

The Long Road Back

BY PETE KOSTELNICK

In the summer of 2017, I met Jenny Hoffman for the first time in Belfast as we both represented the US at the IAU 24-Hour World Championships. I had just finished running across the US several months prior, and she had all sorts of questions for me. I quickly gathered that she wanted to do the same run. Jenny and I both had bad races in Belfast, with her race resulting in an injury that would require a long recovery period. With over a dozen years of consistently competing at a high level in ultras (while raising three kids and being a Harvard professor), I knew Jenny had the experience and mentality to run across the US, but would her body hold up? And with a physical setback and plenty of other responsibilities on her plate, would she find training for and running across the US for such a long time still worth it? Meanwhile, another friend of mine, Sandra Villines, set a new women's record for running across the US later that same year.

Fast-forward to the end of 2018, and I got an email from Jenny about possibly running across the US in the fall of 2019. Over several months, we kept in touch and everything seemed to finally align for her, on both a physical and personal front, to make the attempt. Sure enough, on September 11, 2019, she hit the ground running in San Francisco, covering over 78 miles on day one, already 20 miles ahead of record pace. In northeast Ohio, 41 days later, she was knocking on the door of the record with 2,560 miles down and just under 500 miles to go, and two weeks left to do it. Roughly 84% of the way there, only the Appalachians stood in the way of New York City. I ran 6 miles with Jenny near Akron on day 42 before I went back



to work. It was a Jenny who was ready for this run to be completed, if anything, so she could be back with her family in Massachusetts. It was also Jenny who was in complete

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control and showing no signs of slowing down. Just hours after completing my run with her, I got a text from my friend Larry who was running with her later that day: *"Bad news. I'm not a doctor, but I think she's done."*

Sure enough, Jenny had a sudden meniscal root tear that would require crutches, surgery and no running for four months. Her record attempt was over. Between family, work, rehabbing injuries and a pandemic, not a day

went by for four years without Jenny thinking about heading back to the Pacific Ocean and starting it all over. I can't even imagine the nightmares.

On the morning of September 16, 2023, Jenny set off from San Francisco, and for 41 days, conquered essentially the exact same road route she had followed four years earlier through northeast Ohio, while pushing her body to its limit. This time, she never dipped below 50 miles on any given day. And once the Rockies were behind her, never dipped below 62 miles per day. It takes a village to support a run like this, and Jenny had a number of crew members come and go throughout as schedules allowed, with Jill Yeomans being the only constant over the entire distance. Late at night on November 2, Jenny arrived at New York City Hall (the official record ending point, before continuing onto the ocean), finishing the run in 47 days, 12 hours and 35 minutes, and averaging over 63 miles per day. A new world record by over a week, that would also be recognized as the women's 2023 FKT of the Year

Jenny Hoffman with her crew, Dwight and Phil, during her 2019 record attempt.

▲ COURTESY JENNY HOFFMAN

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I've intentionally left out many other details of Jenny's 2023 record run (and how she ran another 138.7 miles for Team USA at the 24-Hour World Championships less than a month later), only because they can be found online. The only thing more incredible about the long road she ran from San Francisco to New York City is the much longer road she navigated beforehand. The sport of ultrarunning has some truly amazing stories you sometimes have to dig really deep to find them. This story had been right in front of me over the past six years. ▲

PETE KOSTELNICK is a numbers guy from Flagstaff, Arizona, who finds balance as a HOKA and Squirrel's Nut Butter athlete, and specializes in races of over 100 miles, and occasionally finds time to cross continents on foot. He is also a coach with the Chaski Endurance Collective.

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