. Does this mean I am a goddam rabbit now!?

Heading into this workout I was feeling a bit tired following my nap, so I put back a couple of Run Gum to boost things a bit. This was the best decision I could have made because during this workout I was focused and ready to meet the set challenge. Our pace was 10 seconds slower per mile than the chaser which I was not willing to settle for. If Tyler is going to close me down, then he is going to have to work for it.

I situated myself in the lead from the start and slowly increased the pace each mile. We went through the first 2 miles conservatively before I started to wind things up. There is no way that Tyler is catching us, I thought to myself. We had a group of four that did not falter. We stuck together mile after mile seeing our pace continue to drop. With just less than a mile to go I noticed someone come up on my shoulder. The guy did it. "Good afternoon lads", Tyler remarked while breathing through his nose. I had really tried pushing things, but it was not enough. He smoothly swings around to the front of our pack and started pushing his pace. We cling onto him through this final section and finish within seconds of one another.

I looked at my watch and saw that this was the fastest effort I had ever done at Buffalo Park for this distance. We had a group of guys all rolling in together managing to keep the same pace. This was insane! The team is flying right now. Even so, I still felt conflicted about being chased down like we were. I guess I am just glad that Tyler is on this team and not another one. His fitness is on another level right now and I have a feeling that he is going to do something special this season.

16th - Saturday

Feeling absolutely drained. We did a 20 mile run climbing up to 9700ft and I am glad it is over!

17th - Sunday

Running with some recruits today we saw a tarantula on the trail. This is always an exciting experience. We stopped and watched it slowly scuttle across the track. This is my first sighting for the semester but my fourth since arriving in Flagstaff. It is weird how I absolutely hate spiders but seeing one outside of the home is a lot less unnerving.

19th - Tuesday

While biking to the locker room I knew this was going to be a tough workout today. The wind was blowing like crazy. Does Flag know it isn't spring yet!?

Today we are rocking some short efforts back out at Foxglenn Park. This time we will be going a bit faster for some and a lot of a bit faster for others. You can tell it is a workout day as a lot of the guys are getting mentally prepared on the drive. Some have their headphones in or, like myself, sit in silence looking out the van window. The rest either talk to one another or sing along to the radio. When we arrive at Foxglen it is important that we warm up together. This gets the atmosphere amongst the team ready for the workout.

We were split into groups of those who are fast off the line with big back kicks and those who are slower off the line with legs that barely kick back past their hips. I am in that latter group.

We do a good job of sticking to the pace for the most part. Tyler hit our first fast rep 2 seconds faster, so I had to give him a friendly

reminder. “Damn it man, hit the pace”, I said. Then I took the next fast rep and hit the same pace Tyler did. Shit. We give each other crap for not hitting the pace regardless of whether we will hit it ourselves. It is all in good fun though and just adds to the atmosphere of the workout. There was a lot of encouragement going on today and it seems like we are ahead of schedule.

20th - Wednesday

I was thinking today about how it has been a while since I was hyped up on sugar. One thing I used to really struggle with over the past three years was getting bad headaches. They would come on after every big workout, some long runs, or even seemingly out of the blue. Even when I felt as though I was doing the right things, something was still making them happen.

I remember when a headache struck one evening during my first summer in Flagstaff. I started to feel sick and my head began to hurt so I went into the bathroom. Within 15 minutes I was sitting in the corner of the bathroom, my head in my lap as it thumped away, and my stomach feeling like it wanted to throw up. I was sweating profusely and could barely control my emotions in this moment. I made my way to bed once I could get up and in the morning felt fine again.

Following the first week of cutting lots of sugars out of my diet I have not had a headache since. This could be due to me eating more quality food, probably hydrating even better now, or not having a sugar crash every day. I imagine it is a combination of them all. Either way, no headaches means I am very happy.

21st - Thursday

Thursdays will be the death of me. They are my weekly reminder that I do not have to enjoy running every day. Today I totalled 22 miles across my doubles before finishing off on the track with drills, mobility, hurdles, and treadmill hills. My legs are tired, my body is tired, and my brain is tired. It is easy to forget that running is not the only thing that occurs in my day. Today I had back to back classes running from 9:35am to 12:25pm and every Thursday evening I do some volunteer work. My day is crammed and any free time I have is usually spent doing homework or eating. I love running, but I tolerate Thursdays. So long as Thursdays continue to contribute to my athletic performance, I will continue to endure them.

23rd - Saturday

I am calling it now: we have the strongest 1-5 punch in the country. These guys are relentless!

We rocked up to ‘mail boxes’ just off Lake Mary road for a long run/workout. Just before starting our warm up some guy in a pickup truck pulls up next to us. He had a warning to give our group. “We had an accident out on these roads not long ago... we get a lot of runners coming out here... we do not want to have another accident out here” – if you know what I mean.

Last year I remember really struggling in this workout. Within the first 3 mile pick up I was way off the back by the 2 mile mark and it was struggle street from there on. This time I knew I was not going to let that happen. I was prepared and ready for whatever challenge lay ahead. We started together as a team on every rep. I must say that the first one was a real wakeup call. The wind was blowing a gale and you could see guys completely bent over driving hard just trying to push through it.

The mood was up-beat today and we had a good group round off this first rep. The recovery consisted of encouragement and reassurance. We can do this!

There was very little wind for the second rep as we were going in a different direction. Since the opportunity presented itself, we decided to get the legs moving a bit quicker. Our strong front end managed to hold on for this effort. We used the final recovery to hydrate and settle the body back down. This is the windy direction again, so we need to be ready for that.

Once we hit the wind everyone had their head down and was battling through it together. One after the other we took the lead and then relinquished it, continuing to push and push and push. Finishing on the lower end of a hill, we came in together. Everyone is pumped! We are undoubtedly tired, but excited. I know there is no other college team working like we are right now.

25th - Monday

It is cold as hell today as winter feels like it is approaching. It was -3 degrees Celsius when I started my run at 6:45am and less than 10 minutes in I went past some kid running in shorts and a singlet. I am here with my face half frozen off wearing long tights, a long sleeve top, gloves, and a head band. Shit is dumb.

26th - Tuesday

Race week is finally here. Things are starting to get exciting amongst the team as we learn who will toe the line in uniform come Saturday. A standard traveling squad will consist of an eight man team. One is an alternate, seven will race, and five will score for the team.

The best part about race weeks is that they usually consist of slightly more relaxed workouts and a pulling back of the mileage. I should still hit 100 miles this week but that is better than 116 which is what I have hit the last two weeks.

We had our final workout of the week today. It was a controlled effort and I made sure to not build up too much shit in my legs that might hurt me come Saturday.

The guys are fit and touch wood we continue to keep injuries at bay. Louisville is going to be our first real test and we are unsure exactly how ready we are for it. Our mileage is still high, we have not done much tuning up, and that first mile is going to feel fast. If we make it through that first mile though, we should be okay as our strength will carry us through.

27th - Wednesday

Today was our last lengthy run before heading to Louisville. We have one final weights session in the afternoon today and then the work in Flag will be done before our early departure tomorrow.

Heading into this race we are still ranked number one in the country. Come Saturday morning, I think it will stay that way.

28th - Thursday

4:55am wake up. I got in a 4 mile jog before we departed for Phoenix. We have a long day of travel ahead of us as we won't get to the hotel until 6:45pm. There is a 3hr time difference between Louisville and Flagstaff, so getting to bed early tonight and waking up early tomorrow morning is going to be a vital part of adjusting to Louisville time.

We somehow managed to get 6 miles in once we arrived at our hotel. We were right next to the course, so we did some pre-pre-race laps around it. My first thoughts about the course were that it is nothing like I had expected. There is a bunch of gravel parts and hard dirt areas with no grass. The whole time we were running over it I was wondering how we are expected to run in spikes on it? We will run the whole thing tomorrow, so I will get a better sense of it then.

My legs are a little tired and tight from the travel but that should get shaken out by tomorrow. For now, as the sun sets over Louisville, we headed back to our hotel for some Mexican food.

29th - Friday

Pre-meet day is usually a fun and relaxing experience. We ran the full length of the course and made sure to note the main landmarks that will be important for tomorrow. This included the half way mark, the first mile, and the last km. After doing a bunch of exercises we finished with a few strides from our box. The grass is uneven under foot and no step is the same. I really practised driving through this start section as it will be an important part of tomorrow. There is a 90-degree turn about 800m in and I will need to be in a good position by then.

I had a better impression of the course today after being able to run the whole thing. There are still a couple of sections that will be death to my spikes, but there is less gravel than I originally thought. We have a great vibe amongst the team and it seems like the guys are excited to get after it tomorrow.

I am feeling a mixture of nervousness and excitement for tomorrow morning. It is my first time back on the grass at sea level this season.

I really want to get out hard and have a good race. My plan is to not leave things up till the last 400m. If my body is ready and I can do so, then I will put the pressure on a bit further out.

One more run for the day and then we have a team dinner before bed. I cannot wait to see what happens tomorrow.

Greater Louisville Classic

30th – Saturday

Race Day

All the hard work and dedication up till this point in the season is about to be wasted as my body is trying to piss into the wind!

I got into bed at 9:15pm ready for a good night sleep before getting up at 5am for our shake out. It was 10pm and people were being loud in the hallway, so I was struggling to get off to sleep. 10:45pm rolls around and I decided to listen to some music to calm me down. Finally, 11:15pm shows on the clock and I started to doze a bit. I decided to ditch the headphones and by about 11:30pm I was asleep.

It felt like I blinked, and my alarm was going off. Five and a half hours sleep is not going to be enough, I am thinking to myself. It took some frustration before I realised that I had a quality amount of sleep regardless of the quantity. This shit can happen, and I must deal with it. Things like this can be frustrating but I had to ensure it did not get the better of me.

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We did a 10 minute shake out and then I was back to my hotel room to get ready. Today was a New Zealand themed music mash. I had the hotel room to myself, which is rare, so I decided to enjoy it. I blasted some classic Kiwi hits as I showered and got my things together for the meet. I soon forgot about my rough night and was ready to face the challenge set ahead. 7:15am is here and it is time to head to the course.

We arrived at the course earlier than usual. This gave us time to hang around, share a couple of laughs at a teammate's expense, and relax before anyone else arrived.

75 minutes out from the race and we started to warm up. As a team we got physically and emotionally ready together. The guys were all business right now. We heard that BYU went 1-4 yesterday and SUU beat Oregon. Now people want to know what we are going to do. There was a common consensus that we wanted to show everyone what this team is capable of.

I just came back from trying to pee up against a fence when I heard a roar in the distance. There was a slow succession of clapping and a loud chanting of NAU. I darted towards the men as they were beginning our team chant. "Jacks on me, jacks on three. One, two, three, JACKS!!". Oh, we are ready.

As we retreat to the start line one of our seniors dropped a Mike Tyson quote that got the guys laughing. At the one minute call we organised ourselves in our box. There were four of us on the front line with the rest of our team just behind. We had excitement, encouragement, and confidence radiating from our group.

After we took our marks: the flag was raised; the smoke was visible; the bang was heard.

The first 200-300m was like a stampede. Everyone is sprinting like hell off that start line. There were limbs everywhere and the constant threat of spikes to the shin. Your legs need to be ready to move and move fast. If you are too slow off the line, then you can get lost in the pack and that can be your race decided right there.

I found myself out on the front line quickly as well as four or five of my team mates as we approached the first narrowing section. Out of the first bend Tyler made a surge and put a few strides on the field. No one was going with him, so I decided to. This decision dictated the race. Tyler had the balls to challenge this field and I was not going to let him do it on his own. We were shoulder to shoulder through the first mile splitting 4:33. A coach on the side line remarked to the guys behind us, "don't worry they will come back to you". We didn't.

Mile after mile we grinded it out together. Keeping one another honest and focused. I accidentally elbowed Tyler on one of the hills and we both gave each other a gentle tap on the back as a reminder that things are okay. For the entirety of this race it was as if we were encouraging each other without saying a word. One another's presence was enough. I remember hearing a commentator say over the loud speaker: "NAU has seven in the top ten... they are really showing the world why they are the best in the nation".

We came into the last mile still side by side with the knowledge that some of our team mates were close behind. I saw Tyler look back around one corner just outside of a km to go and his face gave me confidence that we were clear of the field. The cheering between us

and the guys behind got more of a distance to it which reassured us there was a gap.

I had talked to Tyler after one of our 300m workouts that if there is a race where we are side by side at the finish then to not come in holding hands. We need to try and drop one another the best way we can. Come Nationals, every place counts and you need to be ready to beat whoever is beside you.

We came into the home stretch side by side and had to put this plan to the test. Tyler started to stride out and got a couple of steps on me as we came into 150m to go. I dug in deep, pumping my arms and legs trying to respond to this move. After a lot of clawing I managed to get up on his shoulder. I crossed the line only a second ahead in 23:10 (28:50s 10km pace). This course is fast!

I see Andy and Geordie come in soon after and we are all pumped about what just happened. We had a 1-4 punch. I looked over and saw Tyler rolling on the ground because someone told him to keep moving (quirky guy he is). Our team continues to charge through the line. There was a lot of excitement in the air as we just did what we knew we were capable of.

I did a quick interview and then made my way over to our tent. The whole way back there were guys from our team who did not race that were crazy excited. They saw this whole thing unfold and noticed how strong we looked. They knew better than us just how special this was.

We quickly got our trainers on and headed out on a 10 mile cool down to round out 18 miles for the morning. This was harder for some than others. I was riding a lot of adrenaline so for me it flew by. We took

a team photo with our Louisville Slugger bat/trophy and then made our way back to the hotel.

This was a very successful trip across the board. We had guys running times they have never run before, myself included. Our top four were strong but we also had depth stretching out to eight or nine guys. This was a great start to our season on the road.

We were getting back to Flag at just past 12am so there was still a long day ahead. The guys were tired but held their heads high the whole way home as we had done what we needed to do. We executed.

Part III Build up ends and the first big race begins

October 2nd – 13th

As Coach told us at the beginning of the season, “summer ends at Wisconsin”. This is our final mileage phase and the conclusion of Wisconsin will represent a shift in our training. Our season is coming up to its half way point and the nerves amongst the team are now beginning to show.

We introduced some faster work during this phase as we are approaching the business end of the season. It is important that we do not leave getting the legs moving quicker until too late. Considering how high our mileage still is, I was interested to see just how well our bodies will handle the faster paces.

I had some very unproud moments during these two weeks. I began the week with feeling I was coming down with something and this morphed into some stomach issues. It seemed like nothing was going right and no matter what I did things were not getting better. There was a lot of frustration as this began to really inhibit some of my workouts.

Wisconsin is an important race on our calendar. It is our first real indicator of where we could rank nationally. There are some of the best teams and individuals in the country that line up at this meet. We had a dominant showing here last year and we wanted to at least have a similar result this time around.

An endless summer comes to an end

October:

2nd - Monday

It is a weird feeling getting back into classes after a weekend like the one we just had. I usually feel tired as I adjust to the feeling of being more relaxed and not having my emotions peaking for such a long period of time. I am basically coming off a huge adrenaline rush, so life can seem dull after that. As I settle back into normality I know in the back of my mind that in two weeks I will be back out doing the same thing again.

My throat is starting to feel a little scratchy. There are a couple of guys with differing versions of sicknesses on the team, so I would not be surprised if I picked up something. In saying that, on Saturday I was up at 5am Kentucky time and did not go to bed until 4am Kentucky time when we arrived back in Flag the following morning. I guess my body is going to inevitably be run down. I have no time for sickness though. I will see our trainer tomorrow for some cold and flu medicine and start pumping vitamin C into me.

3rd - Tuesday

It seems like such a quick turnaround from being in Louisville to being back in Flag and working out with the team again.

Today the plan is a 10 mile sub-T out at Buffalo Park. I have never done 10 miles out there before. Considering how I have been feeling in other tempos this season, I am confident that my body can handle

it. My only hope is that I don't have too much shit in my legs from the weekend's race and travel.

Buffalo Park is a wide-open space where, if it is ever windy, you just get hammered on certain parts of the course. It is looking like today will be one of those days. Our coach is prepared for that and tells us to stay on the slower end of our pace range.

The goal of this workout is to keep the guys together for as long as possible. When we were approaching the 800m mark my stomach began to feel a little off. I was very eager to go toilet before the workout. This is somewhat uncommon as it can be a bit like pulling teeth trying to go on some of these days. That was my first indicator that something was slightly off with my stomach. I ensured to stay at the back of the pack as I basically dropped my guts for 6 miles. Regardless of these issues, I was still comfortably sitting on the pace and trying to encourage some of the guys who were feeling it a bit today.

Then disaster struck. Just over 6 miles in the gas stopped and the feeling switched to needing to use the toilet. I knew it was going to be a long few miles from this point. Every step of a downhill was agony to my stomach. All I could think about was getting through this workout and running straight to the toilet.

We dropped most of the guys off at 8 miles while three of us kept going. My stomach was getting worse and worse, but I kept my head down and stuck with it. I was maybe a foot over the line when we finished before I did a 180 and headed straight for the toilet. The relief.

Besides the stomach issues this was a positive workout for me. I felt comfortable sitting in on the pace and my legs were not as tired as I thought they would be. I have never been this fit before.

I remember doing a 9 mile tempo over this same course last cross country season and we hit around 3 seconds faster per mile. By mile 8 I was really struggling and after mile 9 I was exhausted. Now I am running only slightly slower, for longer, and breathing through my nose. On top of that we have a group of guys doing the same thing.

4th - Wednesday

As a broken record would tell you, I am tired again. The 14 mile run this morning seemed to just drag on and my body is not feeling up for much at the moment. On top of that, my throat is still scratching so I hope that isn't going to turn into something more. All I can do is rest, hydrate, and keep stress to a minimum because the one thing I will not change is busting my arse in training. Consistency there, where possible, is key.

5th - Thursday

This morning's run was rough. My stomach was bad for a couple of miles before I managed to get to a toilet. It has been like this for the past few days and the only thing I have done different is take vitamin C sachets. I might cut these out for now and see if that helps.

Where possible, on Monday and Thursday I do my morning runs a little faster than other days. This is because it is about 30 hours before each workout and over 48 hours after any workout. Training at altitude means I need to be sensible with what runs I push and which ones I relax on to recover. My Monday and Thursday rule seems to be a good compromise. I typically run easy outside of that.

This afternoon's run was a bit of an outlier to my previously mentioned rule. My legs just wanted to go faster but and I really had to try and hold myself back. After all the drills and mobility work I jumped on the treadmill for some hill repeats. These have been tough as of lately but today was different. After my fourth rep I was hardly breathing, and my legs were not getting tired. I bumped the treadmill up as fast as it could go just to get a bit of an effort out of it. After the next four reps my heart rate was up but nothing like it had been in previous weeks. My body is recovering great.

6th - Friday

I always find it funny when we leave our house for a workout and our college neighbours are playing beer pong at two in the afternoon. It is a bit of a contrast.

The workout today had a skull emoji next to it, so we knew it was going to be tough. The plan was to head down to Sedona and do a few sets of kms and 400s. I had been looking forward to this workout because I knew it was an important one for this season.

The trip to Sedona took about an hour due to road works. When we got to the track we quickly got into our warm ups and started getting ready for this thing. I was feeling good about this workout as my training had been going well up to this point. I knew something a little faster wasn't going to put me into a hole like it did last year when we came here.

The first rep of this workout felt comfortable as our pacer found a good rhythm. I opted to take the next one where, after a bit of an eager start, I found the pace and finished on time. The first 400m rep was where things began to go south. I got through it okay but just

below my chest was feeling a bit off. I thought it might have been some tightness from the travel, so I proceeded to try stretch it out a bit.

When we started the next set, I knew something was wrong. It felt as though someone was firmly pushing in just below the centre of my ribs. This was a shock to the system and my heart rate spiked as I was trying to adjust to this discomfort. It got progressively worse and by the end of that first rep I was contemplating calling it quits. I was desperately trying to stretch things out hoping that would help. I even had our trainer do a little bit of work on it in the small time we had before getting back on the line.

I headed into the second km of the set and it was pure agony. I was just hanging onto the back of the guys and really struggling to settle myself down. I battled through that next 400m and then had a decision to make. I can continue pushing through this discomfort, knowing it will likely not do any physical damage, or I can pull the pin. I reluctantly went for the former option and decided to take each rep at a time. From here I just sat on the back of the pack, put my head down, and grinded. Each time when we finished I went off by myself, closed my eyes, tried to relax my breathing, and thought about just getting through the next rep.

The most frustrating part was that my legs were not suffering. I was still able to hold onto the pace, yet my form and composure went out the window. It was just a matter of survival. I finished the final 400m not sure if there were still more reps to go. By that point I was way out of touch with reality. I had been so focused on just putting one foot in front of the other that when I was done I didn't know what to do. I went over to my bag and started to take off my spikes. As I

knelt there, I had this overwhelming feeling that I just wanted to burst into tears. I wasn't hurting any more but that long drawn out frustration and helplessness had finally come to an end. My body just wanted to cry.

It took till the end of the warm down for things to begin settling down again. I have been having issues with my stomach since that 10 mile workout a few days ago, but today was the worst this has been.

The hardest thing about struggling like that in a workout is feeling like I am letting the team down. Today I could only help pace one rep and then I sat on the back of the pack for the rest. That is a selfish place to be. Thankfully these guys are really understanding when it comes to situations like these, as we all have our rough days. If one of these guys were struggling I would take every rep for them and today they did exactly that for me.

Something that really got me today was how supportive these guys were when I was struggling. I had a lot of them come up to me, not necessarily to ask what was up, but just to encourage me to keep going. Afterwards I had numerous guys checking how I was feeling and I even got a message that night from Geordie asking if I was okay. That is something I will forever cherish about this team. We always have each other's back.

Overall, it was a strong workout for the team and things are looking positive as we progress towards Wisconsin a week from today.

7th - Saturday

This was my last 20 mile run for the season and it was a grind due to the quick turnaround from yesterdays workout to this morning's long run. Most of the guys seemed exhausted. Soon the mileage will start

cutting back and the energy levels amongst the team will begin to resemble those of a normal person.

8th - Sunday

Today is the peak of my stomach issues. I have been having problems since Tuesday but now the constipation has really set in. I went to the supermarket and started smashing back prunes and dried apricots. This might make my run interesting, but I really need to reset something here. Hopefully it is a simple fix that I can get rid of in the next day or two. For the mean time I must deal with the discomfort.

I had a heart-breaking moment on my run today. I planned to run to Cardinal Field and do my mileage around there because it has a porta loo. It is only .6 of a mile from my house, so a very makeable distance if my stomach plays up. I got half way there and was busting to go. I soldiered on and got into the porta loo to find that there was no toilet paper. I almost had a mini breakdown. It took a lot of deep breaths to leave and run straight back home. Safe to say I made it, clenching and all, but only just.

10th - Tuesday

Heading into day three of some 'real' stomach problems. I still don't know exactly what has caused this, but it is a pain in my arse – literally. Yesterday I went to our student academic department to talk to one of our advisors there and he asked me, "how is your stomach doing?". How the hell does this dude know? Word travels fast around here when you have any medical issues (or funny ones at least).

I was talking with my coach yesterday morning about some remedies for this. Pounding back prunes and apricots are not doing the trick. The plan is to try laxatives. Like some legit – make you shit –

laxatives. I popped two after class today. It says they could take 6-12 hours to kick in, so I am just waiting. Anxiously.

We leave for Wisconsin at 6:30am tomorrow morning. This is a big race for us. Last year it was a great indication of where our season was heading. We need to have a dominant showing there. Hopefully I can kick these stomach issues before tomorrow and I will be flying come Friday.

11th - Wednesday

It has been a long day of travel today. We stopped off at a park on our way to the hotel for a mid-length jog where my legs were feeling stiff from the travel. As nice as the trail was to run on it started to get dark, so we cut the run back to ensure no one would roll an ankle out there. Spirits are high amongst the team and there is a lot of joking around.

12th - Thursday

One of the best parts of being on these trips is hanging out at breakfast. I got my run out of the way early, so I could sit with the guys and chat while eating. Sometimes the food can be hit and miss but thankfully at this place it wasn't too bad. We sat around laughing and joking back and forth. The mood is light within the team right now.

I had my first pre-race media conference today. Coach and myself headed to the course for a couple of basic questions. For us athletes they did not want to ask about the race, for some reason, and we just talked briefly about preparation and meals.

When we arrived for our pre-meet it was slightly drizzling. I was excited about this because the softer the ground can be, the better

come race time tomorrow. We began our usual ridiculously slow pace over the course with the first mile being 10 minutes and we didn't pick it up much from there. This has become a bit of a tradition now. We get rolled up by team after team as we slog around the course.

We finished this walk up with a few drills and strides from our box. Finding our box is important to get a good idea on what it is going to look like on the line tomorrow. Most of our strides are done individually but we try get at least one in as a team. This sometimes turns into a bit of a joke race.

When we are done I take some time to stand in our box and look up the starting area. It is a wide stretch of mowed grass leading over a hill into the unknown. I look to my left from box 35 and imagine how full it is going to be tomorrow. There will be bodies squeezed into every gap. I take my time enjoying this moment and then prepare to move out.

The blessing and the curse that is laser tag just so happened to be right next to our hotel. The allure of this place was too much for our Coach and right after dinner we headed there for a couple of games. Being at this place felt like drinking under age. You know you should not be doing it and there is a sense that someone will tell you off, but the fun takes over (or so I have heard).

I was on the pink team versing the baby blue team. Although I was the worst scorer on my team, we won both rounds. I am not saying it was because I had 110% accuracy on one of my games, but that may have played a role in our victories. It was also obvious that this was not a typo.

The games were crazy intense. Our nerves about the race got lost in this place. Guys came out dripping in sweat but looking happier than ever. I really hope we race well tomorrow or this could be an embarrassing story to tell.

Nuttycombe Wisconsin Invitational

13th – Friday

Race Day

Waking up on race day feels like I am about to go into battle. My stomach knots and my palms sweat as I think about what is to come.

There is an eerie atmosphere in our van as we to head to the course. Most of us put headphones in and zone out into our own worlds on this drive. When we arrive at the course it is all business. We have worked incredibly hard up to this point in the season. Now it is our time to show everyone how much of a dominating force we can be. The van ride is the last sense of calm we have before arriving at the course. Once we get there, things are suddenly real.

I have managed to get a lot better at controlling my emotions going into races like this. I know for the most part how this will play out and I am prepared for whatever scenario eventuates. Preparedness really helps level the emotions.

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As we take our marks on the line I keep an eye on the starter. He is standing in the worst possible place – right in the middle of where the stampede is about to approach. I wait intently to see a puff of smoke

or hear a bang. Knowing both are soon to approach I readjust my gaze to straight ahead. Then we are off.

I am sprinting like hell to get up the front and I feel like my legs are moving as fast as they can go. Soon I am level with all those who are dominating the front line. As we make our way over the brow of the hill I start to ease into the pace. I am still moving just as fast, but I stop grinding and let my legs accept the rhythm. I hit that first bend just off the front but make my way up there by the km mark. I knew at this moment that it was going to be a tough one out there today. My legs were feeling a little heavier than usual and that sprint took something out of me. Regardless, I must focus on relaxing and holding my position.

I see my team mates left and right. Tyler put his hand on my back to make me aware that he was close by. One of the greatest feelings in a race is knowing that you are not in it alone. This must be what it feels like for someone racing with God on their side. I have my mates by my side and we are ready to battle. Km after km goes by and I hold my position in the front two lines. It was not until about 3 km out that a move got made. One guy pushed it up the last hill and opened a gap on the then chase pack. We decided to let him go with the thought that we would catch him when the time was right.

Tyler took the pace 2 km out and started to apply the pressure on the field. This was great because it helped form a final pack that would stay together to the end. The most exciting part about this was that our pack consisted of three NAU guys as well as the top two ranked guys in the NCAA.

We caught the rabbit as we approached the km to go mark. Things are feeling very antsy in the pack and I know someone wants to make

a move. Considering how I was feeling at this point, I knew it was not going to be me.

Andy breaks the pack. He surges to the lead and gets the pace moving even quicker. We are coming into the last bend before hitting the long uphill home straight. As we approached this corner I swung wide and got on the shoulder of my two team mates. We come around the corner, three wide, ready to attack. Unfortunately, so are the other two. We all kick hard towards the line but none of us can match the pace of these two as they cruise through for first and second. I am redlining as I cross in fifth place just behind Andy and Tyler.

The battle is over, but the war was won. One after the other our team mates come across the line and without official results we knew we had won. It is an unbelievable feeling to share that moment with a group of guys I have been through so much with. We are high fiving, hugging, and patting backs. Tyler even slaps Geordie in the stomach almost motivating a gag reflex. After a couple of photos, we make our way to our tent for a debrief before warming down.

We ended up scoring just 50 points which was 28 better than last year when we went on to win Nationals. This was an incredible showing from these guys. It was a statement alright.

Part IV The strategic part of the season starts and Conference Championships

September 14th – 28th

This is the beginning of our strategic part of the season. During this phase we were preparing for our Conference meet which will ideally be our last ‘hit out’ race before Nationals. There needed to be a big emphasis over these two weeks on recovery as we will now be racing at least every other weekend.

I spent a good portion of my time during this phase recovering from Wisconsin. I was carrying a lot of soreness in my legs that took a while to shake out. Since we are racing a lot more often now I will need to monitor my recovery a lot more closely.

We had a couple of solid workouts during this phase. The fitness levels of these guys are at a place I have never seen before. We are hitting times in workouts that we could not even get close to last season.

There were a couple of moments where I really struggled mentally over these two weeks. Running became a bit of a chore and I did not know how long this dull patch would last.

The goal of Conference was to put some people in the ground and get a solid effort in while doing it. This was a great time to practise tactics and have a little bit of fun with racing. After this race I think we knew exactly how we should approach Nationals and where we should position ourselves in that race.

Time to drop the miles

14th - Saturday

We left the hotel at 6:45am for a long run. I battled through this with a lot of tenderness in my quads. The down hills were really beating me up, so I cut my run back slightly to 16 miles. We got back to the van to watch our women's team race at Pre-Nats before heading to the hotel for breakfast.

We were informed of BYU's efforts at Pre-Nats and how they scored 41 points in a dominant victory. Our team acknowledged this solid performance, but our own excitement did not diminish. The fact we have another team that we will be strong rivals with this season is perfect. We are ready for a showdown at Nationals and we know they will be too. A National team title should never be won easily, and both of our teams will ensure that will be the case this year. BYUs performance was motivating. Regardless of whose effort this weekend was more impressive, as that would be up to debate, we are ready to meet their challenge with force.

Following some water basketball at the hotel we made our way to the airport to head back to Flag.

16th - Monday

After the weekend's results our team stayed at #1 in the FloTrack rankings. Unfortunately, I dropped back to #9 as an individual but two of my team mates jumped up to #8 and #5. Having three of our guys ranked in the top ten is a pretty exciting prospect.

17th - Tuesday

For some reason things felt a little colder than usual on my run this morning. It was about 7 degrees Celsius and the thin gloves I had on were not doing their usual job. After some pain as my hands continued to freeze, the sun finally helped inject some warmth back into them

My fingers have been sensitive and stiff since this morning's run. It is almost as if I got frost bite on those bad boys.

This afternoon we had an easy run followed by some short efforts on Cardinal Field. This was never supposed to be anything special, rather just an opportunity to get the legs moving a bit after Friday's race. It was a pretty low-key atmosphere today and we naturally merged into separate groups. My legs were feeling a little heavy on a couple of the reps and my breathing was far from being relaxed. It feels like I am back at altitude, basically.

This Friday we are back to business as we will hit another hard workout in preparation for the Big Sky Conference coming up in two weekends time. These next two races are just about getting some tactical experience in as we build towards Nationals. Wisconsin was the big one. Now we need to stay healthy and keep the momentum going for the next five weeks.

18th - Wednesday

It takes a few days after getting back from a race to readjust to things. We usually arrive back in Flag late after a day worth of travel and suddenly we need to try get back into a routine again. This starts with catching up on missed sleep on that first night. Finding a routine here can be hard for the first couple of days but it is important to try get back into a rhythm.

Another key part of readjusting is getting back to eating normally. I try to eat similar foods each week, including on trips when possible. This can be hardest to do on travel days. The first morning I am back I get right into having a regular breakfast and the routine here starts again.

Coming back up to altitude, I often find that it takes about three days to readjust to training up here. My runs are usually a little off during this few day window. For example, it took until this morning's run before I started to feel normal running at altitude again. By 'normal' I mean my breathing being relaxed and being able to get into a solid rhythm on runs without struggling. This is an unfortunate but important phase of this process.

Arriving back from trips and getting back into normality is vital. I am back at class, meeting up for workouts, runs, and weights. If I am not careful during this window I risk not recovering properly, injuries, and sickness. All things that can be devastating to this process. Sensibility here is imperative to success.

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This afternoon I learnt the implications of saying things that draw upon the credibility of this process. My confusion around changes to our training led me down an unredeemable path. One of the great things about Coach Smith is that he often seeks and equally appreciates our input into the training he prescribes. He has a plan, but is interested to know our thoughts about it. Today I wrongfully critiqued the prescribed plan and my out of line remarks had real world implications. I not only questioned the plan, but I also drew in the credibility of this process. That is something I cannot take back.

Trust is only ever earned through actions; words do little to bring about trust. I can only rationalize and retract my words and their intentions so much. My actions from here need to reflect a true belief in this process and the goals of this team. Although I am confident this situation was not reflective of my deep-down beliefs, the fact I opened my mouth and uncertainty followed is an issue that I need to address. I have always been 100% invested in this team and now I need to ensure my words reflect that.

19th – Thursday

Sometimes the best run is a barefoot one. I had 6 miles easy this afternoon, so I ran to Cardinal Field, kicked off my shoes, and plodded around. It is a nice feeling running without shoes sometimes. The grass was wet and quite cold in the shade, but also warm and dry in the sun. The contrast on my feet feels amazing. When I am not in shoes I suddenly feel like I am running a lot more on the front of my foot and my posture improves. I can feel my toes gripping the ground with each step. The worst part is putting my shoes back on and feeling like I am carrying two blocks on my feet for the rest of the way home.

20th – Friday

This morning's 10 mile run was slightly concerning as both my hamstrings and quads are feeling wrecked. They are feeling better than they did earlier in the week, but far from being properly recovered. We have a big workout tomorrow morning, so I need to try loosening off this tension before then. I brought some ice from the O'Leary St Market and threw it in the bath at home. 15 minutes of YouTube videos later and I am good to go. Hopefully this aids the process, but I will have to also do some manual work later.

I am sure that every athlete knows this feeling to some degree. Today running was not fun. With this week rounding off a lot of catch up readings and a couple of midterm assignments, I have had a lot on my mind. I delayed my run for as long as I could before I had to be at the track for drills and treadmill hills. When I finally got to the track to start my run, I was not in a good headspace. I did not want to be there.

My run consisted of me frustrating myself over 4 miles, contemplating different things that were bothering me. At practise I tried to isolate myself as much as possible but when there are coaches and other team mates around this is hard to do. I kept interactions brief as I was not up to talking much. I did everything on my own including the treadmill hills. The reps were a short distraction from my average day. I had to concentrate on every rep and during the rests I could barely catch my breath let alone beat myself up.

After the hills I walked out of the gym to an empty track. I had tried to isolate myself up to this point, but that moment was the first time I truly felt alone. Just having people around saying 'hi' and keeping me engaged was enough to not feel lonely. I know moments like this pass and they are often a reflection of more than running, but that does not make them any easier to endure. The running can be going as good as it gets but if other things in life are out of balance then it can feel like nothing, including running, is going well.

Thankfully there is a tomorrow - but if it were not for tomorrow I might be forced to smile today - that is tomorrow's only downfall.

21st – Saturday

Today is a new day. The plan for this morning's workout is to hit 10 miles at sub-T pace and for the latter 8 miles to have two surges in

pace per loop. We are back out at Buffalo Park with little wind (like seriously) and it is a crisp morning. Something in the air says we are ready to roll.

Tyler, Andy, and myself set out to get 2 miles in before the group hooks on for the real part of the workout. The first 2 miles was at a comfortable pace, but it was feeling a little more taxing than I would have liked it to. We came through the first lap off pace and suddenly I felt our group of three force a surge to catch the rest of the guys who had just been let go.

The first shifts in pace felt comfortable. I managed to settle back into a rhythm after them and relax my body as well as my breathing. Two laps down and I was feeling under control. I heard that we hit our previous lap quite fast. Even so, the pace kept rolling. I situated myself at the front of our pack and kept the pressure applied.

By the final lap we had been out here for a while. My legs were starting to feel a little tired, but my mind was engaged. I knew all I needed to do was hang on through this next mile and then I am in the final stage. By a mile to go it had come down to Tyler and myself. We had been running side my side in races all season and it felt natural having him right there. We kept the pace going and hit our last increased effort. I was really having to dig in deep here to make it through this one as my legs were starting to fade on me. I know that when we finish this effort there is only 800m more running to do and then the workout is done. I grinded through this section and then coasted it home.

When we crossed the line, I turned around to see man after man come rolling in. There were hurt faces and a lot of pushing going on, but these guys were not giving up. Nobody was packed together, instead

they were all giving their own honest effort. It was a great sight to see.

My average pace for the 10 miles was 5:14. If I took out the slow 2 miles at the start, my latter 8 miles was a 5:09 average. This is faster than I have ever run out at Buffalo Park before and is up there with one of my best workouts in Flagstaff. Seeing how strong and deep our team is right now, we should have a lot of confidence heading into the Championship end of our season.

22nd – Sunday

One of the great things about living with two guys on the team is that we have a lot of discussions about how the team is looking. We hypothesize different scenarios and where guys could place throughout the season. It keeps the excitement levels going even when we are not at practise.

23rd – Monday

The cross country season is short but at the same time it feels long. As much as I want the season to continue, the intensity of it sees me looking forward to its conclusion. I almost wish Nationals was next week, so we would find out who wins sooner. The excitement about the thought of winning mixed with nerves about other possible scenarios makes this a draining experience. After Conference this weekend, there will only be 3 weeks of the season to go. Things are starting to get real.

24th – Tuesday

Today was a relaxed effort workout as we prepare for our Conference Championships. We were back out at Foxglenn Park for some short

efforts at a comfortable pace. This workout was not designed to be hard, rather the ideal was to run as relaxed as possible.

This was probably one of the most enjoyable workouts we have done this season. I say that because the atmosphere was so relaxed, and the guys seemed to be really enjoying themselves out there. In between reps and sets we were joking to each other, laughing, and giving each other shit. While at the same time we were encouraging each other to get through each rep.

The field today was covered in sheep shit and had a big hole by the start, so nothing too glorious for us. The recycled joke about “watch out for the hole” never got old for the entirety of this workout. It was a great effort all round and I think the guys are ready to head into Conference with a bit of a chip on their shoulder. We will not be going to Utah to take things easy or give any other team a chance to get one up on us. We are going there to fight and fight we will do.

25th – Wednesday

I went way too low with the bar today at weights. Now my lower back is feeling like it is on the verge of pulling something. I went to our trainer to get some ice for it, but I will have to be mindful of this occurring over the next couple of weeks. If I need to make an adjustment to prevent something like this happening again then I will. This is the time when I need to be most cautious with what I do.

We leave for Utah tomorrow at midday. That is enough time for me to get in a 10 mile run, take an exam, and then head to another class just before we leave.

26th – Thursday

This morning I got in my 10 mile run, did my exam, and got to the SkyDome by 12:30pm ready to leave for Phoenix. It feels like it has been a chaotic morning, but now all I need to do is sit back and relax for the next couple of hours.

27th – Friday

Cory and myself headed out for a 6 mile jog this morning from the hotel on 100% pavement. We decided to head straight towards some hills in the distance. This was a bad move because the streets began to really start climbing. Once we got to the base of the hills we turned around, ran back down the hill, and finished off our mileage on the flat streets. As we were running by the Budget Inn Cory started trashing on it. This place basically looks how it sounds. Before Cory could finish his sentence, he caught a curb outside this motel and went sprawl eagled onto the grass. It was quite impressive how well he managed to not catch himself at all. I guess that is what you get for dissing the Budget Inn.

The place for tomorrow's race is on a golf course. Why any golf course lets us run on them is beyond me. We can tear this stuff up which must be an expensive and lengthy repair on some occasions. In saying that, they can be nice to run on. Often flat and fast, I have come to appreciate them more since being in the U.S.. I used to think that the only real cross country course was over farm land with mud, hills, and hurdles. You know what, I still think that is the case.

BYU went 1-5 to sweep their Conference today. These guys mean business. Let's see what we can do tomorrow.

A couple of team mates and myself got into an elevator at our hotel to go up to our fourth-floor room. I walked a few guys from SUU.

We exchanged brief greetings, but it was an intense ride up. We are pushed up against one wall and they are pushed up against the other. We both want to beat each other so bad tomorrow. Everyone is out for blood. This elevator cannot handle that kind of tenseness. Come tomorrow, I imagine that tension will be just as present.

Big Sky Conference

28th – Saturday

Race Day

The sun had not yet come up when we began our shake out. I am dressed in tights, sweat pants, a long sleeve top, hoodie, and gloves. It is cold outside, and I know we are not running for long enough to really warm up to things.

When we got back to the hotel we all sat down for breakfast and shared a couple of jokes amongst one another. There is a lot of talk about our plan for the race today. We are going to have one of our guys take things out hard over the first 2 miles to separate the field. When he drops back, a couple of us will keep applying the pressure. College races can have sneaky tactics like this in them. If you ever see a guy take out a race hard from a team that has the capability of holding on, be very skeptical. This is our plan and although there may be a couple of guys who can hang with us, I think we will do some real damage early on.

After putting back my breakfast I made my way up to my room to get ready. I turned on the TV and Good Will Hunting was on. This is my favourite movie, so I got absorbed into it as I was getting my

things together. We missed a couple of the heavier scenes before heading out the door and making our way to the course.

It is slightly warmer than I had expected. We hung around on our tarp for half an hour or so before beginning our warm up. Our Coach had really hammered the idea into us that no matter where you are racing in the country or the world, as soon as you start doing these warm ups you get a sense of familiarity. No matter where you are, the routine is the same and that can be a very calming feeling.

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After doing our pre-race chant we made our way to the start line. It is always weird standing on the line and knowing at the back of your mind that in about 20 minutes you are potentially going to be in a world of hurt. If you have done things right, this discomfort can be controlled. The starter tells us to take six feet back from the line. I do not know if he understood how far that is, but everyone takes maybe two feet back from the line ready for the whistle. The whistle blows. We jogged up to the line. I kept my eye on the starter gun. There is the smoke. We are off.

The start is all go for about 200m and then things began to settle a bit. I saw the guys from SUU begin to pull back waiting in anticipation for someone to take charge. Luckily, we were onto that. Cade (pacer) took the lead and drove the field through the first mile in 4:33. By the 2 km mark our man had done his job so Andy, Tyler, and myself took over. We were being told by our coaches to keep applying the pressure. We made it through the first lap, just shy of 2 miles, and I noticed that people had begun to break. By the 3 mile mark it was just Andy, Tyler, and myself left. We ruined those other guys. The

rest of our team knew the plan, so they kept conservative through that carnage.

We hit 5 km in at 14:35 and now I was starting to feel it a bit. I knew we had dropped the field, but we continued to apply the pressure to do as much damage as possible. Coming into the final lap and it was just Tyler and myself left. We were running side by side just like we do in workouts. It almost felt like we were doing a tempo at Buffalo Park for a second. There were a couple of times when I accidentally elbowed him when I got too close (I am getting into a bad habit of doing that). I was sure to tap him on the back as an apology after this. We cruised through this course together knowing we have done what we needed to do. The only thing left is to find out who is going to win.

It is hard when it comes down to you and your team mate at the end, but just like Louisville Tyler and myself will take no prisoners. We approached the final turn and Tyler was in the lead. As we came into the home straight I began to kick, as did he. I was sitting just behind him, my legs working but not making any ground. He took the win and I come in about a second behind. He really deserved that one.

We saw our team mates come flowing in and it is obvious that the team title was ours. The celebrations were short and sweet as we headed back to our team camp and got ready for a longer cool down. This was a strong showing from our guys today. We sat out two of our top seven to rest them for our upcoming races. Those who took their place really earned it. We may not have seemed as dominating today as BYU did yesterday, but I am confident that our team is exactly where it needs to be.

Part V Last opportunity for big workouts and Regionals

September 29th – November 10th

This is the final work phase. It is our final opportunity to hit any last minute big workouts. After the Regionals race there is only eight days until Nationals. If we want to get some work in, then now is the time. By the end of these two weeks, if the guys are not looking like a National title contending team, then we never will.

BYUs strong showing at their Conference meet bumped us back in the Regional rankings. Since we are no longer seen as the favourites going into this meet I think some of the pressure has come off. Now we have nothing to lose.

We headed back down to Sedona for our last big workout of the season. Although I was apprehensive about being back there because of what happened last time, this was not going to hold me back. With the rest of the team ready to roll I was not willing to be the only one not contributing today.

Flagstaff is starting to chill off a bit now, so the threat of sickness is now stronger than ever. As a team we all need to be mindful of this.

The Regionals race is more of a formality in our season than anything else. This can result in teams letting their guard down going into it. We had a less than dominant performance here last year and we did not want that to happen again. On top of that, this was going to be our first time racing BYU all season. There has been a lot of hype surrounding our first interaction, so we want to attack this race as we would any other.

Applying the final touches

29th – Sunday

Easy 10 miles this evening. I had a bunch of school work to get done during the day, so I left this run a little late. By 3 miles in the sun began to set and by my turn around point visibility was low. I had run a trail out, so I had to be careful with my footing on the way back. With my iPod on shuffle and the coolness of the night setting in, I got into a great headspace. I was mouthing along to the words of the songs as I was running at my own comfortable pace feeling like I was the only person in the world. It was a nice debrief after the weekends race. There were no crowds, no pressure, and no expectations. In that moment there was just me and this trail.

30th – Monday

Today our team dropped back to #2 in the Regional polls behind BYU. This was fairly expected as perfect scoring your Conference should earn you a #1 spot. It does provide us with some motivation going forward that BYU will be the likely favourites heading into Nationals. We bore that label last year and it is time for someone else to have it.

This does not mean our team has deteriorated, instead our tactics scatter our team in races whereas BYU usually stick together as a pack which makes them look stronger. Come Nationals, I guarantee that if BYU sticks together as they have done this whole season, we will put several guys ahead of them. The strength of our team runs deep, and I know we will be ready to fight come Nationals.

31st – Tuesday

When we were being told by Coach what the workout would look like I started getting a headache and feeling like I was heating up. I don't know if I ate something weird, but my body is feeling a little off. I was in a bad place when we got out to the trail to start our run/workout. It took a good 6 miles before I started to feel a little better. At this point I was struggling mentally more than anything. It was another one of those days where I just did not want to be training.

There was an absence of conversation amongst our group today. It appears the travel is just starting to hit these guys as everyone seems flat. When we flipped the run and began the shifts in pace, everyone seemed to perk up. I think the adrenaline had started to kick in.

We finished this workout as a strong pack. I looked around and saw the six other guys that I would toe the line with at Nationals. They all looked ready.

Now we have a couple of days before our last real workout of the season. We will be back down in Sedona for that one and I am nervous but excited for it.

November
3rd – Friday

Today would be our last big workout of the season. This is quite an exciting moment because it is an indicator of both the season coming to an end, as well as a time to show where our fitness is at.

The plan is a Vo2 workout down in Sedona. The idea with going to Sedona is to get some slightly warmer weather and lower elevation so we can get our legs rolling a little quicker. Last time we headed to

Sedona I had a rough time. My stomach was playing up and the whole workout turned into a grind. I was a little apprehensive with heading back there because of this.

I decided to try keep as relaxed as possible and not work myself up too much for this workout. Sometimes I am better at controlling my nerves for races than I am for workouts. Today I wanted to get that relaxed race day feeling and go into this workout ready to attack it.

The drive to Sedona is beautiful. This is a special place for us to travel to and we are incredibly lucky to have it so close to us. On the way down there were guys sleeping in the van, some listening to their music, but overall our van had a quiet tone to it. This is understandable as it is about a 40 plus minute drive and there will be some pain at the end of it.

This workout consisted of some fast 400s and a couple of miles. We were bang on for the 400s hitting 62s comfortably. The team was working well together as we switched the lead on and off for each rep. The pacing seemed to be right on today which makes the workout a lot easier.

Getting into the first mile took a lot of concentration. I took the first 700m before Tyler came past me down the home straight to take the last two laps. We hit things even here and finished up in 4:23. This was a great start, but we were straight back into some 400s before having a break and getting going again.

This time the 400s were starting to get a little tougher and my legs were getting tired towards the end of a couple. We still hit the pace, but this concerned me slightly for our last mile.

Going into the mile we were told to hit the pace for the first 800m and then we can bring it down after that if we were able to. Tyler led the first 700m this time and then I came past in the home straight. For this one we were a little quicker at the start but kept things controlled. When I went past Tyler I decided to get things moving a little quicker. The pace change was nothing crazy, but just enough to get the legs really working. We came through the line in 4:18. We were pumped. Then we got straight back into some more short reps before the conclusion of the workout.

This was a strong day across the board from our team. Even the guys who were time trialling were pushing things out there. This was a perfect workout to build further confidence within the team. There is no doubt that we are ready for Nationals. I am glad that I am on this team and not another as I would hate to face these guys.

No matter how Louisville is run, we will be ready for it. What I know right now is that our plan is to ensure it is fast up the front. Just how fast? We will find out on the day.

4th – Saturday

The turnaround to this morning's long run was quick. We had less than 12 hours from when we got back from Sedona to when we were heading out for our run. This made the run mentally tough as I was not completely recovered from the workout yet. It was also hard to get an adequate amount of water and food in. Although it was a grind out there this morning, I was comforted through knowing this would be our last real long run of the season. Now I need to focus on recovery and getting my body ready for next week's race.

6th – Monday

Things are starting to get cold here in Flagstaff. There was a real chill in the air for our drills/strides today and it took a little while to get moving. It isn't even winter yet, but I will have to start bundling up a bit from here on.

7th – Tuesday

Even though we considered Friday's workout to be our last, it really wasn't. We still have today's and next week's workouts. Today we were doing some shorter reps on Cardinal Field to get the legs ticking over. I have never done a big workout here, so I usually only associate this place with easy running. Today's workout on the other hand felt far from easy.

I ran in flats for the first set just to ease into things. For some reason it felt like I was going all out to hit the back end of our range. This can be a demoralizing feeling as these efforts should not be feeling this hard. I have still been feeling Friday's workout in my legs up till this point, so I am thinking it might just be that. Sometimes it can take a bit to get moving again when there have been a few easy days since a hard workout.

We split into two groups for this workout consisting of guys with self-defined fast twitch and those with slow twitch. The second set of these efforts started to feel a lot better. I switched into spikes for them and was able to hit the lower end of the pace range a lot more comfortably than I was hitting the top end in the previous set.

Sometimes short workouts can get you breathing hard up here at altitude. This was one of those workouts. Focusing on jogging in between reps and catching your breath is a key component of recovering.

Looking around the team I see that everyone is healthy. There is no sickness or injuries amongst our top eight guys. This is a great sign.

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I remember thinking from the start of this season that I would not lead Nationals at any point this time round. Last year I took the lead just before 3 km to just before 5 km. I did not do anything with the lead besides give myself a little room to breathe. When I had been asked if I would lead it this year I would always say no. I felt that it was somewhat pointless last year as I exerted a bit of energy that I should have been saving for later in the race.

My views on leading are beginning to change. Considering how this season is going and what we need to do as a team to win, I am rethinking my reluctance to get to the front. In fact, if the pace is not hot at the front I will pop out and push it. The best way for our team to break the pack is by applying the pressure up the front. We are stronger than any other team out there.

At this stage, the plan is to ensure the pace at Nationals is fast. It is slightly nerve racking to think that I could help dictate the pace of the biggest collegiate cross country race in the U.S.. However, for this team and for the sake of my individual performance, I know this is the right thing to do. I am excited to make some people hurt out there.

8th - Wednesday

This morning was about -2 degrees Celsius when I started running and it felt as though things didn't warm up much from there. Sometimes it can be harder to breathe when it gets colder because I start to get blocked up. Even chatting with people takes more of an effort. It will only get colder from here though, so I'd better get used

to it. I remember one morning when I first got to Flagstaff in 2016 and it was -26 degrees Celsius. -2 doesn't seem so bad after all.

We leave for Utah at 2pm this afternoon. My day is focused on packing, getting some work done, and relaxing.

Sometimes in amongst all the hype and nerves it can be the little things that make you happy. When we arrived at our hotel we all went straight up to our rooms. I noticed that we had an adjoining door to another room which is always exciting if it is a team mate on the other side. Just when I opened our side of the door I heard a knock on the opposite side of our room. There was another adjoining door. How do I handle this suspense?

I walked over and opened our side of the door and there were two team mates there. We all lost our shit in excitement that we now basically have one big lounge area. Then I quickly turned to the other door which Andy was now standing next to. He knocked on the door and we all waited to see if it would open. A few seconds later it opens and two of our team mates were there. It is an understatement to say we really lost our shit this time. This was like the happiest day of our lives! Better yet, about 15 minutes later one of our teammates locked himself in the bathroom. In no time at all we had the whole men's squad outside the bathroom door laughing and jeering as he struggled to get out. What a start to the trip.

9th – Thursday

This was a pre-meet just like any other. We rocked up to the course and got into our business as usual. Our lane draw is number one which is ideal because it means we have the most direct route and there will be no shoving coming from the inside.

As we jogged over the course the usual pre-meet jokes began to flow. This day was particularly crude, and we had some guys in stitches struggling to keep one leg in front of the other as they were laughing. This really helped relax the bunch and it made the run fly by.

One of the special parts about this team is how much we enjoy the process and being around each other. When you enjoy the company, it makes it a lot easier to be willing to bleed for the guys come race day.

NCAA Regional Championships

10th – Friday

Race Day

As we left our hotel for the course there was a very premature playing of *We are the Champions* by Queen on the radio. Regardless of whether we may jinx ourselves here, we sung along to this absolute classic.

At the course our tent was the only one that had a great array of music coming from it. Cade was DJing and there were a couple of bangers coming through. Our sports psychologist Shannon surprised us at our tent with a couple of signs and Sprouts cookies. This really got the guys pumped up as she brings such a great energy to our team. They also just love cookies.

Regionals is our first 10km race for the season. Excluding George Kyte, every other race is 8km. That extra 2km can play a big role in telling who has built a good base up to this point in the season. Since

Nationals will also be 10km, this race can be a good indicator as to how the distance will feel.

Once that 70mins out mark came we were right into some rope stretching before heading out for a jog. For some reason on race day I need to pee way worse than usual. I am always well hydrated, but I think it is the nerves that get the system working overtime. I can pee and then 20 minutes later I will be jogging and feel like I am going to piss my pants. Thankfully being a male helps make relieving oneself a lot easier when we are out on a warm up.

As we were all warmed up and heading over to the start there is a bit of nervous tension in the air. This is our first time racing BYU this season and we all want to show them what we are capable of. At the same time, this race is somewhat of a formality in the season. Being only eight days out from Nationals, we need to be mindful of the effort we give here. Regardless, this is still a race and it can be a good confidence boost if things go right. It can also hurt the confidence if you have poor performances and sickness like we experienced at this race last year.

We are all business right now and know what needs to be done. After a few strides and some pre-race chants we are ready to go. I am on the very outside of our box up against the fence. I know the roar of the crowd is going to deafen me here. We watch as the red flag got raised and the gun went with it. Bang.

Just like every race, we are out fast. We all drove off the line sprinting like hell. Then out of nowhere (or five boxes over) an athlete from BYU darted across all the other teams and sat in front of us. I don't know exactly what was going through his mind, but it was a smart-arse gesture none the less. We gave him a bit of shit for this and I

think there were a couple of high fives from our team. This was happening while we were all out sprinting.

This course is 90% dirt/gravel, so we are all in flats for it which is weird for a cross country race. My plan was to get right out towards the front because last year I fell back into the pack and it was chaotic on this course. There was a lot of pushing, bumping, and expending of energy. This time when I get to the front I am staying there.

Tyler set the early pace as a guy from UTEP was giving a speech to the field. It may have been motivational if I could understand a word of it. The first km consisted of joking in amongst the pack. Although this is still a serious race, for those who know they will be going to Nationals, it is hard to not relax a little bit.

I stayed up the front as the race went through km after km. There was one point where a UTEP guy broke away from our pack, but I gestured to Cory to let him go knowing we would catch him later. Sure enough we did.

The pace was comfortable and there were five NAU guys right up the front for most of it. We have shown our dominance in the past by packing the front line with yellow singlets and this race was no different. By the last lap things began to start stretching out a bit as the pace was picking up. When we came into just over 2 km to go Tyler broke away from the pack and made his move. I quickly responded by making a surge to jump on his shoulder. Here we go again.

Tyler and myself were side by side driving this pack. The pace increased and consequently people began to fall off. Now the pressure has been applied and the move has been made, there is no

turning back or easing off. We hit the mile to go mark and things started to really get moving.

I do not remember elbowing Tyler in this race, but for the sake of tradition I will just say I did.

I hit a km to go in about sixth place as we headed into a 90-degree turn. I accidentally clipped another guy in the turn, but thankfully he stayed on his feet. This last km felt like I was all out. My legs were tiring as we approached 400m to go. I was in sixth place heading into the home straight. I know I have a bit left in the tank but not enough to catch the leaders. I kicked it in and took one athlete just before the line.

I crossed in fifth place, three seconds behind Tyler in third. I turned around and saw NAU singlet after NAU singlet come across the line. It was obvious that we had taken the team title. I was pumped. We did what we needed to do.

Our final team score was 49 points to BYUs 70 something. Even though they held out three guys, had we added in our fifth guy that we held out, we still would have beaten them on this day. This was a huge boost of confidence for our team.

We had a post-race interview which was difficult to get through. We had coaches gesturing trying to make us laugh and other team mates creating chaos. This whole ordeal basically summed up our team.

Someone said that my last mile was about 4:19. No wonder it felt like I was all out. Interesting how it is almost the same as the last mile I hit in our Sedona workout a week back. It was as if I can hit that pace, just no faster. For now.

Part IV The NCAA Championships week

November 11th – 18th

Our last phase is all about final preparations. The work is done and now all we need to do is get to that start line healthy in a week's time. A large emphasis over this week is recovering and making sure our bodies are ready for what is to come. Hopefully we can all keep our nerves in check and not burn our brains out before we even touch down in Louisville.

We had our final workout of the season and it was less than motivating. As we were trying to recover from Regionals, we could not expect to start feeling good again until later in the week. It is important for us to then not lose confidence when feeling exactly how we should.

I spent a lot of time reflecting during this phase about how far we have come as a team. From low morale at the beginning of the season to almost uncontrollable togetherness. We have morphed into a family. The healthy rivalry that we have in this team has continued to push us day after day. I hope that come Nationals we are all focused on beating other teams rather than just each other.

Heading into Nationals the atmosphere amongst the team was familiar to that of other races. The guys were ready to face the challenge that lay ahead of us. We knew that we were capable of being the best team in the nation, but we still needed to show everyone that was the case. Can we pull off the back to back?

Final preparations

11th – Saturday

We all met up at the training room today for a little TLC. Everyone is in a different headspace now. We have seven days to go and we know that we can win it.

I was thinking a lot today about the weekends race and how our team is looking heading into Nationals. Had both BYU and us had full strength teams on the weekend we could have put seven of our guys ahead of their fifth man. That gives us a lot of confidence. I know that some of our guys had a good showing and some of us have more to give. That is the nature of Regionals, but I know BYU wouldn't have wanted us to win, especially in that kind of convincing fashion. It is starting to get really exciting now.

12th – Sunday

With only six days until Nationals, the realization of how close the season is to an end is starting to dawn on us. This is the exciting time. We are still fresh off our last race so there is excitement from that stand point, but we are also not close enough to Nationals that the nerves have really began to settle in. This is the sweet spot. The time when hopes are high for what could happen in less than a week's time.

As we get closer to race day the excitement can begin to dwindle and the realisation of how important this moment is settles in. All the hard work over the past few months has been for this week; for this weekend. There is nothing more I can do to prepare myself physically

for this race. All that training is done. Now I must maintain myself and get to that line healthy.

My biggest focus over the next six days is ensuring I do not get sick, keep stress levels low, and get the right amount of sleep. These are all things that I can control. Keeping my body relaxed is a vital component during this final week. I did not put in all that hard work to start slacking off now. After Nationals I can enjoy some down time. Until then, it is business as usual. Like Andy said tonight, “the days will fly by, but the hours will seem long”. I know that I will blink and be in Louisville. Then I will blink again, and the race will be over. I must enjoy this part of the process as much as possible. This is the fun stuff.

13th – Monday

One thing I have thought a lot about this season is how competitive this team is. Particularly how close Tyler and myself have been finishing throughout the season. There is always a part of me that wants to be the best distance guy on this team but often that is not the case. Having a younger guy beating me over most races this season could be hard to take, but at the end of the day I would not be running as well as I am right now if Tyler was not on this team. I feel like we have a mentality between each other right now where if I can do something so can he and if he can do something so can I. Our fitness levels are so in sync that our top end effort is very similar. This guy is an absolute grinder and does a good job of masking how he is feeling. That means that I do whatever I can to hang with him in trainings regardless of how good he looks and how bad I may be feeling, and vice versa.

I have no doubt that last track season I would not have been able to keep up with Tyler in some of our longer tempo runs. Now I can, and we push each other through them. As much as I still want to beat Tyler whenever I line up next to him, I am so grateful that we are on the same team. Every race when we have popped out the front and see each other there is a comforting moment.

Come Nationals, I know that I will do whatever I can to stick with Tyler and he will do the same with me. Our core focus is the team title, but for Tyler and myself there are also big individual goals. At Nationals I want to beat him, and I know he wants to beat me. However, that will not be decided until right at the end. Until that last mile we will be working together and motivating each other. When the moment comes that one of us makes a break on the other, whether it is a mile out, a km out, or 200m out, there will be a mutual understanding of the moment. Neither of us will falter. We will both grind it out to the finish in pursuit of our team and individual goals. In the end, we will both be better and stronger athletes for this healthy rivalry.

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Today was our last weights session before Nationals. Right now, we are counting down every ‘lasts’ that are occurring. Last long Monday, last weights, last workouts, last long run, etc. These are all indicators that we are getting closer and closer to the end of our season.

There have been rumours circulating about new uniforms for Nationals. Last year we had a care package from Adidas before heading to nationals and this time we get a whole new uniform.

The weather predicts rain on the forecast for Saturday in Louisville. This is exciting for me because the softer the ground can be the better I work through it.

14th – Tuesday

Today is our last official workout of the season. We had a fartlek session that was supposed to be a pretty relaxed effort to get the legs moving a bit. For some reason today was feeling a little tougher than I would have liked. It took a couple of the on efforts to warm into things and once I did it was still a bit of a push at the end.

Last year doing a similar workout around this time I was struggling with my confidence. My hamstring was giving me problems and I just had a mediocre race at Regionals. This time, besides the heavy leg feeling, I am healthy and have no injury issues. The team is looking great as well, and we are looking forward to heading away tomorrow.

15th – Wednesday

Travel to Louisville done and dusted. We got an easy run in once we got to the hotel. It was a little colder than I expected and there was a bit of misty rain around. We ran a mixture of road, trail, and loops around a Wellness Centre. Once it started to get a bit darker we made sure to keep to the pavement.

16th – Thursday

This morning we ran for just over 10 miles on some trails shown to us by one of NAUs previous coaches, Ron Mann. It took a few miles to warm into things here. The travel can still hang around in the legs for a couple of days, but I think I finally started to get rid of it.

The team banquet was held tonight at Churchill Downs, the Louisville Derby track. We dressed up in our usual flannel shirts looking like the Lumberjacks we are. It was a nice dinner followed by some typical team antics.

I came out of the restroom and saw half of our guys team coming down the escalator pulling poses. Next minute Cory has ripped his shirt open and is coming back down the escalator. I hate to think what other teams think of us. We finished things up with some photos in the photo booth before heading out.

On the trip home we had some tunes blasting from the van. We ended up back at the hotel sitting in our van waiting for the drums to drop in the song *In the Air Tonight*. After a ridiculous number of extended intros to the song, getting to the drum part was like peace on earth.

17th – Friday

This is our final pre-meet of the season. As our coach said, “let’s not treat this one any differently”. This is obviously easier said than done. The course was about five minutes from the hotel. When we finally found our tent, it was suspiciously right next to BYU. Someone did this on purpose. Inside our tent there was a heater which will come in handy tomorrow as it is supposed to be windy and wet.

We are in box 20 for the race, so bang in the middle. We started our jog through our box out onto the home straight. It is clear within the first 400m that this course is going to be different from the last time we were here. Besides the course taking us over some different loops, the under footing is wet and muddy in some places. The first km has a lot of this. It will be vital to get out hard and stay out of trouble.

We decided to run the whole course and check out every twist and turn while paying close attention to what portions will be muddy. When we hit the last km of the course our pack went quiet. It seemed like everyone was visualising what it will be like coming into this part tomorrow. This is a downhill section of the course and a part where we can really get moving. As tradition we did not run through the finish line, instead we cut back towards our tent once we got to the home straight.

There was not enough room in our tent for us all to do mobility exercises so three of us went into BYUs tent instead. Since they were not there yet we figured they wouldn't mind. Part way through mobility I got up to do some leg swings and saw a BYU hat coming towards the tent. I then saw the whole BYU team coming our way. One of our guys noticed I was looking at something and asked, "is BYU coming?". I, without hesitation, told him no and made my way back to our tent. Those two then had to share an awkward moment with the BYU team as they rocked up and saw two NAU guys sprawled out in their tent.

After mobility we headed to our starting box to get some drills and strides done. We noticed that it doesn't take much to slip off the line because of how muddy the boxes were. We practised as a team taking off together. This could not have gone any worse as about three of our guys hit the deck. We have noted that some longer spikes and pushing off with the front foot is going to be the go come tomorrow. We practised a couple more starts and then seemed to get the hang of things here. It is slightly concerning if someone goes down, but we will just have to be extra cautious off the line tomorrow.

As we left from our tent we passed BYU heading towards theirs. When we pass a lot of the teams here there will be exchanges of greetings, but not so much between us and BYU. This just comes down to the heavy rivalry present. The tension just makes things more exciting.

After our pre-race and lunch, we headed out on a secret team activity. Everyone was trying to guess what it was going to be as we were driving to this place. Once we get there we still had no idea what it was. Some place called *Breakout*. Turns out that the aim is to split into two teams and each team tries to break out of a room. Although my team had a slower time getting out of the statistically harder room to break out of, it was a great team experience and took our minds off the race for the hour we were in the room.

Now we just have a low-key team dinner tonight, a meeting later, and then ideally a good sleep before the big dance tomorrow. My sleeping has been a little hit and miss since getting to Louisville, but I am getting enough to not be too concerned.

written the night before Nationals: On our way back to the hotel after dinner I started to get my first real nervous feeling for this weekend. It suddenly dawned on me that this is it. This is the final day before the showdown. As much as I am excited for it, I cannot help but also carry some serious nerves with me. Even writing this now I can feel the tension in my stomach. There is a lot riding on this moment. We have trained so hard as a team and the desire to have it work out in our favour is immense. This is it. The moment has finally arrived.

NCAA National Championships

18th – Saturday

Race Day

For some reason I have been struggling to sleep a little bit since getting to Louisville. I have no problem falling asleep, but I will usually wake up about twenty minutes later and cannot get back to sleep for another hour or so. Last night I decided to put my headphones in and listen quietly to a mix of Ed Sheeran and Boyzone. I find this quite relaxing. I still woke up a bit and there were a couple of times I struggled to get back to sleep, but I got enough hours in me. Last time at Louisville I struggled to sleep before the race, but I was happy with the quality I ended up with. This time I am happy with the broken-up quantity. I can survive off this.

We all met in the lobby at 6:15am for a 10 minute shake out. The weather was surprisingly warm. It had been freezing since we got here but I started to get a little warm in all the clothes I was wearing this morning. We shook out around this residential neighbourhood that is by our hotel. This less than a half mile loop has become a nice place to run to avoid being on the busy roads.

The mood this morning is upbeat. It is like no one is tired and we have been awake for a lot longer than we had been. Today everyone is fit and healthy so as a team we have no excuses. We are not holding any one out and we are not holding anyone back. Time to get ready and then off to the course.

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We got in the van to head to the course and the first song that came on the radio was *Number 1*. This was awfully premature like the song at Regionals, but it seemed like a sign of good things to come. The ‘throwback station’ 105.1 has treated us well this trip.

When we arrived at the course the wind was already blowing strong. We made our way to our tent dressed in all black track suits, rolling deep and trying to look as intimidating as possible. I got straight to our tent, put my bag on the ground, got my iPod out, and lay down to get off my legs. I eventually removed my iPod as I heard DJ Cade start playing some decent tunes.

I had a brief chat with Coach Smith out back of our tent before starting to warm up. As we stood there talking the wind was trying to push us around. We discussed that our race plan does not change. I will go to the front with Tyler and we will apply the pressure if no one else will. I said that this wind will be good because if people start falling off the pack it will be a lot harder for them to make their way back up. If you do not attach yourself to the front pack in this wind, then you can leave yourself alone and exposed. Perfect.

We started doing some rope stretching to *In the Air Tonight*. This has basically become one of our songs of the trip. The guys are seeming pumped while still somewhat relaxed heading into this race. As we begin our warm up we made our way out onto a parking lot. Everyone is running hunched over as the wind is so strong it is almost blowing us back. I am thinking to myself that I hope no one says anything about this. We all know the wind sucks, so we do not need to draw more attention to it.

There is a bit of talking and joking around but this soon stops. There is a lot of quietness as everyone is thinking about what is to come and

concentrating on what their own effort today is going to need to be. We got back to the tent, spiked up, and made our way to the start line. This whole season has led up to this moment. There is no backing out now. No matter how shit scared you may be in this moment, you are committed. In 15 minutes things will kick off.

As we made our way to the start line the BYU mascot is kind enough to offer us some encouragement. They stood there with a sign saying “NAU Shortcut” as we walked past them. All I could think in this moment was that we did not need any more motivation to beat BYU at this point. However, thank you for a reminder why we want to kick arse (axe) out there.

We got a couple of solid strides in and then met in our usual spot just down the home straight for our team chant. We decided to do something different this time and almost whisper it. Usually this can be a form of intimidating other teams while pumping ourselves up. This time we had done all the intimidation work and we were already pumped up. This was all we needed. We headed back to the line.

Last night we got new racing singlets and the plan was to not show anyone these until we were on the start line. I did one more stride out, then turned around and saw the guys all taking off their jackets to reveal our new racing singlets. They look good! I figured that I am out here now, so I might as well give these other teams a show. As almost everyone was lined up, I walked back towards the NAU box and took off my long sleeve to reveal our new singlet. I don't know if anyone noticed, but in that moment, I pictured everyone looking at me and just a hint of doubt slipping into their minds.

As we packed into our box I reminded the guys to really push off with their front foot. We do not want anyone falling. Andy told us to keep

an eye out for the smoke from the gun. We have a 90 second call. A 30 second call. Bang. We are off.

I got off the line well and just kept driving. All I needed to do was continue to push and get myself just out the front. I managed to do this, and I see Geordie right beside me. There are three Alabama guys who cut right in front of us to try and take the early pace. I looked to my right and sure enough there is Tyler. He wasted no time in making his way out to the front. I followed. Pretty soon we were leading the pack side by side. Here we go again. I turned to Tyler and said, “this is just another tempo in Buffalo Park”. He agreed, and we got to work.

Running past the crowds of people is deafening. I cannot make out what most people are saying because the screams all morph into one another. I could make out chants, some individual names, anything NAU related, but everything else is just noise. At this point I heard a lot of BYU and Justin Knight chants. I also saw our NAU flag making its way around the course and the NAU supporters being loud and proud.

Coming off the first small lap the Alabama guys started moving towards the front about the 4 km mark. Tyler and myself made sure we stayed right on these guys. Then there was the first break. An Alabama guy made a move and put some space on our pack. I see Tyler go to respond and I am thinking, don't do it. Thankfully he quickly drops back to our pack as we realise that this is a fruitful attempt to get away from us. He opened a lead quick but this early into the race there is plenty of time to close it. We rolled through the downhill section of the course, coming through the finish shoot before starting our last lap. At this point our group is starting to thin out.

As we hit the 4 km to go mark and our last lap, I knew this was about to get hard. We had been pushing the pace for 6 km and now we are about to bear the brunt of the wind for another 4 km. This is the make or break moment. If I am going to drop off, this is the time. There is no way we are going to let that happen though, especially with this Alabama guy in our sights. We slowly closed him down over this lap and by 2 km to go he was done. Now it is down to Tyler, Myself, and Knight.

It is crazy that I have found myself in a position of a guaranteed (hopefully) top three placing. We came into the mile to go mark and I knew this is where the move needed to be made. I was feeling surprisingly fresh, all considering, and was ready to apply some pressure. We drove around a near 90-degrees turn before Tyler and myself hit the final up hill. Knight was hanging on our backs as we applied the pressure through here. We hit the km to go mark and it is just us three. This is basically all downhill before it flattens off in the home straight.

I kept my legs ticking over and then 600m out I made my move. I moved around Tyler and started pushing my final effort. I am opening a small gap on these two as we are approaching the home straight. I have a potential individual title in my sights, but I know these guys are right behind me. I got into the home straight and basically just start kicking. I was giving it all I had.

I see the finish and the crowd was going crazy. Crazy for not me that is. Everyone wanted Knight to roll me up. I guess they got what they wanted because sure enough he did just that. I saw that orange singlet come up on my shoulder and then pass me with 150m to go. I am all out and tried my best to respond but my legs would not go any faster.

Now I needed to hold my position and get through that line. Knight crossed first (29:00.1), myself second (29:00.8), and Day third (29:04.6). I could not believe it.

I was barely across the line when Knight turns to me and says, “you are f’n amazing”. At least I think it was that. I went straight into a hug partly to compliment his efforts and another part to stable myself. I then turned to Tyler and we hugged as he proceeded to kiss my forehead. This has turned into a bit of a tradition for him. We had little time to ourselves before Peter came across the line in eighth place. This was a huge result from him. He had a great race at Regionals, but this was a breakthrough performance for his career. Not long after that we had Andy come through in 35th and Geordie through in 40th. They rounded out our top five and secured five All-American spots. Last year we had to wait around for what felt like an eternity to find out the team results. This time we knew almost immediately. We have won the team title! We scored 74 points, with Portland second 53 points behind, and BYU rounding out the top three. At this point we are crazy excited. Luis (true freshman 60th) and Cory (tripped in first 600m when a pack went down and went from 250th to finish in 102nd) rounded out our squad and we all shared in this moment that every one of us had worked so hard for.

After a couple of interviews and a brief chat to Coach Heins we made our way out of the finishing area to a big group of NAU fans. Everyone is going crazy. There are hugs all around. It was in this moment that things really began to settle in. I am having people I did not know come up and express their joy at what we just did. It was like walking into a big family reunion.

Everyone there was a part of this whether they raced or shouted from the side line. None of this would be possible without these people. As the adrenaline began to wear off the reality of what just happened kicked in. I was ready to head back to our tent as I could not stop my eyes from beginning to water. There was so much that went into this moment. All the hype, all the expectations; everything came to fruition in this moment. Just as I said when I had one of my worst workouts of the season, ‘all my body wanted to do was cry’.

We made our way back to our tent which SUU were standing by. We all congratulated one another as their team finished the lowest in their school’s history. When we got into our tent the celebrations continued. We had *Sweet Caroline* playing on the speaker and no one held back in shouting the chorus. We were shouting this thing in the tent completely forgetting that BYU are in the one right next to us – maybe not. We are all crazy excited with what we just managed to pull off. All the hard work and dedication over this season has led to this moment. This very moment where we are singing *Sweet Caroline* as a team in a tent in Louisville. I will never forget that moment.

One of the greatest things about this experience is the support everyone gives one another. We had Syracuse’s whole team come up and congratulate us, both us and BYU showed our support for one another, even back at our hotel the whole Portland team came over to offer their congratulations. We offered ours back to them for an outstanding performance on their part in taking second place.

No matter the result, almost everyone is humble in victory and defeat. We all know how much this race means to one another, so we can feel for each other’s experience.

We had a brief lunch with Alumni, fans, family, and NAU staff, before heading back to the hotel. At this moment all I am craving is some time to myself. I headed out for a 30 minute jog to go over the experience I had just had. I had my headphones playing some Billy Joel as I was back doing laps around this residential neighbourhood.

I was feeling a mix of disbelief with satisfaction that this is something I knew we were capable of. There may have been a lot of surprised people out there today with how this team ran, but the least surprised were us. We had been working so hard and everything had indicated we were capable of this. I cannot pretend to be surprised about something I knew was possible.

Final Thoughts

August 2, 2017.

Exceeding the expectations of those who carry doubt would, in such a circumstance, require an exceptional showing. Producing a performance that silences the critics and emboldens the supporters. Toeing the line with confidence; running with passion; finishing with grace. Being able to show the world what it means to be a Lumberjack on the biggest stage, under the brightest lights, would be pure bliss summed up in a moment of surreal serenity. Such a moment would be dreamlike. Yet such a moment was lived. Dare seven men attempt such a feat again would be fit for a fairy tale. One that will inspire kids rather than scare them. Until such a day as they may toe the line against the Lumberjacks - then their nightmares will be validated, and their fears confirmed.

I wrote this piece at the beginning of the season while trying to picture what it would be like for us to win another National team title. Following our race in Louisville I am drawn back to this. Something within it resonates with my feelings about that race. When I wrote it, I tried to create a picture of an unbelievable reality where everything was inspiring; where the language was expressive, emotive, and exciting. I wanted words that touched the heart as much as the soul and images that were exuberant. Anything less would fail to do justice to such an experience. My race summary then does not come after the fact but through forethought. I knew

the moment before I experienced it as much as I felt it before I knew what it would feel like.

If a tear could summarize a season, then my summary was left at the finish line in Louisville. As I stood among a sea of NAU supporters everything that occurred not only during the season, but during my life, came rushing back to me. All the love and loss that I had experienced over my 23 years was felt within that moment. My heart ached, and my stomach fluttered in sync with one another. To quote Will Smith:

This part of my life, this little part... is called happiness.

...

When I began keeping a diary I was worried that I was going to hype this up to more than it should be. If things go wrong or I get injured, then I have pages of useless writings that I spent hours creating for nothing. There were times during the season where I wanted to stop writing because I felt as though I was running out of things to say. I can only jot down how tired I felt or how hard a workout was so many times. On top of all that, what if we make it to the end of the season and do not win? Will any of this even matter? Will anyone really care about NAU, the 2nd best team in the nation?

I soon came to realise that regardless of how the season turns out, people have a right to know when goes into a dream. People have a right to know how hard some work only to be let down. Our teams story is not entirely unique. I guarantee that there are countless cross country teams who go through the same ups and downs as we do. Our pain is certainly not unique, and neither is our passion for

what we do. The brutality of this sport creates a community among those who understand it.

One of my real takeaways from this season was that running is not always fun. I detailed a couple of days when I was really struggling mentally. During these days not only was running not enjoyable but life was not so hot either. This can be a dangerous place to find yourself in. No matter how strong willed you may believe you are as a person, sometimes it does not take much to lower your walls and let some damaging emotions slip in. Running alone during moments like this can either be great to clear your head or an opportunity to further beat yourself up. I have come home from some runs more pissed off than I was before I left, simply because I had just spent an hour making it worse in my head. Following this with a post adrenaline rush crash is a vulnerable place to be in.

With all the excitement and happiness that is contained in this piece of writing, it would be wrong of me to not acknowledge the tough sections. These days were infrequent for me, but when they hit they hit hard. Nobody should ever have to struggle alone. As a team we have a responsibility to look out for one another. I guarantee that most of the guys would not remember the days when I was struggling. It pains me to say that goes both ways. This sport can take its toll as we all make ourselves entirely vulnerable out there. Take the opportunity to talk with your fellow runners and make sure they are doing okay. We need to keep our community healthy and safe. That is our job, not somebody else's.

I sincerely hope you have enjoyed reading about my experience. My roller coaster ride was raw and often it felt like the harness was

about to come loose. In the end we all made it in with the wheels safely on the tracks.

I must extend a huge thanks to my Coaches for all the time and effort they put into this team. Their dedication to this process makes our job as athletes a thousand times easier. Putting my trust in this process enabled amazing things to happen. I cannot wait to continue to work with these people in the future.

An incredible moment for me this season has been having the opportunity to watch our women's program flourish. They did not allow themselves to sit in the shadow of success that our men's team was having. These women made huge strides this season and their spot at Nationals is guaranteed for the near future.

For my individual successes throughout this season I must thank my family. Karen Eliason and Rob Baxter have been the most supportive parents that I could ever ask for. My siblings Glen and Kate have always stood by me throughout my running career which I cannot thank them enough for.

I must also thank my girlfriend Emily Roughan for her endless support and motivating passion for this sport that we both love.

My final thanks are saved for the team. These guys started off as strangers and have become my brothers. As I said in one of my Instagram posts, "we ride together, we die together". While slightly ripping off a *Bad Boys* movie quote, it is incredibly fitting to this team. We have shared a lot of ups and downs as a group and we are all better people for it.

Now, as Cade would want me to sign off, "we got some boys!".

2017 Men's Cross Country Team Roster

- Matthew Baxter
- Geordie Beamish
- Cade Burks
- Tyler Day
- Joey (meatball) DeFeo
- Blaise Ferro
- James Fitzgerald
- Elliot Gindi
- Cory Glines
- Luis Grijalva
- Kyle Havriliak
- Soren Knudsen
- Ryan Lanley
- Peter Lomong
- Harvey Nelson
- Beau Prince
- Jack Shea
- Andrew Trouard
- Ryan Wolff



NCAA Banquet Dinner, November 16, 2017