

Pikes Peak Ascent—2011

For the 2011 Pikes Peak Ascent I finally did what I have been advising myself to do for the last few years: come to Colorado a full week before the race and get thoroughly acclimatized. Here is the recap of the race and how things went.

Sunday, August 14:

After leaving North Creek, NY at 5:30am, I arrived at the “Sunrise Chalet” in Florissant, Colorado at about 6:30pm. Despite two plane changes along the way, the trip from Albany, NY went fine. Carrying my bags and groceries up the stairs to the cabin immediately reminded me that high altitude takes some getting used to. The cabin is at about 8,000 ft.

Monday, August 15:

After a slightly restless and chilly first night I put an extra blanket on the bed and wound up sleeping until 9:30am. I had breakfast at the Hungry Bear restaurant in Woodland Park (highly recommended!) and while on the way to Manitou Springs decided to be conservative and do the bottom part of the mountain rather than starting from the top down. This proved to be a good choice because I really struggled on my hike up.

I parked in town on Manitou Avenue near the turn onto Ruxton Avenue. It took me 14:22 to reach the Barr Trail starting point. I started the hike from the normal trailhead rather than using the Ascent variation. I was not sure that I would be able to get to the Ascent variant because it is normally closed.

When I began the trek, I saw “7-miles to Barr Camp” and “4-miles to Incline” signs. I reserved the decision on how far to go. Nonetheless, I thought it likely that I would go all the way to Barr Camp. I imagined that I’d be able to do the hike in just a couple of hours. However, after twenty minutes the realization came to me that I was having an uncommonly hard time. Instead of pushing smartly up the mountain like I was accustomed to doing in the Adirondacks, I was plodding forward at a snail’s pace and finding the hill shockingly steep. I quickly decided that making Incline would be more than plenty for the day. I struggled mightily to do that. I went beyond the Incline turn-off to the “3.5 miles to Barr” sign and called it a day there. I plopped down on a rock, sucked down a quart of water (I should have carried more) and looked at the “Experimental Forest” off just to the right. It took me 1:08:39 from the trailhead to reach this point. The next day I discovered that where I had landed was No Name Creek. From the official starting point at Memorial Park it is 4.3 miles and 2,505 feet of altitude gain. From my starting point near the turn onto Ruxton, the distance was about 3.7 miles and the altitude gain about 2,475 feet.

After ten minutes of rest, I headed back down. Naturally, it was childishly easy to go down the hill. I went slowly to maximize the acclimatization benefits, reaching the trailhead in 58:00 and the car 15:12 later. Overall, my day on the mountain lasted 2:46:16.

Apart from my difficulty in making speed, which hopefully will improve with more time at altitude, the most concerning part of today's hike was that the Barr Trail is in absolutely horrible condition. I was astounded to see how rutted, narrow and clogged with obstacles it is. I could not imagine how you would ever be able to pass on the majority of the route. Instead of the relatively even surface I remembered, the trail is v-shaped for a long part of the way. In addition, it is shockingly narrow. Getting behind a crowd of runners will be extremely problematic because the pack will dictate the pace and there will be no getting around it.

Upon arriving back at the cabin, I ate heartily and spent an hour in the hot tub. I felt great afterwards.

Tuesday, August 16:

I slept well and headed off to the Hungry Bear at 9am where I had another wonderful breakfast. I decided to drive all the way to the official starting point and begin my acclimatization hike from there. I was hopeful of making it all the way up to Barr Camp but frankly was unsure whether I'd be able to based on my weakness yesterday.

Happily, I felt much better today. I started at Memorial Park and reached the alternate trailhead that is used for the race 22:33 later. This is, of course, very slow but involved no running at all. About ten minutes beyond the trailhead I merged onto the Barr Trail proper and began the laborious trek up the W's. It was a real advantage to have done the hike yesterday because I had some sense of where I was and where the progress-landmarks were.

At 1:24:25 elapsed time I made it to No Name Creek. This was about thirteen minutes slower than what I'll want on race day but is about eight minutes better than yesterday's clocking. Progress! It took me a further hour and two minutes to make it to Barr Camp (2:27:20 elapsed time).

I was thrilled to re-discover that the route flattens out considerably in the Enchanted Forest section. This makes the hike above No Name Creek much easier than that below, in spite of the increasing altitude. I felt good and was satisfied with my progress in acclimatizing. However, everything is relative; midway between No Name and Barr Camp I was passed by a couple of guys who were running very fast. Their performance was thoroughly impressive. I met them at Barr Camp and it turns out that they are Catalonians (Catalonia is a mountainous region of northern Spain that borders France) who are here to compete in the race this weekend. Both are razor-thin and looked like they could run uphill forever. (Post-race I checked the Ascent results and found that they had both finished in the top twenty.)

After buying a couple of drinks and enjoying fifteen minutes of rest at 10,200 feet, I headed back down the hill. The 7.5 mile hike down to the car took a bit less than two hours and felt very comfortable.

I used my Brooks running shoes instead of the Nike trail runners. Yesterday the Nikes felt a bit too big and I had several moments of clumsiness. Today I scarcely ever put a foot wrong. I'll try the Nikes tomorrow and see whether the problem yesterday was the shoes' fault or just the product of my incomplete acclimatization.

Wednesday, August 17:

After breakfast and a slow drive up the Pikes Peak Highway to the top of the mountain I set out for the A-frame at 11am. I was full of confidence based on yesterday's outing and thought that a rehearsal of the route above the A-frame would give me a nice, moderate workout. In fact, I felt so good that on the way down I started seriously considering going all the way to Barr Camp. I thought that this would be worth doing because it would give me yet another complete round trip on the mountain, albeit in two stages. In any event, I reached the top A-frame sign in 1:05:43 and continued on down.

While I felt just fine, I became nervous about the clouds that were beginning to roll in and prudently decided to stop my descent about fifteen minutes below the A-frame. I took a quick two minute rest and began the trek to the summit. I was appalled at how chewed-up the trail below the A-frame is. It is a sorry, rutted, narrow mess, the worst I have ever seen it. Passing will be out of the question on race day.

Encouragingly, I got back to the A-frame in 16:14, just half-a-minute slower than my descending time. I still felt very confident about making the top in an easy walk. However, I struggled for rhythm and clearly felt the altitude. Everything seemed just a bit tougher than expected. The mile markers rolled by, but never at a rate that told me I was doing fine. In fact, the final mile turned into a terrific death march during which I despaired of ever being able to record a strong performance on Saturday. The numerous step-ups and horrible 16 Golden Stairs put me right up against my limit. It was an awful struggle to stumble and claw my way to the top. Needless to say, this was nothing like what I expected. I had rosy memories of doing the A-frame route with Germaine last year in perfect comfort and was shocked at how I had deteriorated against that standard in just a year's time. The only thing that salvaged the day was that, no matter how bad I felt, my time up was perfectly fine. My official clocking was 1:22:17 and that includes a minute lost due to a route finding mistake. On the practice hike with Germaine last year our time was actually a couple of minutes slower.

I did the hike today in my Nike trail runners and they once again felt big and unstable. Yesterday, I felt like I never put a foot wrong in the Brooks shoes. Today, I was very unhappy in the Nikes.

Once at the top, I downed a half-dozen Peak Donuts and rested my weary legs. It felt unbelievably nice to sit and relax with nothing but an easy drive separating me from the hot tub at the cabin. I was very glad to get this hike in and decided to do another trip to the A-frame the next day. I hoped that another night at altitude will help make tomorrow's time on the hill considerably less painful than today's.

Thursday, August 18:

Today was a very good day. I decided to limit the hike to an A-frame round trip and nothing more. With that end in mind I set out from the summit at a little before 11am. The trip down was a relaxed affair and I used my time trying to assess the course and confirm my thoughts as to where the hard and easy parts were. I predictably concluded that the 16 Golden Stairs are the worst and that about half the route above the Stairs is almost comparably unpleasant. By contrast, a good portion of the middle mile is a long traverse on reasonably smooth ground. It got my vote as the easiest section.

I reached the turnaround point in 1:00:47, about five minutes faster than yesterday and certainly with no special effort. After a water break of just two-and-a-half minutes, I headed back up the hill. I was conscious of working hard from the first moment of the ascent and my goal was to top out within one hour and twenty minutes.

The trip up was a mixture of good and bad. I was proud to be able to motor by lots of other hikers and with my familiarity with the course refreshed, I felt a bit less lost on the giant face of the mountain. However, the terrain of last mile was not bashful about asserting itself against my tired legs. The worst part came shortly after I surmounted the 16 Golden Stairs. For some reason, I expected the finish line to appear shortly after the Stairs. This was simple-minded because I know that it takes 10 minutes when you are going downhill for the 16 Golden Stairs sign to be reached. In short, quite a few minutes of nasty terrain await you even after you have made it up the Stairs.

My legs were wobbly by the time I made it to the finish line. I had not done a time-check since the "2-miles to go" sign and when I punched the Stop button on my watch, I had little idea of what it would say. I was astonished and delighted to see 1:12:10. This was a best-ever performance and hugely better than the 1:15:53 I did in the 2005 Ascent. It encouraged me to think that my acclimatization routine was finally paying dividends. It was wonderful to have this performance in the books. Back at the cabin, I celebrated with an hour's soak in the hot tub.

Friday, August 19:

I had planned on doing the top couple of miles of the mountain after picking up my number at the Expo at Memorial Park. I thought it would be a quick matter to get some spare GUs and buy a pair of running shorts. Unfortunately, I had to drive miles to find a sporting goods store that had the things I wanted. By the time I finished shopping and drove back to Manitou Springs it was after noon and the clouds had rolled in over Pikes Peak. Consequently, I did my training hike in town.

It took me 22:15 to hike briskly from Memorial Park to the start of the Barr Trail. This was pretty much the same time I recorded three days ago. The trip up Ruxton Avenue is miserably steep and the half-mile or so on Manitou Avenue also has a depressingly uphill tilt. The thought of running this route is anything but appealing but experience shows that running is necessary for me to have any hope of a strong time.

Saturday, August 20 (Race Day):

Well, the race is over and the results are in. I finished in 4:34:14, a personal worst performance by a margin of almost 4 minutes. Nonetheless, I feel good about my day on the mountain and am proud of myself for making it to the top. Even though my time does not reflect it, my relative performance was a bit better than last year's. I finished commendably in the 38th percentile of my age group and in the 54th percentile of all finishers. Last year's age group ranking was the same but the overall percentile 4 points worse. This year, I would have needed just a 4:28:10 to finish in the top half of the field. By contrast, a 4:20:12 clocking was needed to finish in the top half in 2010. The eight minute difference in the median time is doubtlessly attributable to the unseasonably warm weather on race day this year. Make no mistake race day was a warm one. Throughout the week before the race the weather was making headlines; the heat wave was such that every day records were being broken or threatened-to-be-broken. When the race started at 7:30am the temperature was in the mid-70's and it never got much cooler, even at the top. It was so warm at the summit that I never even opened my sweat-check bag!

Oddly enough, I thought that I was going at a terrific pace from the start through the first leg of the race up to No Name Creek. I felt strong and was overjoyed by the fact that the crowd was not nearly as big a hindrance as it has been for the past couple of years. I reasoned that this meant that I had started fast enough to be among the quickest Second Wave runners and that I would be free to set my own pace rather than have it dictated by the slow-moving pack. I mentally congratulated myself for positioning myself so adroitly and as I approached No Name and my first scheduled time-check I was in the frame of mind of a kid about to open a Christmas present. I honestly thought that my No Name time would be wonderful. I was thinking that it would be under 1:10:00, maybe even a personal best. The Yuletide feeling ended abruptly when I saw that my split was a mediocre 1:14:10.

The leg to Barr Camp took almost fifty-seven minutes despite the fact that I ran all the flat sections through the Enchanted Forest and was seldom stymied by the crowd. My elapsed time to Barr Camp, 2:11:03, was nearly as awful as last year's and I was painfully aware that I was heading for a result I would not very much like. But, on the positive side, I was happy to be at Barr and confident that I'd manage to drag myself to the top. I even looked forward to getting above the tree-line to enjoy the incredible views of the Great Plains that are available from that airy vantage point. However, getting there was no picnic. The trail between Barr Camp and the A-frame was perfectly awful; narrow, irregular, strewn with inopportune step-ups and crowded with people. It was here that I first noticed the toll that the hot weather was taking on the field. There were burned-out people everywhere along the route sitting down and trying to massage life back into cramped legs. Others were walking stiff-legged, painfully attempting to avoid the cramp that would seize them the moment they lifted their knee too high. It was awful enough to watch these poor distressed wretches but even worse to realize that it would not take much provocation for me to land in the same bucket. Somewhere along the way to the A-frame I recalibrated my goals and decided that just finishing the race without an unscheduled stop would be more than good enough.

I was grateful to pass the top A-frame sign and begin the final stage of the race. I knew that my time for the leg from Barr Camp (1:01:50) was perfectly horrible but did not fret about it. Once I got above the A-frame I felt that nothing could keep me from finishing the race. I reflected wistfully that in practice a couple of days before I had completed the leg to the top in a personal best time of 1:12:10. I knew that it would be completely impossible to duplicate that performance today and that even if I did my finishing time would still be rotten. Hence, I stuck with my “just finish” directive and did not attempt anything heroic. This is not to say that I had completely given up on competing. I was absolutely thrilled to drop a couple of fellows who I had been playing tag with, passing and being passed by, since No Name Creek. I enjoyed the look of resignation in the eyes of one of these guys as he stopped for a breather at the final water station and I surged by. It is nice that in races even a turtle can have his moments of (relative) glory.

Topping out and passing under the “Finish” banner was thoroughly delightful. I was ever so happy to be there and offered a little prayer for the sad cramped masses perched by the trailside below. I was infinitely grateful that I was not among them.

After collecting my sweat-check bag and downing a couple of Gatorades, I was lucky to grab the last seat on a van to Glen Cove. From there I transferred to a waiting school bus and an hour later was breathing the thick warm air of Manatou Springs. I collected my finisher’s shirt at Memorial Park and drove to my waiting hot tub at the cabin. It was delightful to have the race behind me.

Post-Race Reflections:

I really thought that this would be my year to shine on the mountain. Giving myself a whole week of acclimatization and training on the course was a major commitment that I was confident would give me a big advantage versus prior years. In addition, by spending most of the summer at the ski house in the Adirondacks I had had the opportunity of doing a huge amount of hill climbing. This was fantastic because I put thousands of feet of vertical gain on my legs and got fully accustomed to going uphill. Naturally, hill training is completely impossible in Houston and on this account alone I felt more race-ready than ever before. I have been beating on the drum of better preparation since I started coming to the mountain in 2005. This year I thought that by simply following my own advice I would unlock the door to unprecedented success. Yet, all I got for my trouble was a personal worst performance. Yes, it was hot on race-day and the trail was in poor condition. Yes, the whole field did materially worse on average this year than last year. But still, a personal worst?

For whatever reason, I think that my acclimatization went poorly this year. I remember being quite surprised on Monday that the hike to No Name Creek was so tortured. I was similarly nonplussed on Wednesday during the trip up from the A-frame. All week long I felt not-quite-right and, apart from Thursday’s very strong practice session, none of my training produced objectively satisfying results. I wonder whether my age is working against me from an acclimatization standpoint? The sad fact is that I put a lot of time in the acclimatization bank but did not reap a notable reward.

I will definitely come back to Pikes Peak next year and hope for the stars to align in my favor weather-wise. I will plan on staying the full week and will train in much the same way as I did this year. However, I will make a special effort to do a top-to-Barr Camp round trip as part of my routine. Also, on the day before the race I will do the last two miles from the top in an attempt to eke out some more acclimatization benefits. I am confident that my race-day feeding plan is well dialed in (six GUs diluted with water in a plastic squeeze bottle is just about perfect) and I am more determined than ever to put a seriously big effort into the start of the race. I am convinced that, for me, getting to No Name Creek in a good time (1:10:00 or less) is the key to success. I felt seriously deflated this year when I saw my 1:14:10 clocking and that set me up for more trouble later on. It encouraged me to be more cautious than competitive. Once I saw that my time was slow I abandoned all hope of a strong result and accepted the relative comfort of survival-mode. I can't help but think that if my No Name time was better I would have thrown caution to the winds and tried harder. Whether this would have ultimately put me in the company of the cramped suffering masses by the trailside is anyone's guess. However, I owe it to myself to find out.

Logistics:

The only change of note is that the parking regulations in Manitou Springs have changed. All of the downtown area and adjacent blocks now have a three hour parking limit. You get one warning ticket after which a fine will be imposed. Parking on race-day needs to be on residential streets a bit further off Manitou Avenue than before.

August 30, 2011

Pikes Peak Ascent (Aug. 20, 2011)

<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	1:14:10	1:14:10	0:17:15
Barr Camp	7.6	3.3	10,200	1,400	2:11:03	0:56:53	0:17:14
A-Frame	10.2	2.6	11,800	1,600	3:12:53	1:01:50	0:23:47
Summit	13.3	3.1	14,110	2,310	4:34:14	1:21:21	0:25:54

Cumulative ET=> **4:34:14** **0:20:33**

2011 Ascent v. 2010 Ascent

	<u>2010 Time</u>	<u>2011 Time</u>	<u>Better/Worse</u>
No Name Creek	1:16:26	1:14:10	0:02:16
Barr Camp	0:55:08	0:56:53	0:01:45
A-Frame	1:00:41	1:01:50	0:01:09
Summit	1:18:01	1:21:21	0:03:20

Cumulative Difference=> **0:03:58**

2011 Ascent v. Prior Years

	<u>2011 Time</u>	<u>Better/Worse</u>
2005 Ascent	4:20:53	0:13:21
2007 Marathon	4:21:35	0:12:39
2008 Ascent	NA	NA
2009 Ascent	4:22:42	0:11:32
2010 Ascent	4:30:16	0:03:58
2011 Ascent	4:34:14	

2011 Ascent v. 4:14:00 Pace

	<u>4:14:00 Pace</u>	<u>2011 Time</u>	<u>Better/Worse</u>
No Name Creek	1:14:25	1:14:10	0:00:15
Barr Camp	0:54:37	0:56:53	0:02:16
A-Frame	0:51:49	1:01:50	0:10:01
Summit	1:13:09	1:21:21	0:08:12

Cumulative Difference=> **0:20:14**

2011 Ascent v. 3:59:00 Pace

	<u>3:59:00 Pace</u>	<u>2010 Time</u>	<u>Better/Worse</u>
No Name Creek	1:10:02	1:14:10	0:04:08
Barr Camp	0:51:23	0:56:53	0:05:30
A-Frame	0:48:45	1:01:50	0:13:05
Summit	1:08:50	1:21:21	0:12:31

Cumulative Difference=> **0:35:14**

Best / Worst Stages

	<u>Best</u>	<u>Worst</u>	<u>When</u>
No Name Creek	1:07:47	1:16:26	2008 / 2010
Barr Camp	0:52:10	0:56:53	2008 / 2011
A-Frame	0:54:52	1:01:50	2008 / 2011
Summit	1:15:53	1:23:46	2005 / 2007
Total	4:10:42	4:38:55	

Note on 2011 Race:

Exceptionally hot: sun + 75° / 70° start / finish

Placement in 2011 Race

age group	25 of 65	top 38%
men	699 of 1175	top 59%
all finishers	917 of 1704	top 54%