

HIGH COUNTRY RUNNING

Breaking barriers, records at Imogene: A Flagstaff story

BY RENEE METEVIER
Special to the Daily Sun

The Imogene Pass Mountain Race in Telluride, Colorado, is a true test of endurance, grit and heart.

This year, it became the stage for one of my proudest running moments — breaking the 52-year-old course record while surrounded by the incredible spirit of the Flagstaff running community, which made up the largest percentage of race entries from any city. What made the day truly unforgettable wasn’t just the record or the podium — it was the miles shared, the laughter through pain and the teamwork that carried me up and over one of the toughest mountain passes in the country.

The 17.1-mile race begins with a grueling 10-mile climb, one that tests not only your legs but your determination. Early on, I found myself running and pacing alongside friends and training partners from Flagstaff — people whose faces I see on local trails and whose energy fuels me daily. I

started the climb sitting in 11th overall, but each switchback brought new focus and motivation. Encouraged by familiar voices and that steady Flagstaff grit, I gradually moved up through the field.

Cresting Imogene Pass at 13,114 feet, I knew the race was far from over. The descent from the summit is notoriously steep, rocky and intimidating — especially for a first-timer like me. I found myself running beside another Flagstaff runner that I had caught just before the summit, both of us laughing nervously as we began the crazy downhill plunge.

“Try to not put on the brakes and don’t die, lol,” we joked, half in fear, half in pure exhilaration.

The laughter helped cut through the fatigue, and the camaraderie gave us both courage. We reminded each other to stay loose, stay focused and, most importantly, have fun. When I felt a surge of strength in the final 5 miles, he encouraged me to push harder, keep racing the men and finish strong.

By the time I crossed the finish line, I had moved up to fourth overall, beating the next woman by over 20 minutes, was the top Flagstaff finisher and shattered the long-standing female course record. The disbelief quickly turned into joy as I was met by cheering Flagstaff friends — some celebrating their own records, others celebrating comebacks or simply completing one of the toughest mountain runs around.

One of the most inspiring moments of the day came from learning that an 84-year-old man (also from Flagstaff!) became the oldest person ever to finish the race. Having now experienced how treacherous that descent truly is, I am beyond impressed by his accomplishment.

The celebration afterward was pure joy — a mountain-town mix of exhaustion, elation and deep appreciation for the journey. As a prize, I earned free entry to next year’s race as well as a copy of “To Imogene, A Flagstaff Love Letter,” a beau-

tiful collection of stories, poems and photos from Flagstaff runners who have fallen in love with this race and what it represents: community, courage and connection.

Running has a unique way of bringing people together — across ages, abilities and backgrounds. Whether you’re breaking records or breaking personal barriers, the essence is the same: discovering what you’re made of. Doing hard things makes us stronger — not just physically, but also mentally and emotionally.

As the African proverb says: If you want to run fast, run alone. If you want to run far, run together.

Here’s to running fast and far — with friends by your side, laughter on the downhill and the spirit of Flagstaff in your heart.

Renee Metevier has won six USATF national championships from track to cross country to roads to trails! Her versatility has spanned over three decades, boasting a marathon personal best of 2:27:17 and a 5000m personal best of 15:15.78.



COURTESY

Renee Metevier crosses the finish line of the Imogene Pass Mountain Race.

You can join her and some of the Flagstaff community at the Team Run Flagstaff track workouts on Tuesday evenings as well as upcoming strength workouts she will be leading on Thursday evenings!

Rachel Smith is the coordinating editor for the High Country Running column. You can email her at rachschneid18@gmail.com to contribute to this column.

FOOTBALL
FROM PAGE 1

through multiple tackles to score a 32-yard rushing touchdown to retake the lead. On the first play on the ensuing drive, senior AJ Ragan picked off Valdez and ran back for another score.

In a matter of 10 seconds, a 7-7 tie turned into a 20-7 Coconino lead to end the first quarter.

Flagstaff’s defense made a fourth-down stop deep in its own territory, signaling that the game was still up in the air. Coconino soon put together a balanced drive that ended with Hanley’s second touchdown pass of the game to junior Austin Rath, who had a handful of deep receptions throughout the night.

Up 27-7, Coconino got the ball back with about two minutes left in the half. Looking to score before the break, the Panthers got to the 30-yard line. A lack of timeouts and some confusion with personnel led to a rushed field goal attempt that was no good.

Cook said that is also something that will need to be fixed.

“We had some problems with substitutions and stuff like that tonight,” Cook said. “That’s part of what I’m talking about that needs to be cleaned up. Especially with special teams, we didn’t have the right people on the field. We’ll address that.”

Flagstaff opened the second half with some



PHOTOS BY JAKE BACON, ARIZONA DAILY SUN

Flagstaff’s Teyan Clerry (23) dives for the end zone Thursday during a crosstown rivalry game against Coconino in the Walkup Skydome. Clerry came up just short on the play.

trickery. A reverse pitch to Carpenter was thrown back to Valdez, who found a wide-open junior Aeneyas Clerry to make it 27-14 less than two minutes into the third quarter.

Eagles head coach Mickey Clements said scoring out of the locker room had become a trend for Flagstaff.

“The last few games, we’ve been scoring on first drives of halves,” Clements said. “It was great to see. You get momentum, you get excited. That’s maybe the story of our season a little bit. I feel like we’re turning a corner, and then we shoot ourselves in the foot somewhere along the way.”

Flagstaff had another chance to get back in the game when Hanley fumbled the ball while trying to reach for a touchdown on a long run. The Eagles

recovered it in the end zone four minutes into the half.

Unable to take advantage of the miscue, Flagstaff punted the ball away. Coconino made up for the error by fixing what was almost another mistake. Hanley could not handle a low snap, instead guiding the loose ball to Callado, who ran for a 12-yard touchdown to extend the lead to 33-14 with 4:58 left in the third quarter.

Junior Bruce Larson came up with an interception on a deflected pass to set up one more scoring drive before the final quarter. Hanley connected with senior Habib Aceval, who was brought down just outside the 1-yard line. Buckley got on the board with a 1-yard dive into the end zone to make it 40-14 after three.

Buckley got his moment in the limelight away from the crowded goal-line runs he has been used to. He put the finishing touches on Coconino’s highest-scoring game this season with a breakaway touchdown from midfield.

“It felt so cool,” Buckley said. “I’m a little scared trying to run away from everyone. I know I’m a little slower, but it’s just a great feeling. I’m glad I can be able to do that a couple of times every once in a while.”



HATTIE LOPER, ARIZONA DAILY SUN

Coconino’s Blanca Ventura Gomez (11) celebrates a touchdown in the end zone during a crosstown rivalry game against Flagstaff on Wednesday at Flagstaff High School.

EAGLES
FROM PAGE 1

knocking on the door at the Coconino 3-yard line. Edgewater found junior Morgan Maloney in the back of the end zone to cut the lead to 10-7 with 39 seconds left in the half.

Flagstaff was not done just yet. Following the kickoff, the Eagles forced their second interception of the game and returned the ball to the Coconino 22-yard line. It only took Edgewater one play to find senior wide receiver Donna Carrasco Gonzalez in the end zone on a post route. With a defender on her back, Carrasco Gonzalez made the grab. A missed extra-point attempt kept the score at 13-10 going into the halftime break.

Flagstaff’s defense forced Coconino to punt on its first three drives in the second half.

A shanked Panthers punt opened the door for the Flagstaff offense. Starting on the Coconino 31-yard line, Edgewater unloaded a deep ball to Culwell, who caught the contested pass in the end zone around two defenders and extended the Flagstaff lead to 20-10 with 2:30 remaining in the third quarter.

Everywhere became four-down territory for the Panthers in the final quarter. A 10-play

drive for the Eagles to start the fourth quarter was highlighted by a hook-and-ladder play that put Flagstaff deep in Coconino territory. Flagstaff hit a field goal from the 9-yard line to extend the lead.

With just 6:36 remaining, Ventura Gomez drove the Panthers all the way down to the 3-yard line. The goal-line defense stood tall, and Flagstaff broke up a fourth-and-goal pass to take over possession and seal the game.

Coming off a loss the day before against Mingus Union, Flagstaff got a huge boost to end the regular season and bolster its playoff seeding. After Coconino won the inaugural city rivalry game last season, Flagstaff’s win on Wednesday showed that the competitiveness and parity between the two is real.

“You know, for it to be the second year of the rivalry, them winning the first year, us winning this year, our seniors can go out and hold this in their memory,” Johnson said.

Flagstaff (11-2, 4-2 4A Grand Canyon) is in position to host a state playoff game, with the first round set for Nov. 12.

Coconino (9-4, 3-3 4A Grand Canyon Region) will likely go on the road to start the playoffs, but is set to make the 16-team field.



Flagstaff quarterback AJ Valdez (2) throws while under pressure Thursday during a crosstown rivalry game against Coconino in the Walkup Skydome.