

Pikes Peak Ascent : Aug. 16, 2008

Notes:

1. Overall—This was the race that wasn't. One is reminded that in the high mountains the weather rules the day and all plans must defer to it. It was raining in Manitou Springs at the start and continued on-and-off all the way to Barr Camp, at which point it became sleet. By the time the A-Frame was in view the increasing cold, thunder, lightning and snow forced the organizers to close the course and send everyone back down the mountain. The shutdown order came shortly after 10am. I learned of it when the A-Frame was in sight two hours and forty-nine minutes into the race. No Wave 2 runners completed the course. Laggard Wave 1 runners were turned around as high as the Cirque. Of the 2158 runners signed up for the race, only 761 reached the finish line on the summit.

2. My Race—No doubt about it, I put in a gigantic effort getting to the A-Frame. I followed my plan of running all the way to the start of Barr Trail and latching on to strong hikers on the way up. The strategy paid off in two ways. First, my intermediary times were lifetime bests at each waypoint. Second, I was clear of the slower runners and never materially slowed by the pack.

However, there is no free lunch. By the time they turned us around I was hurting badly and dreading the final three miles to the top. There is no question that I felt better above Barr Camp last year. I think the root cause of the problem is that the cold, wet weather gradually took its toll. I think this was a bigger factor than simple fatigue. In 2007, I groused about it being too warm; this year it was decidedly cold and much less to my liking. I was soaked to the skin and the chill was shutting me down as I made my approach to the tree-line. Frankly, I was hugely relieved when the turnaround order came. At that point, I knew I was ahead of last year's excellent pace but had already mentally conceded that I had no chance of finishing strong. I was thinking 4:30:00-plus and an agonizing effort to accomplish even that modest goal. I was not feeling at all chipper.

One fact that weighed on my mind was that I had not been able to drive to the summit the day before and rehearse the last two or three miles of the course. This was psychologically devastating because it left me feeling less acclimatized than ever before and fretful about blowing up on the toughest, coldest and most oxygen-starved portion of the route. Given the hideous effort it had cost me to make it to the A-Frame, I could only imagine the pain that was yet in store. I don't know whether breathing the air at the summit the day before would have been a material physiological advantage. I do know that not having done so was a major mental disadvantage.

To be sure, the race had its high points. My 1:07:47 split at No Name Creek (4.3 miles) was 3:29 better than in 2007. For the first time in my life I was able to get to Barr Camp (7.6 miles) in less than 2 hours. Plus, my split time for the leg to

Barr Camp was 7 seconds faster than in 2007. Finally, despite feeling like a wreck on the leg to the A-Frame (10.2 miles), I actually performed extremely well. In 2007 I did that leg in a personal best 54:16. This time I did it in a corrected equivalent time of 54:42. I think that the 5-minute correction I allowed to account for the distance differential between the official A-Frame waypoint and my 2008 turnaround point is more than adequate. Thus, versus 2007 I had over three minutes in hand. I have never gotten so high on the mountain so quickly. Given the truly miserable conditions, soaking clothing, squishing running shoes and shivering cold, my 2008 run was something to be proud of.

3. Clothing—Rain and 50-degree temperatures at the start made long sleeves a no-brainer. I wore the same shirt as I did in 2005. I thought about using a second shirt underneath but opted to wear my wind shirt instead. The wind shirt was useless against the wet but its fleece lining was helpfully warm. After the first mile or so I considered tying it around my waist because I was sweating quite a lot. However, I left it on and just zipped-unzipped as I got hotter or colder. Above Barr Camp you definitely needed something to keep the chill out. It would have been a big mistake to go jacketless.

For me, cold legs are never a problem and I confidently set out in nylon running briefs. Once again, this was a good choice.

I used my Brooks running shoes rather than my Nike trail runners. Both weigh about the same and are very comfortable. I chose the Brooks because I planned on running as much of the course as possible and liked their extra cushioning. As it turned out, this too was a great choice because running (mostly downhill!) figured more heavily in my day than I had planned.

I used a minimalist fanny pack which turned out to be only marginally successful. The problem was that it was difficult to fish out the GUs I wanted. I kept on getting flavors I wasn't keen of. Also, my pace sheet quickly became an unreadable sodden mass. Next time I'm going to attack the feeding problem by loading my GUs into a small plastic squeeze bottle. I've come to understand the importance of feeding during the race and ready access is the key. I ate three packets of GU during the uphill portion of the race and felt a surge of energy each time. I would have eaten more but for the nuisance of finding, tearing open and squeezing out the packets while underway. I think a pre-loaded squeeze bottle will be a highly useful addition to my kit. You live and learn: I thought about buying a squeeze bottle at the expo the day before the race but balked at the \$10 price.

Clothing-wise the only item that did not work out well was my gloves. I used cotton mesh gloves and these were useless in the rain. I put them on after Barr Camp and they were soon too soaked to provide any comfort at all. Next year, unless it is bright and sunny, I'll take polar fleece gloves up the hill.

Finally, because I forgot to pack my trusty Nike runner's watch (dumb, dumb, dumb!) I was forced to substitute a newly-bought Timex. The Timex was okay but the numbers are a bit too small and I was not completely comfortable operating it. At No Name Creek I actually hit "Stop" instead of "Split" and it took me half-a-minute to recognize and correct the problem. I added 30 seconds to my Barr Camp and A-Frame times to account for the error.

4. The Descent—The trip back down the mountain was surprisingly easy. When I began the descent the prospect of putting another 10 miles on my legs was not at all appetizing. However, after a few minutes of downhill travel I was feeling good enough to start running a few sections. I was astonished at how quickly the warmer temperatures and thicker air restored me. By the time I made it back to Barr Camp, I was feeling absolutely great. I was cheered by the fact that the race staff collected bib numbers at Barr Camp as I figured (correctly) that this meant we'd get souvenir tee shirts for our efforts. In addition, as we got lower the rain abated and eventually stopped. My wind shirt was almost dry by the time I reached No Name Creek. I ran most of the W's and all of the way from the "2-miles to go" sign to the Marathon finish line on Manitou Avenue. It took me only 2:14:43 to do the 10 miles back to the starting point, a commendable 13:28 pace. While my descending pace was a couple of minutes per mile quicker in 2007, then I was working hard. This time the trip was an unpressured walk in the woods.

5. Post-Race Condition—While putting plus-5 hours on the legs naturally causes some fatigue, I felt remarkably sound after the race. My only immediate physical need was to get warm again. A few minutes in the car and a Starbucks largely fixed this. Jumping into the hot tub at the cabin put the icing on the cake and fully restored me. Now, three days after the race, I'm completely without aches or pains. It was no problem at all to run four miles yesterday.

It is strange that after a much less demanding physical test, Rim-River-Rim in the Grand Canyon, I was very sore for days afterward. It must be that the upside down nature of the Grand Canyon hike is to blame for the difference. In the Grand Canyon you hit the showers shortly after exerting peak physical output. Because there is no adequate cool-down the legs knot up and give problems later on. This is a useful insight. Next time I do the Grand Canyon and after next year's Ascent I will have to discipline myself to do a couple of cool-down miles.

6. Level of Effort—I pushed myself very, very hard in this race. If I left anything on the table en route to the A-Frame it was not much. I pushed so hard that I seriously questioned why I was subjecting myself, at age 60, to such brutal effort. The familiar thoughts of "Never again!!!" and "What am I doing???" and "STOP!!!" clamored in my head. These always come when I'm doing something especially hard. I have to admit that flogging myself as mercilessly as I do is a little bit insane. However, when you look around and see lots of other people suffering every bit as much as you are, it only seems sporting to continue. On Pikes Peak

misery has plenty of company. More importantly though, the shame and disappointment of quitting engenders horrors far more powerful than the physical discomforts of continuing.

At the limit it is imperative to stay mentally tough. But for the fact the race was stopped, I would have continued to the finish line no matter how rotten I felt. A measure of my curiously stern work ethic is that upon being told that the race was over and we had to go back down, I was ashamed about feeling happy about it. Imagine feeling *embarrassed* about being delivered from 3 miles and 2300 vertical feet of pain and suffering in the freezing thin air!

After my Grand Canyon hike in June, I rated my effort level “high” and did not think I could have done materially better on that day. This year’s Pikes Peak experience causes me to rethink that conclusion. By comparison to Pikes Peak, the Grand Canyon was barely an “8” on the suffering scale. Having lots of other hikers to pace off amps the effort level considerably and at Pikes Peak there was no shortage of people to compete against, most of whom (by default since they were ahead) I considered stronger than myself. Struggling to keep up and passing at the first sign of weakness assured there would be no cruising on Pikes Peak. It is interesting that when you are just competing against yourself, as I was at the Grand Canyon, it’s easy to think that you are in the red zone when you’re really not. Maybe the weather factors into the assessment but I am comfortable about rating the Ascent as a “10”.

All of which means that I truly did the best I was capable of on Pikes Peak but probably left something materially big on the table during the Grand Canyon ascent leg. The numbers are compelling:

	Ascent to A-Frame	Grand Canyon Ascent
Distance	10 miles	9.7 miles
Altitude Gain	5405 feet	4390 feet
Start Altitude	6295 feet	2460 feet
Finish Altitude	11,700 feet	6850 feet
Pace per Mile	16:58	18:43
Time to Distance	2:49:39	2:57:48

By every measure Pikes Peak is a harder day in the mountains than the Grand Canyon. Even allowing for the facts that 1) the Barr Trail is vastly better than the Bright Angel Trail, 2) temperatures between 70 and 83 degrees don’t allow maximum speed and 3) you are already tired from the descent down the Kaibab Trail when you start up the Bright Angel, the nearly 2-minute per mile difference is hard to reconcile. I think that the only reasonable conclusion is that my Grand Canyon effort was far less than 100%. The conclusion is reinforced by the fact that my pace going down the Kaibab Trail was 13:14, hardly at all faster than the 13:28 I did descending from the A-Frame.

There are two lessons to be learned from this. The first is that head-to-head competition is key in wringing out maximal effort. No surprise here. The second is that when you are working alone and think you are at the ragged edge of your ability, you're probably not. There is not much chance of finding competition on most of my extreme hiking adventures but it is useful to know that more juice may be available if I buckle-down and go for it.

7. Plan for Next Year—I never want to short my acclimatization routine again. Instead of arriving on the Wednesday before the race, I'll come on Tuesday. I'll plan on doing two acclimatization hikes from the top to the A-Frame as well as the traditional Pancake Rocks hike. Apart from that, all I need to do is stay healthy. My absolutely realistic goal will be to qualify for Ascent Wave 1 and finish the race in a time better than 4:15:00. Sub-4 hours will be my stretch goal. All the stars will have to be perfectly aligned for that particular dream to come true.

8. Logistics—Parking in Manitou Springs is not too bad. On race day we were able to get a spot near the Library with no problems at all. Traffic was allowed to flow on Manitou Avenue until shortly before Wave 1 went off. We arrived in town about 6:45am and this worked out perfectly. However, things were not quite so lucky on Sunday. I made the mistake of parking on Ruxton Avenue and got towed because the car was in the path of the Marathon finish chute. I honestly didn't notice the No Parking signs but they were there. Fortunately, a \$25 taxi ride and \$192 towing fee fixed the problem and we made it to the airport in plenty of time to catch our plane home.

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<u>Waypoints</u>	<u>Cum Mileage</u>	<u>Stage Miles</u>	<u>Altitude</u>	<u>Alt Change</u>	<u>Cum Time</u>	<u>Stage Time</u>	<u>Pace/mi</u>
Ascent Start	0.0	0.0	6,295	0			
No Name Creek	4.3	4.3	8,800	2,505	1:07:47	1:07:47	0:15:46
Barr Camp	7.6	3.3	10,200	1,400	1:59:57	0:52:10	0:15:48
A-Frame in sight	10.0	2.4	11,800	1,600	2:49:39	0:49:42	0:20:42
Return to Start	20.0	10.0	6,295	-5,505	5:04:22	2:14:43	0:13:28

Cumulative ET=> **5:04:22** 0:15:13
 Up=> 2:49:39 0:16:58
 Down=> 2:14:43 0:13:28

2008 Ascent v. 2007 Marathon

	<u>2007 Time</u>	<u>2008 Time</u>	<u>Better/Worse</u>
No Name Creek	1:11:16	1:07:47	0:03:29
Barr Camp	0:52:17	0:52:10	0:00:07
A-Frame	0:54:16	0:49:42	0:04:34
Less: A-Frame Distance Adjustment			0:05:00

Cumulative Difference=> **0:03:10**

2008 Ascent v. 4:14:00 Pace

	<u>4:14:00 Pace</u>	<u>2008 Time</u>	<u>Better/Worse</u>
No Name Creek	1:14:25	1:07:47	0:06:38
Barr Camp	0:54:37	0:52:10	0:02:27
A-Frame	0:51:49	0:49:42	0:02:07
Less: A-Frame Distance Adjustment			0:05:00

Cumulative Difference=> **0:06:12**

Note on 2008 Race:

Race was halted by El Paso County Search and Rescue due to dangerous weather conditions (thunder and lightning, snow) above treeline at the A-Frame. Some 1st Wave runners were turned around at the Cirque!

2008 Ascent v. 3:59:00 Pace

	<u>3:59:00 Pace</u>	<u>2008 Time</u>	<u>Better/Worse</u>
No Name Creek	1:10:02	1:07:47	0:02:15
Barr Camp	0:51:23	0:52:10	0:00:47
A-Frame	0:48:45	0:49:42	0:00:57
Less: A-Frame Distance Adjustment			0:05:00

Cumulative Difference=> **0:04:29**