

ALERT TOP STORY

HIGH COUNTRY RUNNING

High Country Running: Taking flight at Imogene Pass Run

MARK JAMES Special to the Daily Sun 22 hrs ago



Mark James recalls taking a spill -- or taking flight -- during a downhill section of the Imogene Pass Run.
Courtesy

It was early autumn. Higher aspirations were goading me on toward the mountains. Along with so many others in my running community, I was training for one of Flagstaff's seasonal rituals: the Imogene Pass Run. On this particular day, I had the trail to myself, and I had been keeping a respectable pace while ascending the trail to the rim of Humphreys Peak.

Cresting the rim, I knew the hardest work was completed, and the reward of a brisk downhill was about to begin. As I descended the trail that I had labored up, I soon found the pace that can become an instinctual toe-tapping downhill dance.

Feet decide where they will land, almost intuitively, barely contacting the trail, then spring up again to search, mid-flight, for the next safe touch down. Knees are kept a bit higher than usual to more effectively skirt the obstacles that pop into view and can shock the runner out of their wandering thoughts. On a good day, a descent like this becomes an invigorating Irish jig down the mountain.

But rocky trails will disguise the obstacles meant to upend the runner out of their rhythmic flight. There is often no smart place for the mind to go during these harrowing descents other than staying locked in on keeping the knees high, the feet from tripping and the mind always half-step ahead.

On this particular day, I was toe-tapping my way through an especially steep and rocky section of the trail, when the tip of my shoe caught the top of a tree root. It was as if it had been lying in wait for such an opportunity as this.

With barely an instant to react, I was launched and airborne, in full-flight: Superman without any superpowers. I was a projectile, preparing for an inevitable headfirst landing. My right arm, independent of my brain, reflexively reached out to hook the solid trunk of a well-placed pine tree. Helpful, but not enough to break the crash landing. Unlike so many other falls in the past, I don't recall ever colliding with the rocky ground. When I quickly came to consciousness, I realized the skin of my forearm was shredded but my body was, otherwise, surprisingly intact. I stood on the trail stunned by the realization of what had just happened, and what worse fate had been averted.

Deflated from my runner's high, I committed myself to a safe trot through the remainder of the downhill section, determined to concentrate on staying alert to the perils of a steep trail and a wandering mind. A great idea, I realized, until the next time that I would inevitably falter.

Taking flight seems to be a certainty that increases with each passing year on the trails. For me, the risk is still worth the reward, and a slowing pace has an added purpose: to preserve my still functional body for further explorations of trails that will lead me back into the wild.

Mark James earned his scars honestly with years of climbing and descending our incredible trails alongside our incredible running community.

Rachel Smith is a professional runner and amateur mother. She is also the coordinating editor for this column and encourages people to send their stories to her at rachscheid18@gmail.com.