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## The Long Way Home: Hi-C and FKTs

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## Hi-C and FKTs

**A** LONG ABOUT THE FOURTH OR FIFTH DAY OF MY APPALACHIAN Trail thru-hike, someone told us that a man ahead was backpacking with a giant can of Hi-C fruit drink tied to the bottom of his backpack. He was moving slowly through the Georgia mountains with his children— young kids, like 8, 9 years old. Most news on the AT travels second- and third-hand and amplifies in the telling. I imagined one of the big cans of orange-flavored drink that he'd open with an equally heavy tool and have to drink all at once.

My mental image of that juice can woggling back and forth as the father trudged along made me laugh. My three companions and I filtered water collected in the woods, and we carried only higher-tech provisions, like tomato crystals and powdered Tang. We'd boxed them up and mailed them ahead to post offices on the northbound route. We'd debated which method was the best—mailing our lightweight foodstuffs versus buying provisions from stores along the way, and we thought we knew what we were doing.

We never caught up to the juice-toting dad. I felt sure he hadn't lasted more than a few days. But now I have a new theory: that he was a hero.

I regret that I giggled over his brave pilgrimage. Doing so distracted me from my own fear that I might not complete all 2,100-plus miles over the next few months before collapsing. That man probably never wasted one second laughing at people like me. I know today that whatever his goal was had nothing to do with others' opinions of him.

THIS QUAINST STORY CREPT BACK INTO MY HEAD AFTER THREE DECADES because the AT experience has changed. These are the days of the FKTs: fastest-known times. An FKT is a self-reported speed record on trails and mountains all over the world, first coined by two Colorado trail runners in the late 1990s.\* I follow the sport of long-distance speed hiking the way some

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\*Doug Mayer, a frequent contributor to this journal, described the phenomenon in "You Can't Run That," *Appalachia* Summer/Fall 2014, 65 no. 2. See also Mayer's piece, "Origins of the FKT," *Trail Runner* magazine, October 5, 2017; trailrunnermag.com.

fans track the Red Sox. The FKTs for the Appalachian Trail send shivers not just down my back but around it.

ON FOGGY, HYPOTHERMIC AUGUST 28, 2018, KARL SABBE REACHED the northern terminus of the AT, the top of Katahdin in Maine, after an astonishing 41 days, 7 hours, 39 minutes. Sabbe ran and walked north from Georgia “supported,” meaning that he got his food, gear, and medical help from friends who followed him in a vehicle, meeting him at trail crossings. Sabbe beat the ultrarunner Karl Meltzer’s 2016 FKT (southbound and supported: 45 days, 22 hours, 38 minutes) and ultrarunner Scott Jurek’s supported northbound FKT of 46 days, 8 hours, 7 minutes in 2015.

These guys covered between 48 and 53 miles a day. Our longest day was 26 miles; we averaged 15. My 15 miles a day, with giant backpack minus canned Hi-C, transformed me. I don’t minimize any distance I or anyone else achieves just because someone else can triple it. But looking at these feats on [fastestknowntime.com](http://fastestknowntime.com), I say, wow.

Even more amazing: In 2017 Joe McConaughy, known as “Stringbean,” ran and hiked almost as fast as Sabbe, but *unsupported*—carrying all his own food and gear, getting himself into town to resupply—in 45 days, 12 hours, and 15 minutes. While carrying his own stuff, he beat the supported times of the more famous and closely watched Jurek and Meltzer.

Women speed-hikers hurdle old expectations too. In 2011, Jennifer Pharr Davis hiked supported—her husband, Brew, crewed her—in only 46 days, 11 hours, 20 minutes, which for a few years held the record for both men and women. Davis had hiked supported in 2008: 57 days, 8 hours, 38 minutes for a women’s record at the time. Heather Anderson, calling herself “Anish,” hiked *unsupported* in 2015: 54 days, 7 hours, 48 minutes.

Davis had first completed the trail in 2005, walking the traditional way, unsupported and carrying a full pack for four and a half months. She struggled alone and still maintains that the slow hike with a full pack defined her character more than the speed hikes. One morning she discovered the body of a man who’d hanged himself from a gazebo. Slowly, not quickly, she had noticed a tragedy that no one else had seen. It frightened her. She reached deep inside for the strength just to keep going after that. She chronicled her personal metamorphosis during that hike in *Becoming Odyssa* (Beaufort Books, 2010).

Long-distance mountain trips can play out like John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*, in which every physical obstacle defeated is a metaphor for

perseverance. But in these days of the FKT, when super athletes follow a well-trodden and tested route, maybe the epic AT thru-hike has transformed into something lighter, less philosophical and weighty.

The speed-hikers carry their drinks in vests and belts—sugary drinks, like Hi-C of the old days. They move so fast that their drinks wobble back and forth a little like the Hi-C dad's provisions.

I envision the Hi-C dad as strong and a dreamer. He represented the best of the American long-distance walker. He holds the FKT for a dad carrying a big can of juice. Out there on every person's trail, the AT, he found a place where any nonathlete could strap on sneakers and a can of Hi-C and connect with his purpose. He could walk 5 miles or 40 miles and win; no one was keeping track, except him.

—*Christine Woodside*  
*Editor-in-Chief*