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Greenwich Sentinel

Greenwich grown Jenny Hoffman breaks the record for a woman's run across America

By Anne W. Semmes
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Jenny Hoffman running somewhere in Nebraska on the evening of October 12 with a dog following.

Perhaps it was that field hockey coach at Greenwich Academy who shared with Jenny he'd run 100 miles. Jenny thought he was "pretty cool," hearing that "Humans can run 100 miles." Someday, she told herself, "I'm going to do that," and today, the Guinness Book of Records is at work ratifying ultrarunner Jenny Hoffman's record-breaking run crossing America by a week-and-nearly-a-day, completed as of last Friday in New York City.

This was Jenny's third try, she was two-thirds across the country (from San Francisco to New York) when she suffered a severe knee injury, a third try brought another injury. So those last 12 miles last Friday were nearly heart-breaking, but she became buoyed by "a pack of 20-30 runner friends," surrounding her, including those from all aspects of Jenny's life. Greenwich Academy friends, former PhD students – Jenny has taught physics at Harvard for 18 years, and "physics collaborators from other universities" were there. "I felt so blessed," she shares.

Today, Jenny is back teaching at Harvard, having taken that necessary sabbatical, but we caught up with Jenny at her mom's (Caroline Hoffman – a noted hiker) the day after Jenny's triumphant arrival, where we met Jenny's supportive husband Daniel Larsen and 14-year-old son Zephyr, both runners. Her other son and daughter awaited her in Cambridge.

"I have a great husband," Jenny said of her 6-foot 3-inch mate (Jenny is 5-foot-3-inches). "He did all of the routing details behind the scenes. So even though he was not along for most of the journey, he was in contact and dealing with all of the turns...He was definitely behind the scenes the whole time."

Last September 16 was Jenny's transcontinental starting day on a route where previous records were made by a man and a woman. "Now the ultrarunning is not part of the Olympics," Jenny explains, "It's just a personal goal." She ran her first 100-miles in her mid-20's, "with some intervals for three babies."

So, what are some of the rules for this transcontinental run? "You can't go on private property without permission...You need to do everything on foot. You need two witnesses a day to say they saw you running... You need a little bit of video at the start and end of every day to say, 'Now I'm leaving this point,' and, 'Now I'm ending up at this point.'"

For tracking Jenny would wear two watches "at all times that are tracking exactly where I go all day that I would upload at the end of the day. But I also had a tracking device, which was broadcasting my location every 10 minutes continuously, so people could follow in real time and know where I was."

The Daily Runs

To run those 3,048-miles “from the Pacific Ocean to the Atlantic Ocean” took her 47-days, 12-hours, and 35-minutes. Mind you, she ran only during the day, some 15 hours, sleeping some six hours a night in a rented RV. Rising early, she was averaging 63.3 miles a day. “I started every day with a cup of coffee and a banana, and then at the first two stops, at three miles and six miles, I had an egg sandwich each.” She’d move on to bagels, peanut butter and jelly. “And then in the afternoon, a lot of baked goods, sugary stuff to just keep me going.” For dinner a half dozen eggs, cheese, salad, peanuts, and a protein smoothie – “That’s 8,000 calories a day.”

For her necessary crew she had two women, one the main RV driver to take care of logistics, including route changes if a bridge was out (her route was mainly two-lane roads), or to call in a sheriff to get rid of those following dogs. “I got chased by dogs for six miles.” Other women crew member friends would fly in for one or two weeks to bring her that food while she ran, and “make sure that I have sunscreen on,” she tells, “and that I’ve got enough calories, and enough fluids.”

Then there were those weather and mountain range challenges. “On the whole, I was lucky,” she says. But then there was that lightning and hailstorm when she was running through California’s Tioga Pass, at 9,900 feet. And “when there’s lightning, that’s the one thing I’m not going to run through. So, my crew car (in addition to her RV) came to where I was when the lightning became dangerous, and I just sat it out in the crew car and then started running again from that location.” There was that heat wave in Ohio, and in Pennsylvania, three straight days of rain, but then came the great finish on that “beautiful evening in New York City.”

At the end of every running day Jenny would write in her journal. Her daily journals are worth a read on Facebook and Strava, a social media for runners. And likely she wrote of what was making a profound impact on her running across middle America.

Revelations on the Way

“One thing you learn from running across the country is that the center of the country is big, and it’s very different from the coastal cities where we have this very dense population. But 99.9 percent of the country is open space with people who are ranching and farming and providing the food for the coastal cities. There’s a lot of people who work hard who have a completely different set of life experiences, and they’re wonderful, kind, friendly, helpful people who look out for each other because the population density is low. So, I have a great appreciation for the diversity of America.”

So, what’s Jenny’s next ultrarun challenge? Definitely no more cross-continent runs. She needs time to recover – with lots of massages. But come December 1 she’s off to Taiwan for her third World Championships, sponsored by the International Association of Ultra Runners. “It’s a 24-hour run, and every country can send six men and six

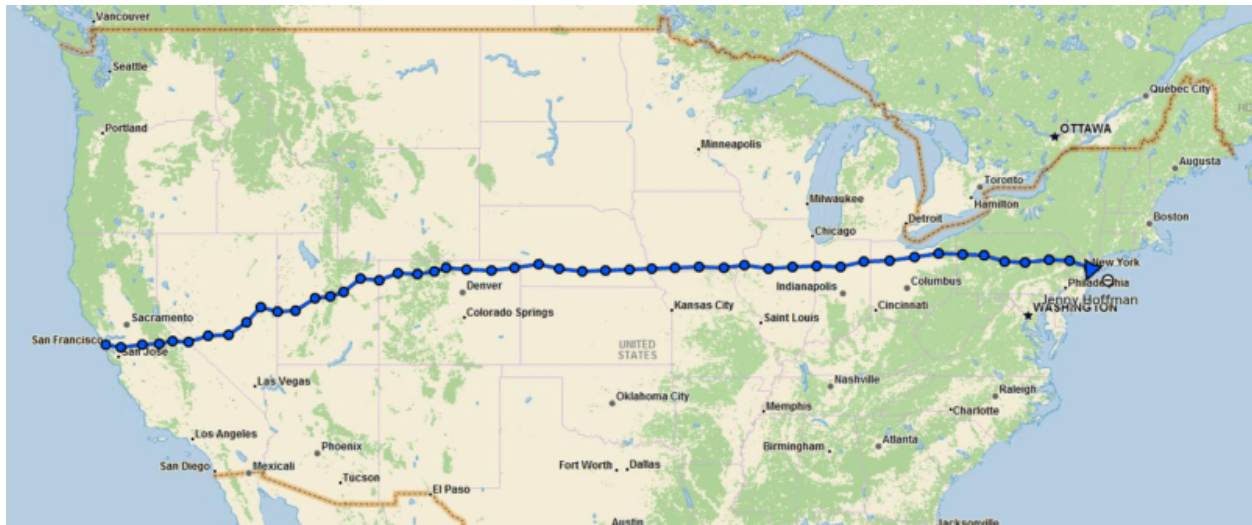
women to go compete,” she tells, “And you run around a loop for 24 hours – no stopping, and they measure the total mileage in 24 hours.”

Does Jenny have shelves filled with physical prizes? “For many of the races there are prizes,” she says, “but they’re quirky. Ultras are a quirky community of people.” So, prizes can be “a clay pig, mug, or glass trophy,” with one standout when she won the National Championships for the 24-hour race. A friend had won the men’s championship prize and when she was presented with her trophy, “It had no boobs, and it said, ‘First Woman’ and his trophy had boobs and it said, ‘First Man.’ So, a male-female trophy exchange was in order.

And what will follow the Taiwan challenge? “I have one more on my bucket list, which is the Spartathlon in Greece. It’s a 153-mile race from Sparta to Athens. And that has been a dream of mine forever. The original 153-mile marathon, right? And I have qualified for that. So, I’ll be running that next September.

So, now that Jenny is 45 has the running challenge increased? “I’m not as fast as I was in my 20’s,” she says. “But I’m also mentally stronger than I was in my 20s, and so there’s some kind of a balance.” So, “Maybe the 40’s is a good crossing point where you’re optimized.”

And what does Jenny hope her ultrarunning experience will inspire in her children? “Just determination to not give up on a dream. So, I hope that my kids will see that determination pays off, that you’re not always going to succeed on the first try. And sometimes the failures are devastating, but you just pick yourself up and you try again.”



Jenny Hoffman’s 3000-plus mile running route across America that she finished in record-breaking time.



Jenny Hoffman being comforted by her husband Daniel Larson with 16 more miles to go to the George Washington Bridge and another 12 miles to New York City Hall. Contributed photo.



*Jenny Hoffman crossing the Delaware River and arriving in New Jersey.
Contributed photo.*



Triumphant ultrarunner Jenny Hoffman preparing to return home to Harvard where she is a professor of physics. Photo by Anne W. Semmes.



Ultrarunner Jenny Hoffman before her mom's Greenwich house after her record-breaking run across America. Photo by Anne W. Semmes.

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