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Physics Professor Jennifer Hoffman '99 Shatters Women's Transcontinental Running Record



Harvard professor Jennifer E. Hoffman '99 ran from San Francisco to New York in under 48 days, setting a world record Friday.

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Harvard Physics professor Jennifer E. Hoffman '99 broke the world record for the fastest trans-America run by a woman last Friday, running more than 3,000 miles in under 48 days.

Hoffman began her run in San Francisco and ended in New York. Each day, she ran around for 15 hours, covering an average of 63 miles. The previous record was 54 days, set in 2017 by Sandra Villines.

Hoffman said the transcontinental run has been a longtime goal of hers.

“I’ve always dreamed about doing this since I was a kid. I’ve always dreamed about crossing the U.S. under my own power,” she said.

This is Hoffman’s third attempt at breaking the world record. Hoffman’s 2019 attempt was halted 2,560 miles into her run when she suffered a knee injury in eastern Ohio. According to Hoffman’s blog, she has since “dreamed every single day for 4 years about redoing and completing this run.”

Still, Hoffman’s decision to make a third world-record attempt was last-minute.

As a member of the U.S. National 24-Hour team, which competes in ultramarathon events, Hoffman originally wanted to focus on training for a December world championship competition.

But Hoffman said she reconsidered in mid-August when Pete Kostelnick — her close friend and the men’s transcontinental world record holder — experienced a serious car accident.

“I had this realization that anything could happen any day. You don’t know when you’re going to be in a car accident that might end the dream,” Hoffman said.

“Talking to him really convinced me to go for it now, while I could.”

Hoffman and her team scrambled to organize the intense run after she made the decision to pursue the record.

“I had the training in the bank, but wasn’t sure if all the logistics were going to come through, but miraculously, I have a fantastic team of women who supported me,” Hoffman said.

From driving the RV to dispensing hugs and chocolate chip cookies, the crew made the run a “team effort,” Hoffman said.

“If I didn’t have such a great crew making all of those challenges invisible to me so that I could just focus on running, there’s no way I could have done this,” Hoffman added.

Hoffman’s support system also extended far beyond her core team.

“Throughout almost every state, I had at least one moment when a friend surprised me who just happened to be passing through and caught me on the road,” Hoffman said.

But even “total strangers,” whom Hoffman encountered on her run, made an impact. In Nebraska, after hearing about the run, a woman offered Hoffman a dozen fresh eggs. In another state, a rancher offered her a free t-shirt from his ranch.

“There’s just so many moments like that — of just pure generosity of strangers,” Hoffman said.

Hoffman also attracted a plethora of online supporters. Her Instagram and Facebook pages gained a combined 2,800 followers, who stayed engaged throughout the run. Hoffman also carried a tracker that broadcasted her location every 10 minutes and could receive messages from the general public.

“Throughout the day, people would send very brief messages of encouragement,” Hoffman said, “It was really powerful to feel a huge community of people watching and rooting for me.”

During the final stretch of the run — spanning 12 miles from the George Washington Bridge to New York City Hall — Hoffman was joined by family, friends, and students from “all parts” of her life, cheering her on.

“A friend from kindergarten, a friend from when I worked at Stanford, so many friends live in the New York City area,” Hoffman said, “It felt like the Pied Piper — more and more friends kept gathering in this pack behind me.”

Hoffman said her supporters and team were ultimately what pushed her to shatter the world record.

“There was no question that I had to continue, no matter how hard it was, because I owed it to all these people,” Hoffman said.

After the December 24-Hour championship, Hoffman said she hopes to take “significant time off” from running before continuing to chase new running goals.

Despite the many “falls and face plants and tears,” Hoffman said she could not be more elated to break the record.

“I failed a lot of times before I succeeded,” she said. “I hope that somebody somewhere is inspired to overcome a failure and continue to pursue an audacious goal because I think failures are part of the process.”