HIGH COUNTRY RUNNING

What if you could only run one more race?

BY MATT FITZGERALD
Special to the Daily Sun

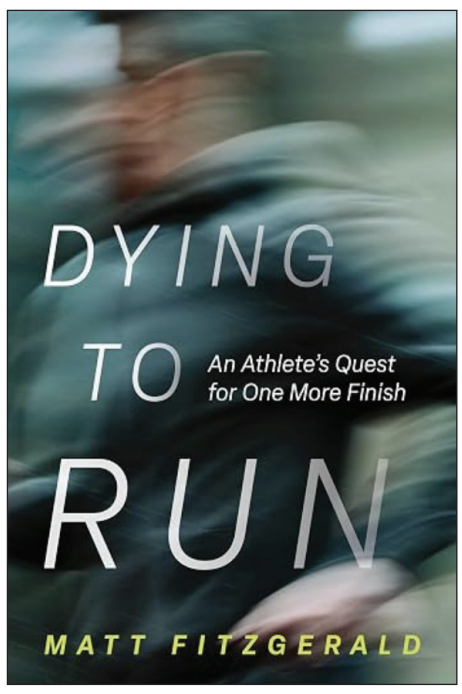
It sounds like the kind of question that might be asked as an icebreaker during the welcome dinner at an adult running camp.

What if you could only run one more race?

If you had just one chance to finish any unfinished business you have as an athlete, what kind of experience would you need to have in order to walk away from the sport with some sense of closure?

I know my answer — not because I attended a running camp, but because I developed long COVID in 2020 and lost the ability to run after 38 years in the sport.

Two weeks before I got sick, I dropped out of the Black Canyon 100K — the longest run I'd ever attempted — a little past the halfway point. The memory of that failure haunted me as my symptoms (including shortness of breath, brain fog and severe neuropathy) intensified over a span of weeks, months and eventually years. Throughout my ordeal I dreamed of a Hollywood comeback. I would beat the disease, regain my fitness, and exact revenge on the 100K distance, but after three years of uninterrupted suffering, I realized I might never beat the disease, and if I was going to achieve the closure I yearned for, I would have to find a way to train for and complete my race of redemption with long COVID.



On New Year's Eve 2023, at the stroke of midnight, I signed up for the Javelina Jundred — a 100K trail race in the scorching Sonora Desert. I had 10 months to transform myself from an involuntary couch potato too sick to run a single lap around a high school track to a born-again athlete able to cover 62 hilly miles in near triple-digit heat. From a medical perspective, it was a dicey endeavor, bordering on dangerous. Yet I didn't really care how it ended. When I woke up on New Year's Day 2024, resolved to complete my journey as a runner on my terms, I felt I'd already won. More than closure, my choice to attempt an ultramarathon with unresolved long COVID was about reclaiming my true self — the passionate, striving, endorphin junkie that sickness had stolen from me. Regardless of whether I failed or succeeded, I knew those 10 months would be one heck of an adventure.

And a heck of a story. Thankfully, I lived to tell it. "Dying to Run: An Athlete's Quest for One More Finish" is the story of a man risking everything to take his life back from chronic illness. It's my answer to the question "What if you could only run one more race?" and an invitation to ask similar questions of yourself.

MATT FITZGERALD IS THE AUTHOR OF 40 BOOKS ON RUNNING. HE WILL READ FROM "DYING TO RUN" AT BRIGHT SIDE BOOKSHOP IN FLAGSTAFF AT 6 P.M. WEDNESDAY, SEPT. 9. COME PICK UP YOUR SIGNED COPY OF THE BOOK, GRAB FREE SAMPLES OF PRECISION FUEL AND HYDRATION PRODUCTS AND ENTER A RAFFLE FOR ONE OF THREE RUN FLAGSTAFF GIFT CARDS.
RACHEL SMITH IS A MOM TO TWO WONDERFUL GIRLS, A PROFESSIONAL RUNNER, AND FEELS LUCKY TO CALL FLAGSTAFF "HOME." SHE IS ALSO THE COORDINATING EDITOR OF THIS COLUMN AND WOULD LOVE FOR YOU TO CONTRIBUTE TO IT BY SENDING YOUR RUNNING-RELATED STORY TO HER AT RACHSCHNEID18@GMAIL.COM.

LUMBERJACKS

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our special teams," Wright said on Monday. "I didn't say that enough after the game how well they played across the board. A lot of young guys who contributed."

Two touchdowns in the final three minutes of the first half put NAU in position to get back in the game, receiving the ball to start the second half. Redshirt senior safety Shoes Brinkley said there was no panic from anyone at the moment.

"Even prior to halftime when it was 24-3, we weren't falling apart," Brinkley said. "We were still right here, cohesive, one unit. Going into halftime, we knew what we had to do."

Brinkley said the energy in his Walkup Skydome debut was electric. The team captain even went as far as to say that it was hard for him to communicate on defense because the crowd was so loud.

The FCS No. 20-ranked Lumberjacks will experience a different kind of loud in Arizona's season opener. Its offense will have to battle through the sound of a large, eager crowd. The last matchup between NAU and Arizona in 2024 saw over 47,000 fans in the stands. The Lumberjacks gave the AP No. 20-ranked Wildcats a scare that night, leading 10-6 at halftime before Arizona came back to win, 22-10.

KYLIE KNIGHT, NAU ATHLETICS

Northern Arizona running back Quran Gossett (10) runs with the football during the 2026 season opener against Eastern Washington on Aug. 29 in the Walkup Skydome.

If the offense struggles early again like it did last week, another three-score comeback may be hard to repeat.

"A little bit of our timing was off on offense," Wright said. "We weren't shaking loose in some of our route concepts. We were just missing some throws that I'd like to see us make, and that we're going to need to make."

The run game couldn't quite break through until the very end either. Junior Quran Gossett, NAU's clear No. 1 running back after being the second-leading rusher last year, got 61 of his 103 yards in the game-winning drive.

Even if the run is nullified against Arizona, expect Wright to keep hammering away at it, not by stubbornness, but because it is a necessity to control the game.

"That's part of our philosophy, to make sure we stay committed to the run game," Wright said. "We want to be able to wear teams out on offense, even if the run is not producing the results

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