

# Podium Runner

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## What Jenny Hoffman Learned Running (Almost) Across the Country

*An impressive go at the trans-continental run record delivers plenty of take-aways for this ultramarathon champion.*



*In the Nevada desert.*

She didn't quite make the FKT (Fastest Known Time) for the Trans America Run, but Jenny Hoffman's efforts to break the trans-continental record was impressive nonetheless. Beginning in San Francisco on September 11, Hoffman set out for New York City with visions of beating the former time of 54 days, 16 hours and 24 minutes, set in 2017 by Sandy Villines. Hoffman was on track all the way through, but a devastating knee injury stopped her cold a week shy of her end point.

The 41-year old Hoffman had a purpose beyond setting a new FKT, however. She also used her run to fundraise for a non-profit, non-partisan group of mathematicians developing algorithms and advocacy to fight gerrymandering. "I love this country," she

says. “It makes me sad that we are currently so divided, and that rights and resources are so unequally distributed. So it seemed fitting to me that as I ran across the country and got to know its many landscapes and viewpoints a little better, I should also be raising money for something that is uniquely American.”

### **2500 Miles To Ohio**

In all, Hoffman made it 2,560 miles in 42 days, averaging 61 miles per day. Her knee injury—a meniscal root tear—showed up just east of Akron, Ohio, a mere one week away from finishing out the run. “I’m disappointed but grateful,” she says as she recovers from surgery to repair the damage. “I went into this not knowing what to expect from my body or the journey, so I’m happy to have made it as far as I did.”



*With Pete Kostelnick in Ohio the day her knee gave out.*

Hoffman isn't a flash-in-the-pants runner who went after this FKT. Her resume includes three ultra running national championships, a spot on the gold-medal winning IAU 24-hour world championship team in 2017, and many other noteworthy finishes. She was partially inspired to take on the run, in fact, by 24-hour teammate [Pete Kostelnick](#), who set the men's trans-continental FKT in 2016, and who offered up advice on how to manage the logistics of the run. She was backed on the run by [Nathan Sports](#) and [Dirty Girl Gaiters](#).

### **Watch Out for Yosemite on the Weekend**

You don't make it that far on a run without learning a thing or two, and Hoffman—a Harvard professor and physicist—says she has many takeaways about planning and executing a personal epic run like this, properly plotting logistics being one of them. “We made some small errors here,” she says. “Things like hitting Yosemite on a weekend, for instance.”

Hoffman says that Yosemite posed challenges because the RV traffic was heavy on the park's narrow roads and she spent a good deal of time hopping on and off them from pavement to dirt or gravel. This in turn contributed to leg fatigue and minor injuries, she says.

“I haven't had blisters on my feet in years, but in the two days running through the park, my left foot became covered in them,” she says. “My left foot must have been landing in all sorts of unusual ways it wasn't used to. I developed a really painful ankle and shin splints from the maneuvering on and off the uneven surfaces.”

### **Adjust Stride and Schedule**

After this, Hoffman focused every step on a shorter stride, higher turnover, and forefoot striking in an effort to heal and prevent re-injury. She also took two very light, easy days, one a 20-miler and the next a 3-miler. “It didn't help right away, but as everyone was telling me, the shin splits eventually healed and I was able to return to more planned mileage totals,” she says. “By day 15 I was pain free and having fun again, hitting 60 miles that day.”

She already had a 74-mile day in the bank (day one) and managed another 70-mile day along the way. This made up for her two short days and put her back on a 60-mile-per-day schedule.

As Hoffman reported her progress and setbacks online, she drew encouragement from fellow runners following her on her [facebook page](#). “People I didn't even know were offering advice and cheering me on,” she says. “It was really helpful.”

### **Play Mind Games**

Hoffman says that playing mental games also became part of the package. “Most days I'd start before sun up, generally around 4:30 a.m.,” she says. “I'd tell myself that I had to make it 30 miles on all healthy food. After that I could start splurging and for the final 10 miles each day, I'd bribe myself with treats.”

Learning and adjusting as she progressed, Hoffman began sleeping without an alarm to waken her. “That way I didn’t disrupt my normal sleep cycle,” she says, “which I think was beneficial to recovery.”



*With fellow scientists and ultrarunners, Serena Eley & Jordan Wirfs-Brock at highest point on the run.*

### **Get More People**

Hoffman ran most of her miles with a crew of only two people at one time, Dwight Dammers and Phil McCarthy for the first four weeks, and Dammers and Dean Hart for the last two. They leapfrogged each other, one in an RV who would get to a nightly

campsite each day ahead of Hoffman. "Their work was all consuming," she says. "From shopping and fueling to massage, they were on for 12 to 15 hours a day."

If she were doing the trans-continental run again, Hoffman says, she'd likely go for a bigger crew or aim for more running company along the way to better keep her mind occupied. "I did have friends who joined me in Colorado, and it was a huge spiritual lift," she says. "At any moment, the fear of no foreseeable break from the discomfort was worse than the discomfort itself. Having more people to run with would have been more distracting and more fun."

### **Come Back Wiser**

As she ran ever closer to the east coast, it wasn't until the final few days that she began to notice anything amiss with her knee. "I noticed some stiffness leading up to the acute injury, having trouble bending it past 90 degrees," she says. "As long as I was running straight, I wasn't feeling pain, however, until it suddenly gave out."

Hoffman's PT and surgeon agreed that the knee injury was result of cumulative normal wear and tear over many years, as is often the case with this particular injury.

Had injury not interrupted, Hoffman's husband Daniel had planned to join her for the final 100 miles into New York City, with a goal completion date of October 29 or 30. While she's laid up for now, Hoffman hopes to give the trans-continental run another go, apply lessons learned and finish business in the future.

"It was harder than I expected and I have huge respect for those who have done this run before me," she says. "I learned that the mental challenge is harder than the physical, which caught me off guard."