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# Outside

## This Woman Ran From San Francisco to New York in 47 Days

After a devastating near-miss in 2019, Jenny Hoffman shattered the coast-to-coast fastest known time



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Earlier this month, Jenny Hoffman, a 45-year-old Harvard physics professor and ultrarunner who has represented the United States at the 24-Hour World Championships, set a [new women's Fastest Known Time](#) for a supported run from San Francisco to New York. She covered the 3,037-mile stretch in 47 days, 12 hours, and 35 minutes to take more than a week off the previous record, set by [Sandra Villines in 2017](#).

For Hoffman, the feat came with a touch of redemption; she'd come tantalizingly close to pulling off the same FKT in 2019, but had to quit in Akron, Ohio, after tearing her right meniscus.

That near-miss wasn't the only setback Hoffman experienced in pursuit of her goal. After training throughout the summer of 2022, she was going to embark on another coast-to-coast adventure last fall when she tore her hamstring mere days before she was meant to start. After months of rehab, she set her sights on a route from Los Angeles to Boston, which, thanks to the dramatic curvature of California's coast, is roughly the same distance as what Hoffman termed the "community standard" FKT route from San Francisco to New York City. (Hoffman told me that to satisfy the requirements set by the *Guinness Book of World Records*, one technically "only" needed to run from L.A. to New York—a paltry 2,790 miles—but that there is an unsaid agreement among the USA-crosser cognoscenti that the chosen route needs to be at least 3,000 miles.) However, 24 hours before she was set to depart from Los Angeles, Hoffman's crew discovered that in the wake of [Hurricane Hilary](#) this past August there were no pedestrian-accessible roads out of the city. In a last-minute audible, Hoffman's crew drove her support RV up San Francisco while she slept in the back. The original San Francisco to New York route would have to do. Let no one say endurance athletes aren't adaptable.

I asked Hoffman about the most challenging aspects of her journey, her lyrical [Strava posts](#), and whether it's possible to learn something about the country while logging 65-mile days on foot.

**OUTSIDE: You have a solid [ultrarunning resume](#). But it's a pretty big jump from doing a 24-hour race to going for the coast-to-coast FKT. What made you take on that challenge, and did you work up to it by doing shorter multi-day runs first?**

HOFFMAN: I was just an idiot and went in blind. I had no idea what I was getting into. It was a big experiment in 2019. I've always dreamed about crossing the country under my own power. When I was a kid I thought I'd do it on a bike. And then I got involved in ultras as an adult. I don't think I'm particularly talented, but I'm pretty stubborn and hard-working. And so, to my surprise, I was more successful than I thought I would be on the ultra scene. Gradually, the idea arose that I don't have to do this on a bike. I met [Pete Kostelnick](#) in 2017. We were both on the U.S. 24-hour team that competed in Belfast. I had a chance to talk to him about his journey and I've been really inspired by him. I just thought it sounded like a grand adventure. A way to bring to reality a dream that I've had since I was a child.

**Did you train for this? How does one even do that?**

I don't think you can ever really train for this. You can ramp up your mileage, but it's hard to know how your body is going to respond when you really just do it every single day. I Strava-stalked some people who had done it before and kind of looked at what they had done. I've always been a relatively high-mileage runner. I got up to a couple of 200-mile weeks and decided that the way to train for this was to hit two 200-mile weeks with a down week in the middle.

**Why did you decide to specifically go after the FKT, as opposed to just running across the country for kicks?**

I'm competitive and I like setting hard goals. And there's a practical aspect: I was leaving my family and three kids. I was leaving my job. You can't do that for too long, so you might as well do it as fast as possible.

**As you are probably aware, these long solo FKT attempts are [often subjected to scrutiny](#). What steps did you take to document your run?**

FKT.com just asks for the specific GPX files and, frankly, I think that's the strongest evidence you can have. Guinness imposes these additional requirements, like written witness statements. I got them all, but that would be really easy to fake. Just make up some names. Guinness also requires ten minutes of video every day. Again, that's easy to fake: I could video myself leaving the RV, get ten minutes of video, and then sleep in the RV all day. So I don't think that those additional requirements actually add anything to the evidence. I wore two watches; I had a Coros watch on one wrist and a Garmin on the other. I had my live tracker the whole time. So I had three different devices. I've put in 20 years as an ultrarunner, so I have a lot of races under my belt.

**The live tracker seems like it's pretty essential since it's kind of a way of saying to the world: Here I am, come check on me if you have any doubts.**

Since I am human and I have a body, I sometimes had to go and do my business in the cornfields sometimes. I would get messages from friends that were like: "Hey, I see you're off road. Looks like you're in a cornfield. What are you doing there?" An RV wouldn't be in the cornfield. So, if you really want to scrutinize you're going to find lots of little human details that suggest that, yeah, I was really out there doing this thing.

**When I've spoken to other USA crossers in the past, they've mentioned the importance of using mental tricks to make something so audacious more manageable in the short term. Did you do anything along those lines?**

I don't think I have anything quite as concerted as Pete, who played golf in his head. I did spend a lot of time visualizing the next reward or something in the future that I was looking forward to. And I spent a lot of time in my head writing the journal entry that I was going to write that night. I wrote a several paragraph journal entry every night that I posted on Strava. Unfortunately, by the time I actually sat down to write it that evening, I'd usually lost the beautiful phrasing that I'd composed in my head.

**Between your Instagram and Strava notes, you provide a pretty detailed journal of your trip. What did that add to the experience?**

It's a singular life experience and I want to remember it. I tried to document in 2019, but I just wasn't as thorough and, it being my first attempt, we made more mistakes and had less time and organization, so my documentation wasn't as good. And I was really sad by how fast it faded from memory. There's necessarily some sleep deprivation and fatigue and you don't form memories that well under conditions of stress. So I really wanted to make sure that I wrote these experiences down. Also, I love reading and listening to books when I train. I mostly train alone and I'll listen to books. So, I'm listening to 40 to 50 books a year. I really love listening to memories and stories of other people's lives

and learning from their experiences. And it's been in my head that I'd eventually like to write a book of my own about these experiences.

**There's a story in the [New York Times](#) about your run that notes that for the most part you didn't listen to books or music and that you ran in silence. (One exception being that you listened to Des Linden's memoir.) Why did you make that choice?**

Yeah, I didn't listen to anything, except for on this one stretch, 169 miles between Tonopah and Ely, Nevada, where you're just going through the desert and there are no towns, or turns, and there's no traffic. Just a couple cars per day. In one sense it's the safest stretch of road, in another it's the most dangerous because it's so isolated. But traffic is a big concern. I was running primarily on two-lane highways and one of the things that I hadn't really understood before I did this in 2019 is that, when you run facing traffic you think you are going to see all the cars coming, but on a two-lane highway, the biggest danger is people passing from behind. So I was really focused on the yellow line: I had to keep an eye on whether it was double or it was dashed. Are people going to come whizzing by me? Another problem is rumble strips. A lot of these roads are rumble stripped—you know, the scored part of the road that's there to keep the truckers awake—and it's really hard to run on them. Another thing: In the west, the cars are very friendly and typically if they see me, they swing way wide, so they are swinging into the opposing lane to give me plenty of space. But as I got towards the Midwest, even if there wasn't traffic or even if there was a dashed yellow line, the cars that were coming towards me seemed to be much more like rule-followers. They didn't want to cross that yellow line no matter what and they weren't going to give me extra space. I don't think it's because they were being jerks, I just think that somehow it's a different mindset. I think in the West, people are a little more used to bending the rules.

**What were some of the hardest moments of your run?**

It was very challenging to run through Nebraska during peak harvest season. The John Deere trucks, they've got the sharp blades coming out of the sides and take up the whole width of the dirt road. And the dust is such that I can barely see them and they can barely see me. So that was scary. Not that that's a challenge that can be blamed on anybody; that's just what farm life is. So I think Nebraska was the hardest state for me. It was in some sense the most gratifying—the people were the kindest and some of the interactions I had were the best—but, also, really the most challenging physically.

**When [Rickey Gates](#) did an [unsupported run across the country](#) a few years ago, he made the trip as a kind of anthropological exercise—a way for him to know his own country better. I know you had a specific performance-related goal, but did your journey have a similar effect?**

Well, first of all, huge respect for people who do this unsupported and spend even more time interacting with Americans. I did feel like I got to know more about this country. I was running for 15 hours a day, but there were moments where we had to get witness statements for Guinness. I had stops with my crew every three or four miles. Often we'd be parking in someone's driveway and the person would come out and we'd have a conversation. People were so kind. From someone offering us a dozen eggs from the chickens in her backyard to someone else with a bunch of kids offering to let us use their

bathroom. Middle America is so friendly. The population density is lower and people have to look out for each other. It's really wonderful, for somebody who comes from densely populated coastal cities where people are a little warier and focused on exactly their task in front of them, to see the middle of America where everyone is so kind and generous and supporting their community. I ran through 27 days of cornfields. You don't think about that much when you're in a coastal city—that so much of our country is corn. I went through the desert. I went through the mountains. And then: 27 days of corn. We kind of lose sight of how hard the rest of America works to feed the coasts of America. I ran through Nebraska during peak harvest. I ran through Ohio and we couldn't even find a place to park the RV because they were driving their farm trucks all night long, harvesting for 36 consecutive hours because the rain was coming and they needed to save their crops. I am still trying to process and sit with that. How can we be more grateful for the rest of the country that feeds us?