

Race Report

Imogene Pass Run 2018

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Race Information

I ran (slash hiked) the 45th annual [Imogene Pass Run](#) on September 8, 2018.

The Imogene Pass Run (IPR) is a 17.1 mile point-to-point mountain race within the western San Juan mountains of Colorado, run along a route which connects the towns of Ouray (7810 ft.) and Telluride (8750 ft.) by way of 13,114 foot Imogene Pass.

The joke is that it is a trail run “with only one hill” because the course elevation profile looks like this:

[\[Imogene Pass Run Course Profile\]](#) | *profil1.gif*

That’s over 5,000 feet of climbing in the first 10 miles (~10% average grade; see [the course on Trail Run Project](#)).

Although it is only 17.1 miles long, a finish time of under 3 hours is considered very good. In fact, the Imogene finish time for most runners is said to be close to their marathon time. But someone who excels at uphill and/or downhill running can finish the run significantly faster than a street marathon.

The course record is 2:05:56 set in 1993 by [Matt Carpenter](#) (of Pikes Peak Marathon fame). Carpenter has won the race several times, usually with a time under 2h10m, but when he isn’t participating the finishing time is usually around 2h15m. From what I can tell by looking at the [historical data](#), only one person

has even come within 5 minutes of his record.

I found a salty [old rant](#) circa 1999 on Carpenter's website complaining about the lack of competition at Imogene. Apparently for one year, 1998, the run was part of an international trail running series and gave cash prizes to the top finishers. After that year, the race organizers withdrew from the circuit, irresponsibly in Carpenter's opinion, so that local runners could continue to place at the top. In addition to Carpenter's complaints, his page provides access to his excellent course description. As he mentions, the uphill portion of the race is "open" meaning runners can take whichever route they think will be fastest to the top. To give an indication of my mental state while running, I don't remember *any* of the forks or possible shortcuts. Or many of the other landmarks.

Training and Logistics

One of the biggest challenges of trail races is just getting to them. That is especially true for someone with no money, no car, and no driver's license. And that is even more true of the Imogene Pass Run where registration opens at 6:00am months before the race starts and usually fills up within 30 minutes.

Luckily I know some very generous people. My sister not only paid my registration fee, but she woke up early and got us registered. She and her boyfriend (who has family in the area) also arranged for a us to stay at a house in Ouray the night before the race. In total there were four of us who registered: my sister, L., her boyfriend, M., our friend, R., and me. My dad had a truck for the summer and volunteered to help us get to the start line, and also signed up to help out at the finish line

(though it turned out they didn't need him on race day so he got to hang out in Telluride waiting for us to finish.)

Once a week in the months before the race my dad would pick me up in his truck and we would drive to a trail to run. That routine certainly helped prepare me for the race as it allowed me to spend some time running up and down steep terrain which I would have otherwise had no access to. My main goal this training cycle is a November road marathon, and I'm running more consistently than I ever have in preparation for that (averaging over 50 miles per week, which is high for me), so other than the weekly trail runs and a small taper the week of the race, I didn't train specifically for the Imogene.

The day before the race my dad, R., and I drove the six hours from Denver to Ouray where we met L. and M. at the packet pickup location. We got our bibs, shirts, socks (yay!), and some garlic butter toast. Before bed L., M., and R. were all busy stretching and taping up various injuries with [Kinesio tape](#). I rarely stretch and have never tried KT tape, but it was entertaining to watch as the living room in our Airbnb was filled with the sound of multiple instructional youtube videos simultaneously trying to unlock the secrets of the stretchy tape.

Race Day

Goals

I didn't know what to expect going into the race. Judging by the elevation profile I thought I'd be able to run the first 4 or 5 miles and have to walk most of miles 9 and 10. My intuition told me I

should be able to make it to the summit of the pass in about 2h30m, and then I was confident I could make it the last 7 miles down in under an hour. So 3h30m was my best-guess at a goal time.

My secondary goal was not to fall, especially on the steep down hill over loose rocks. I fell on a training run a few weeks earlier and cut the back of my head open on a tree stump (it wasn't bad, but could have been). I ran a 50K with my sister a few years ago where I managed to fall twice in the first two miles (once going up hill, once on a down hill).

Goal	Description	Completed?
A	3:30:00	Yes
B	Don't fall	Yes

Start to Lower Camp Bird aid station (mile 5)

I was up at 6am, coffee and toast and some fig newtons. We all made it to the start at 7am. Beautiful weather. Some years there is blizzard conditions at the summit. This year it was clear all day; a bit chilly in the shade but not too hot in the sun. The race started at 7:30am. Smooth sailing so far.

I decided to wear short sleeves and bring no jacket. But despite the good weather, I did wear cotton gloves the entire time so I could catch myself more confidently if I fell.

There are aid stations every 2-3 miles along the course, but I decided to carry my hand-held water bottle (16oz?) anyway.

Carrying water on runs is a newish thing for me, but I've really gotten into the habit of drinking whenever I feel like it. And when I run uphill I feel like it often. I also put two fig newtons and a little baggie of my sister's homemade molasses-based running goo in my shorts pockets.

Apparently for the first time ever the race started in a different direction to avoid traffic before connecting with the jeep road that goes up to Imogene pass, but as first-time runners we didn't know the difference.

R. and M. started up at the front and I never saw them once the race started. I started back with my sister, and we stayed near each other for the first 2 miles or so.

I tried to keep what felt like an easy effort during the first uphill. I was surprised (from looking at the elevation profile) how many *downhill* sections there were in the first 4 miles and tried to take advantage of them by staying relaxed and letting my cadence speed up to go with the flow of gravity. I knew soon enough the downhill would disappear completely (before returning with a vengeance on the other side of the summit.)

Before the race I imagined myself spending a minute or so to eat and drink at each of the aid stations to let my legs recover and make sure I kept my nutrition intake up. But when we got to Lower Camp Bird aid station at about mile 5 and 9,800' (the first station with food), everyone around me flew through in a few seconds with many people not taking anything at all. I got caught up in the peer pressure and only took an orange slice here (and from most subsequent stations) before immediately starting off again.

Lower Camp Bird to Upper Camp Bird aid station (mile 7.6)

The 2.5 miles from Lower Camp Bird to Upper Camp Bird include very little downhill and several steep uphill sections. One thing I wish I had practiced in training is walking at the steepest parts of hills, and then running again when it levels out a bit. My instinct is to run as far as I can, and then walk; but I'm sure that is less efficient and leaves me unlikely to ever start running again even when the trail levels out.

I followed the lead of the runners immediately in front of me and fell into a decent rhythm of walking the steepest part of each hill and then jogging until it got steep again. At times I felt like we were wasting precious runnable meters by walking. The last two miles to the summit would be practically un-runnable, so shouldn't we run now while we have a chance? I would be glad later that I didn't listen to myself.

Upper Camp Bird came sooner than I expected (mile 7.6 and 11,200'). About 1h30m by my watch. I had looked at last year's results online and noticed that most people around my goal time made it from Upper Camp Bird to the summit in about 50 minutes, so I was possibly ahead of 3:30 time.

I got my water bottle filled up with Tailwind, the electrolyte drink, which I've never tried before. I also got a couple pretzels and an orange slice. Then it was right back out, across a stream over two boards, and to the steepest section until the summit.

Upper Camp Bird to Imogene Pass Summit (mile 10.0)

I jogged, I think, from Upper Camp Bird to the [mile 8](#) sign. Then, like everyone I could see in front of me, I walked. Sometimes I stopped to breathe. Pausing briefly to look back through the clear air down the switch backs to see how high we had climbed from Upper Camp was invigorating. I got passed at least once during these slow miles, but for the most part we all just walked single-file trying to keep moving. Another thing I wish I had practiced more during training: hiking at altitude. Only two of my training runs were above 6,000', and only one above 10,000'.

Finally we took a sharp right on the last switch back to the high point on the course before jogging the 100 meters down to the pass (10 miles, 13,114'). My watch read 2h20m. Ahead of schedule! If I could find a rhythm running down, and not fall, I thought a 3:15 finish was realistic.

I pride myself on being able to eat anything while running, but for some reason the Tailwind in my water bottle tasted too rich to me; I sipped it a few times on the way up, but it was not quenching my thirst and my stomach did not seem too happy about it. I carried almost 16oz of it 2,000 vertical feet and then poured half of it out at the summit and had it replaced by water. The 50/50 dilution was much easier to drink.

I also got a cup of the famed Imogene Pass Run summit chicken soup broth. Eager to get jogging down past the steepest part of the descent, I drank it quickly. Too quickly. I felt it sloshing in my stomach for the next two miles.

The Descent: Summit to Finish Line (mile 17.1)

Me beginning the descent from the summit



The descent was slower than I expected, and it wasn't just the soup. My worries about not giving enough on the uphill were unfounded; my legs were *tired*. I did not trust them to keep up with my body on the descent. So I braked myself down the first three miles.

The 2013 race was won by Jason Wolfe of Flagstaff, AZ. On his descent he was being chased closely by the previous year's winner (Daniel Kraft):

No matter how hard I pushed down the technical, washed-out mountain side, Daniel was right there. Finally with about 3 miles remaining, I realized that I had a few min lead.. and I was dropping 4:50min/mile. I quickly thought "I am gonna win!". At that point, my right toe caught a rock.. and CRASH!.. I was on the ground cramping... and bleeding.

He got back up and ran to the finish line—where he was promptly taken to the ER for stitches. Jason’s account of the race is on his weblog, along with a photograph of his bleeding knee: [“October 6, 2013 - Imogene Pass Run ; UROC 100k ; Next Up”](#)

At mile 13 my stomach was feeling good and the road was becoming less steep. I was sure I could now lock in to a faster pace until the finish. Instead, my legs turned heavy and slowed down.

The most runnable part of the descent and I was walking. I realized I had done a poor job at nutrition management during the entire run, and my legs probably wanted more than orange slices and Tailwind. I ate both my fig newtons and my goo baggie, drank some water, got passed by a couple people as I walked for a minute, and then started up again.

This time my legs responded and I managed to keep to about 8:00/mile pace and soon could see the rooftops of Telluride. Actually my GPS watch wasn’t handling the elevation change well and had under-estimated how far I’d run, so my pace was a little bit faster than I thought. As another consequence, the

finish line appeared about a mile sooner than I expected. I didn't mind.

Official time: 3:20:05

Post Race

We walked around Telluride for a bit, rode the gondola, then went to the award ceremony.

R. not only placed in the top 20 overall, but took 2nd in his division. M. finished in under 3 hours and was also awarded 2nd place in his division. My sister didn't get top-3, but she also placed toward the top of her division. I barely made it to the top 30% of mine, but I'm quite happy with my time. 3h20m is my goal time for my marathon in November, so I'm hoping the adage about Imogene being an indicator of marathon fitness holds true!

A few days after the race I could walk and run mostly normally again, and I'm fully back into my marathon training plan.