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So, Professor Hoffman is Running Across the Country (For the Third Time)

Physics professor Jenny Hoffman is attempting to break the Guinness world record for fastest transcontinental run by a woman.

BY [HANNAH W. DUANE](#) October 19, 2023



Physics professor Jenny Hoffman is running (yes, running) from SF to NY.

Physics professor Jennifer E. Hoffman '99 is halfway to New York and her calves hurt. Averaging 60 miles a day, she is running, in Forrest Gump fashion, across America: one corn field, small town, and two-lane highway at a time. To be clear: she's on sabbatical. When I spoke to her on a Wednesday evening, she was cheerful and matter-of-fact, eating her dinner of six eggs and a salad as she told me about her attempt on the wildest of world records: the trans-continental run.

Radical long-distance running is not new for Hoffman. She started distance running while an undergraduate at Harvard. At the time, she mostly ran along the Charles. But with encouragement from a teaching fellow, she decided to embark on her very first marathon. Together, they drove to run the Philadelphia Marathon. In a blog post, she wrote, "Not nearly enough training, not enough vaseline, not enough food... we brought some chocolate power gels, but they were so gross that we didn't eat anything until mile 18, at which point we were pretty much toast."

In the years since, she's gotten better at planning ahead.

"I was always intrigued by the longer distances," she says. "I'm not particularly fast or talented, but I'm stubborn and I work hard."

Her distance increased from marathons to 50 milers and 24-hour events. On her very-2000s blog, she posted her CV, dutifully listing her magna cum laude graduation from Harvard in 1999 and Ph.D. in Physics from the University of California, Berkeley, alongside a complete race list from 1998–2011.

Her blog posts — written in white type on a dark green background — provide detailed accounts of these races. In 2004, she ran the Miwok 100k, her first ultramarathon. She especially appreciated the boiled potatoes at the aid stations. She ran the Superior Trail 100 in 2004 (101 miles in 28 hours, 31 minutes, and 51 seconds, the fastest time for female racers), and lamented the rocks and roots which exhausted her "feet-lifting muscles." And then there was Across the Years, a 24-hour event from Dec. 31 to Jan. 1 of looping the track, which she completed in 2006 (clocking 126.7 miles). She describes being unable to run after 12 and a

half hours as a “total bonk” and then making it her “New Year’s Resolution to start running again.” Then, in 2014, she brought home the national title in the 24-hour run, completing just over 127 miles.



Jenny Hoffman (left) and a friend Grace Fisher.

But none of this was enough for Hoffman, who in 2019 turned her eyes towards transcontinental running. The Guinness world record for the women’s transcontinental run was set by Sandra Villines in 2017. Villines ran for 55 days, 16 hours, and 23 minutes from San Francisco to New York City. In 2019, Hoffman made her first attempt on Villines’s transcontinental record.

“My run is driven by gratitude for the beauty of this country, and the freedom it affords to dream big, work hard, and achieve goals,” she said at the time. Hoffman ran for 42 days, averaging 61 miles a day, propelling herself from San Francisco to Ohio. But near Cleveland, her knee gave out. And so Hoffman, too, had to stop. When I spoke to her about it, the disappointment of completing only 2,560 miles, with 450 to go, was palpable.

“It’s a big, audacious goal,” she says. “And I tried and failed.” Actually, she says, she tried twice. In 2022, she planned a second attempt, which ended before it began due to a torn hamstring.

So she’s trying again. On Sept. 16, Hoffman set out from San Francisco, posting 65 miles on her first day. In the weeks since, she’s been continuing much the same. She gets up between three and four in the morning and tries to get out as quickly as possible. Her crew meets her every three miles with snacks and other supplies. On meticulous Strava posts, you can see the long thin line of her journey, with endless 11–14 minute mile splits listed out in brutal detail. The summary shows mile count alongside calories exerted, a daily eight or nine thousand.

When I asked her what she thinks about while she runs, she highlighted these intense caloric needs. On the day we spoke, she estimated she ate a smoothie, a banana, two egg sandwiches, three bagels with cream cheese, two muffins, two brownies, four mega cookies, four Pop-Tarts, and then six eggs and a salad for dinner. And when refueling isn’t front and center, she’s focused on America.

“The middle of the country is so big,” she remarks. “There’s a lot of people working really hard to feed the coasts.” Running across America is not an urban experience. Her days are spent on a mixture of highways and farm roads, with the occasional sidewalk. Her run has taken her through Yosemite and the mountains of Colorado, but also past a cement factory in Utah, where she was gifted a breakfast burrito. Right now, she’s running on highways with dozens of semis spraying fertilizer for the Nebraska harvest. She highlighted how her 2019 attempt gave her a much greater appreciation for the “glory and the diversity of our country,” and it’s also made her more tolerant and empathetic.

When I asked her what she hopes people will take away from her monumental project, she says, “I hope that by pushing through the hard and the failures that that could end up being an inspiration to some people to pursue whatever their big audacious dream is, even if it’s quite different from this one.”