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You Can't Run That

Trail running hits the White Mountains

Doug Mayer



I AM RUNNING UP WILDCAT MOUNTAIN'S POLECAT TRAIL. IT'S A beautiful fall afternoon, midweek, and it's just me, my dog Samivel, and the mountain. My pulse, my breathing, all settle into a familiar groove. As I move upward, I shed the day's trivialities. My mind wanders. I am working hard, and yet I am totally calm. This moment is exactly why I love trail running.

Then, without warning, another runner passes me. The downright shock of it causes me to gasp. Maybe I'm hallucinating. I have been running in the White Mountains of New Hampshire for nearly twenty years. I have been passed by deer, moose, and bear—but, other than an occasional friend at my side, I have almost never seen another runner. "Hey! How's it going?" A friendly wave and a smile. I give an incomprehensible answer. I don't usually compare myself with others when it comes to my running, but it's impossible not to notice that he's *much* faster, *much* fitter. We talk for a minute, and he departs, floating upward with all the effort of a leaf blowing toward the summit.

My mystery speed demon was waiting at the top. It was two-time U.S. Mountain Running Team member Kevin Tilton, a Conway, New Hampshire, resident. My ego breathed a secret sigh of relief.

That was three Octobers ago. In the intervening years, passing, or being passed by, trail runners has only become more common. Trail running has arrived in full force in the White Mountains.

Growth

Across the country, trail runner numbers have been growing. According to the American Trail Running Association, the number of participants in trail running events has increased more than fourfold in the past dozen years and now surpasses 400,000 a year.

New England has experienced the same trend. One of the first to notice the change was Fred Pilon. In spring 1981, Pilon helped launch *Ultrarunning* magazine. Within a year of the start of the magazine, he was also one of three individuals to form the New England Trail Running Circuit. The circuit began with four races. Today, it has morphed into the Grand Tree Trail Race Series, consisting of nineteen races across four states. There are now

On a summer day, Kevin Tilton runs through the Presidential Range, twenty-plus miles across the highest summits of New Hampshire. JOE KLEMENTOVICH

similar, if less extensive, series elsewhere in New England states. Pilon's *Ultra-running* magazine is alive and well. One of the first widely available sources of information for trail runners, it has gone from black and white to glossy color—in many ways, mirroring changes to trail running itself.

Closer to home, at the base of Mount Washington, Great Glen Trails Outdoor Center General Manager Howie Wemyss has noticed the growing number of trail runners, too. Fourteen years ago, Great Glen started a six-week spring trail running series. It has grown steadily ever since. A fall series was added a decade ago, and a mini-course for kids was recently created.

Today, runners of all levels can be found in the mountains. Recreational runners enjoy a challenging run on classic, rugged White Mountain terrain, and elites from around the country vie for fastest known times, or FKTs, as they're known to the trail running cognoscenti. When fall ebbs and trails become icy, more devoted trail runners add microspikes, high-tech insulation, and running poles to their equipment list. Others, meanwhile, transition to the growing sport of snowshoe racing, using new, lightweight gear on mostly packed trails. Behind today's rapidly evolving trail running scene, though, are the quirkier days of an activity that was largely invisible to the rest of the outdoors community. How did trail running go from under-the-radar, outdoors sideshow to mainstream recreational activity? To get a sense for that transition, it helps to go back nearly 60 years and remember one of the fastest hikers ever to set foot in the White Mountains.

Chris Goetze: Hiker First, Runner Second

Fresh off a strong season on the Randolph Mountain Club trail crew, Chris Goetze left Grafton Notch, Maine, at 6 A.M. on August 28, 1958. Eight hours and six and a half minutes later, having traversed 28 and three-quarters miles, over some of the most rugged terrain along the Appalachian Trail, he stepped off the rail trestle in Gorham, New Hampshire. At age 19, he had just lopped more than two hours off of the Mahoosuc Range traverse time—a record that had stood for 31 years.

Earlier that summer, Goetze had shattered the record for the huts traverse (16 hours, 41 minutes), with a route that then included Pinkham Notch Camp (as it was called then), a record previously held by Bert Malcolm of Randolph. He turned in a number of other remarkably fast times, including Randolph to Crawford Notch in 4 hours, 35 minutes. His preferred trail running diet?

Raisins, pineapple juice, . . . and steak, cooked by friends, served up en route, and washed down by a quart of milk.

Goetze was impressive in other respects. His feats were the stuff of legend.¹ An adventurer in the original sense of the word, Goetze had first ascents to his credit in Labrador. But, preferring to keep blank spots on the map so others who came after could experience the same sense of adventure, he kept his own accomplishments quiet, even as he edited the mountaineering achievements of others in this journal.² After college, he was part of a team that completed the first direct ascent of Mount McKinley's Wickersham Wall. The following year, a team that included his wife, Lydia Goetze, completed several first ascents in the Hayes Range of Alaska. Later, he and Lydia sailed for months at a time in Canada's northern maritime, in their 25-foot boat.

When it came to his speed records, Goetze was part of a long line of ultra-fast hikers who thought of themselves as hikers first, and runners second, if at all. One of his golden rules for his record-breaking trips was, "Walk, don't run, except on that last reckless end spurt, and on smooth, gentle, downward slopes." In a sense, Goetze was a transitional figure, bridging the speedy hikers of earlier days to the trail runners of today. Nowhere was that more evident than on his feet—on one of his epic hikes that summer, he wore, in turn, a pair of Army surplus walking shoes, a pair of sneakers, and a new pair of boots from Peter Limmer.

Goetze died of an inoperable brain tumor in 1977, at the age of 38. Fifteen years later, I moved to Randolph. At the time, the name Chris Goetze hung in the air with that mix of reverence and awe reserved for someone of remarkable character who had accomplished much. In a community that prides itself on the mountaineering accomplishments of its residents, it's not an overstatement to say that his presence is still missed. Though he was just 10 years old at the time of Goetze's exploits, longtime RMC Board Member Bill Arnold well remembers those accomplishments—including how Goetze started that summer of 1958, by riding his bike to Randolph from Cambridge, Massachusetts, in a day.³ "He was pretty down to earth. Those records weren't a big deal for him. It was hard to imagine someone with a healthier lifestyle," said Arnold. "He left quite an impression."

¹ See "Far and Fast," by Klaus Goetze, *Appalachia*, December 1958, XXXII no. 2, pages 203–211.

² Goetze was *Appalachia* editor from 1975 to 1977.

³ Goetze rode the 170-mile trip on a bike he equipped with six gears. It took him sixteen and a half hours.

“And where did you hike today?”

A generation after Goetze, a few White Mountain regulars had completed what Goetze began, and made the transition to sneakers. Though their times were not on a par with Goetze’s remarkable pace, they thought of themselves as trail runners rather than hikers. One of the first to find himself part of this quirky undercurrent was Tad Pfeffer. Now an internationally noted glaciologist and a member of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, Pfeffer was an RMC caretaker from 1969 to 1971. He started running shortly after his stints as caretaker, largely to accomplish long hikes when the free time to camp overnight simply wasn’t available. Although a nascent trail running scene was already developing out west, few athletes ran trails in the White Mountains. Notable among them were Mike Hartrick and Mark Richey, also two of the best-known climbers of their generation. “The chance of seeing someone out running who I didn’t know,” said Pfeffer, “was about zero.”⁴

Pfeffer’s trail running mostly took place around his home base of the Northern Presidentials. An all-time favorite run started at Pinkham Notch Camp, headed up to the summit of Mount Washington via Boott Spur, then down the Ammonoosuc Ravine Trail. At the base of the Cog Railway, he then returned to the summit via the Jewell Trail, went down the Sphinx Trail, up the precipitous headwall of the Great Gulf for a third summit, and finally down Lion Head Trail. His adventure ended with a young woman at Pinkham Notch Camp conducting a survey at the trailhead. “And where did you hike today?” she inquired.

Trading Steaks for PowerBars, Limmers for Lava Domes

By the time Pfeffer was running in the White Mountains, the business side of the recreational world had started to take note of the trail running trend. Endurance foods were emerging, replacing the whole foods of Goetze’s era.

⁴ Not content to trail run and climb, Pfeffer experimented with a sport coming of age a decade later—mountain biking, once riding the Jefferson Notch Road south to the Cog Railway, and carrying his bike up the Ammonoosuc Ravine Trail. (“Explaining to several dozen people on the way up the trail got a little tiresome.”) His plan was to ride down the auto road—until he found out they didn’t allow bikes on the private road. Anticipating a new passenger, the stagecoach driver was probably surprised when Pfeffer opted to carry his bike down the Tuckerman Ravine Trail, then ride home to Randolph. Said Pfeffer, “If the dozens of questions I got while carrying my bike up from the Cog Railway were tiresome, they were nothing compared to the hundreds of questions I had to answer as I carried my bike *down* through Tucks.”

The PowerBar was first on the scene. Ancestor of the plethora of processed sports foods that would take over runners' packs for the next generation, its initial results were less than impressive. On a 30-mile run from Crawford Notch to Randolph, along the Davis Path, Gulfside, and Spur trails, then on to Randolph, Pfeffer ate nothing else, and consistently "crashed" every hour. Eventually, he couldn't stomach the "window-putty," found two dollars in his pack, and upon arriving atop Mount Washington, immediately downed a hot dog, and a cup of tea with a dozen creamers. The results, he said, "were transformational. I sailed across the Northern Peaks in the dusk on cruise control." Later that night, he arrived at his home at the end of Randolph Hill, where a much-less-synthesized meal of steak and peas was staying warm for him in the oven. "It was my best run ever," Pfeffer said.

In addition to the food they ate, at least one other big difference distinguished Pfeffer's exploits from the Goetze era: footwear. Nearly as soon as running shoes came onto the market, they were put to use in the mountains. One of the first was the Onitsuka Tiger Corsair, which arrived in 1969 and had more in common with a tennis sneaker than a true running shoe. The ergonomics were far from perfect, and the Japanese translation was more than a bit off, too. "They came in a box with a size conversion chart labeled 'Size of Life': a mistranslation from 'Sole' to 'Soul,'" noted Pfeffer. "Onitsuka was pretty new in the English-speaking market."

A series of other shoes came and went in quick succession: Nike's Waffle Trainer, various models from Puma and New Balance, Tiger's Colorado, and Adidas's Marathon Trail. None worked as well as today's models, and most were appreciably worse. Hopes were high for the Nike Lava Dome, which first appeared in 1981. Pfeffer said, "I (and many others) thought, 'This is it—the trail shoe of my dreams!'"—really solid upper and good resistance to sharp rocks underfoot. What we didn't know is that the Lava Dome shared more than a few genes with a Checker Taxi Cab. It was really stiff, heavy in the toe. It could cut your speed by half, easily." His solution? "I went back to the lighter road shoes. Sometimes I actually taped my feet, but more often I simply wrapped my ankles with ace bandages to give me a little extra ankle support and padding against hitting rocks." Alexandra Turnbull, a Randolph 2-year-old at the time, wrapped her feet in rags to imitate her uncle, getting ready to hit the trails.

Changes Off the Trails

A barely edible sports bar and a few rough-around-the-edges shoes do not make an auspicious start for a new sport. Something more fundamental was driving the growth of trail running as it became something bigger than a quirky sideshow. When I asked a variety of White Mountain trail runners for their thoughts as to why trail running has stepped out from the shadows, these themes came to the forefront:

- **Limited time.** As Pfeffer had started to experience a few decades ago, the crush of growing personal and professional demands increasingly limited the time available for recreation. In turn, there was a newfound emphasis on maximizing the benefits from the time available. Activities such as climbing, which require coordination with a suitable partner, also became more difficult. Kevin Tilton, for one, sees this trend continuing: “People continue to want challenge, but they just don’t have as much time available as in the past. Trail running is perfect. For now, it’s only going to get more popular.”
- **Running fragmentation.** Running came of age in the 1970s. As it has matured, it has started to fragment, and trail running has become another niche, not unlike how winter mountain biking, competitive ice climbing, and indoor rock climbing have become niche offspring of their parent sports of cycling and climbing. Pilon looks back to the 1980s, when road marathons were beginning to reach their peak: “A lot of people were looking for something else—trails were a way to run on a soft surface and have fewer injuries. Besides, running on a trail is much more interesting than running on the side of a road.” White Mountain trail runner Curtis Moore noted, “People are adapting the expanding sport of running to their specific interests and surroundings. For a lot of people, that’s the trails out their back door.”
- **Gear explosion.** Those early efforts at equipment and food left trail runners nauseous and with aching feet. In the past three decades, manufacturers have continued to improve their offerings. The development of more and better gear for trail runners ultimately helped feed the development of the sport. One of the first companies to focus on trail running was Ultimate Direction, which launched in 1985. Others soon followed, including such major manufacturers as Salomon, Sportiva, and New Balance. Outdoors enthusiasts who might never have given mountain running a second thought now routinely meet the possibility whenever they walk through the doors

of an Eastern Mountain Sports or thumb through the pages of a Patagonia catalog. According to Tilton, himself a sponsored runner for the shoe company Inov-8, runners can buy much more trail-running-specific gear today than they could a few years ago.

- **And more.** A sampling of White Mountain trail runners credit other reasons for this growth: the general increase in adventure sports, an increasing urge for personal challenges, and the rise of “X game”-type activities.

But larger social forces and statistics remain soulless; behind those numbers are individual stories of trail runners. Each of us who has started trail running can look back to a moment that inspired us to trade our boots for sneakers and head for the woods. For such inspiration, it may well be that there is nothing more powerful than a charismatic leader. Here, too, trail running has recently come into its own. Locally, nationally, and internationally, trail running now has a new generation that is moving the sport forward. None of these figures looms larger than the modest, self-effacing Kilian Jornet Burgada.

Kilian and Friends

Every mountain sport, at some point in its development, seems to draw a charismatic member to its ranks who utterly shatters the idea of what’s possible. A generation or more ago, ski mountaineering had Jackson Hole guide Bill Briggs, who skied from the summit of the Grand Teton more than 40 years ago—a route so bold, many didn’t believe him, until a local reporter had to hire a plane the next day to verify the claim. “What Bill Briggs did,” said Jackson Hole skier Rick Armstrong, “was open people’s minds.” The same could be said for today’s solo climbing phenomenon, Alex Honnold. The mountaineering world, meanwhile, can look to Ueli Steck, ticking off hugely challenging climbs like the South Face of Annapurna in record times.

In pulling off their feats, these athletes capture the imagination of both current and future trail runners, inspiring them to get off their sofas and go into the mountains. Today, trail running has several such runners, but one is far out in front of the pack when it comes to opening our minds: Catalan mountain runner Kilian Jornet.

The *New York Times* calls Jornet “the most dominating endurance athlete of his generation,” and that’s no overstatement. He’s won more than 80 races, and 16 titles and, along the way, has brought a new focus to the merging of trail running with technical climbing—a version of the mountaineering feat of



U.S. Forest Service Trails Manager Cristin Bailey on Mount Whiteface in the White Mountains of New Hampshire. She has traded her boots for Brooks Cascadias and moves faster on the job.

COURTESY OF CRISTIN BAILEY

“enchainment” pioneered by Yosemite climber Peter Croft, among others. In August 2012, Jornet ran from the Italian village of Courmayeur, climbed Mont Blanc’s L’Arête de l’innominata, and continued down to Chamonix. Part trail run, the 42-kilometer route features extreme exposure, 1,000 meters of climbing and 60-degree snow slopes. Most climbers take several days. Doing it in 24 hours would be stunning. Jornet’s time? 8 hours, 42 minutes.

This past summer, Jornet coasted past the fastest time up the Matterhorn, completing the round-trip in 2 hours, 52 minutes. In doing so, he broke a record that had stood for 18 years—by 22 minutes. Jornet’s accomplishments are remarkable. But coupled with a sincere humility, it becomes hard not to idolize the guy. This past fall, *National Geographic* selected him as one of its “Adventurers of the Year.” Up next, as part of his “Summits of My Life” project? Mounts McKinley,

Aconcagua, and Everest. It’s going to be an interesting few years.

Although Kilian, as he is known, leads the pack, a growing number of other mountain runners are ticking off adventurous accomplishments: Anton Krupicka, Emilie Forsberg, Rob Krar, Rickey Gates, and Anna Frost, among many others. The growth of social media, the proliferation of trail running websites, and new trail running publications all serve to quickly disseminate news of their activities.

Last summer, I was fortunate enough to spend some time with Gates, one of the U.S. athletes in the cadre of runners redefining the sport. We were in an area many consider the epicenter of trail running, the Alps. Sponsored by Salomon, Gates is a professional trail runner—a phrase still perilously close to being an oxymoron. Winner of the 2012 Mount Washington Road

Race, he was in Switzerland to run the iconic Sierre-Zinal trail race. Saving a few dollars, he crashed in my apartment while I was gone. “Where’d you run?” I inquired a few days later, when I returned. Gates stepped outside and casually pointed at the Dents du Midi, a range of seven, 3,000-meter high, rugged peaks. He traced a line in the air, toward the nearby Dents Blanches range. “I picked up a free map at the tourist office,” he mentioned, somewhat casually. His finger continued through the narrow Pas D’Encel opening in the range, and then suggested the wild backside of the range, and finally up the perilously steep last thousand meters, to the highest point, the Haute Cime. In quick succession, I thought to myself, “You can’t run that,” then, “Of course you can run that,” and finally, “Why didn’t I think of that?”

“You should run that sometime,” Gates said. “It was pretty cool.”

WHY DID IT TAKE SOMEONE ELSE TO POINT OUT THIS POSSIBILITY? For the same reason that I had never imagined I could finish a workday, step outside my door, and find myself atop Mount Adams catching sunset less than a few hours later. It had simply never occurred to me that it would be possible. Today, no shortage of White Mountain trail runners find themselves taking in the view from a summit after work, then arriving back at the trail-head as the last moments of the day fade from the forests. During summer’s long days, they don’t even need a headlamp.

Closer to home, the White Mountains has its own strong array of mountain runners leading the way to new adventures. Two winters ago, Kevin Tilton and Coby Jacobus ticked off a Presidential traverse. Below treeline, they started with lightweight snowshoes designed for winter trail running. Above treeline, they switched to microspikes for traction, cruising along with the tops of the clouds at their feet. Temperatures were above freezing, resulting in less-than-ideal conditions. They landed on surfaces varying from slush to ice to hard-packed snow. Said Tilton, “The whole trip took us a little over nine hours. It’s a great feeling to traverse the biggest peaks in the Northeast in the middle of winter, and still be home for dinner.”

Whether atop the Alps or Mount Adams, elite trail runners are accomplishing feats that captivate the imagination for the rest of us who run half the distance at twice the pace, and with a fraction of the finesse. As a result, boundaries are falling for mountain runners of all abilities.

Slowly, one at a time and collectively, our approach to what is possible for many of us is changing. For decades, speedier RMC members have undertaken variations on the “Crag Camp Challenge,” running the roughly three miles

and 2,940 feet in elevation gain from Route 2 to the club's cabin on the side of Mount Adams. One particular challenge is to accomplish the run in the same number of minutes as one's age—a feat that seems to be easiest to accomplish in one's early 50s. The Crag Challenge has grown in popularity in recent years. This past summer, 59-year-old Randolph resident Paul Cormier, a longtime mountain guide, accomplished the feat in 58:30. Fresh off a summer working for Exum Guide Service in Wyoming, the extremely fit Cormier found himself sad at ticking off the accomplishment. Fortunately, the RMC trail crew reminded him that there was always next year—when he once again could try to run to Crag Camp in his age.⁵

Last year, more confident of my own abilities, I challenged myself to the self-created adventure of running to the summit of Mount Washington, via the auto road, in each month of the year.⁶ When I first discussed the idea with friends, more than one person looked back with a blank stare and, without any runner in mind at all, uttered, “You can’t run that in the winter!”

You can’t? Oh yes, you can.

Cave Dog Comes to Town

In 1991, two friends and I hiked the White Mountain 4,000-footers in eight days. We were recreational hikers, out for a fun adventure. The record at the time was held by two brothers, George and Tom Fitch. In 1973, at age 15 and 17, they had climbed the 4,000-footer peaks in 6 days, 15 hours, and 30 minutes.⁷ In the nearly two decades that intervened since the Fitch boys toured the White Mountains, using one car and a bicycle they spotted at the evening’s trailhead, nothing much had changed.

Two years later, in 1993, U.S. Mountain Running Team member Matthew Cull set a record of 13 hours and 9 minutes for the legendary traverse of all the Appalachian Mountain Club huts. Runners—and strong ones, at that—were

⁵ “The Crag Camp Challenge,” RMC Winter 2013 Newsletter, page 1.

⁶ Winter running on the auto road required special permission from the Mount Washington Auto Road Company and equipment suited to the severe conditions. It is not generally permitted.

⁷ A minor difference: According to the measurements of the day, at the time of the Fitch brothers’ adventure, only 46 peaks were taller than 4,000 feet. Somewhat to our chagrin, we therefore backed into the record for what was the current 4,000-footer list at the time—a testament to the absolute lack of activity on this front, rather than any prowess on our part, as those who know us can attest.



Doug Mayer runs across Memorial Bridge on The Link in Randolph, New Hampshire.

JOE KLEMENTOVICH

out and about the White Mountains. But, by and large, outside of a small circle, the general public paid little attention to trail running until 2002, when an ultrarunner from Colorado nicknamed “Cave Dog” captured the imagination of nearly everyone who was paying attention.

In 2002, “Cave Dog” Ted Keizer focused his ultrarunning talents on the mountains of New England. Arriving in June, he promptly set a new record for the 46 high peaks of the Adirondacks. Two months later, he tackled New Hampshire’s 4,000-footers. Keizer ran or hiked almost continuously and slept practically never. Three days, 17 hours, and 21 minutes after starting, he was done, having cut the record by more than half. The word was out, and elite trail runners started to pay attention to the White Mountains. The very next year, Vermont trail runner Tim Seaver broke Keizer’s record by more than two hours.

Before the decade was out, several remarkably strong women would also make their mark. (Although they considered themselves to be hiking and not technically running, many who consider themselves trail runners would have a hard time keeping pace.) Cathy Goodwin, of Thornton, New Hampshire, was one of them.⁸ Though she remains a hiker in style and spirit, her times are

⁸ In winter 1994–1995, Goodwin became one of a group of three winter hikers to hike the New Hampshire 4,000-footers in a single winter. At the close of 2003, Goodwin completed “the grid,” hiking each 4,000-footer in every month of the year.

comparable to those of many trail runners. On September 1, 2010, she broke a recently set women's record for the 4,000-footers, with a time of 4 days, 19 hours, and 56 minutes.

FKTs Come to the White Mountains

In the last few years, FKTs, fastest known times, have come into vogue, with competitive trail runners sharing their fastest using the data from their global positioning system watches for verification. Particular routes have captured their attention—perhaps most notably, the “Pemi Loop,” a 31-mile trip, encompassing the Franconia Range, Garfield Ridge, the Twinway, and the Bonds. (A 2005 *Backpacker* magazine article, listing the Pemi Loop as America's “second hardest day hike,” no doubt contributed to the newfound attention.) The current FKT for the Pemi Loop is 6 hours, 27 minutes, and 48 seconds, held by Ben Nephew, a professor at Tufts University and accomplished trail runner. The women's record is held by a rising trail running star, New Hampshire's Larisa Dannis, with a time of 7 hours, 34 minutes, and 25 seconds.

One of the classic test pieces in the White Mountains is the Presidential traverse, even long before Chris Goetze's epic speed hike. In fact, one of the earliest mentions dates all the way back to September 1882, and a traverse that was part of a 42-mile epic by pathmakers (as trail builders were then called) Eugene Cook and George Sargent. The editor of *Appalachia* called that hike an “audacious tour de force.”⁹

Remarkably, in 1968, with little trail running occurring in the White Mountains, two U.S. Ski Team members—Mike Gallagher and Ned Gillette—ran the route in 4 hours, 46 minutes. That same year, Gallagher won the Mount Washington Road Race and set a record on Vermont's Long Trail. (Later, in the 1980s, he became head coach for the U.S. Ski Team.)

Last year proved that the record for fastest Presidential traverse is now hotly contested. Nephew set a new FKT when he ran from Dolly Copp

⁹ The hardy duo returned via the Cherry Mountain Road, west of Fabyan's, the White Mountain hotel, not far from the present-day Bretton Woods ski area. (It was another 24 years before the Jefferson Notch Road was completed.) The *Appalachia* quotation is from “A Record of a Day's Walk,” December 1884, IV, pages 54–57. For a great article on the history of adventures in the Northern Presidentials, see Judith Maddock Hudson's article, “Challenge in the White Mountains,” in the Summer 2006 RMC newsletter, available online, or Chapter 7 of her book *Peaks and Paths: A Century of the Randolph Mountain Club* (RMC, 2010).

Campground in Gorham to Crawford Notch in 4 hours, 34 minutes, and 36 seconds—less than a minute faster than the prior record set a mere two weeks earlier.

Just as Jornet and other elite runners around the world have been setting new standards for trail running, White Mountain runners have been busy redefining the sport here at home. Although they are remarkable accomplishments, speed records clearly are not the reason many of us take to the hills. But, assuming a passing runner doesn't otherwise diminish a hiker's day in the woods, is there any reason to criticize their experience? One would hope not—though that was not always the case, especially when trail running first appeared.

“That’s a good way to break a leg!”

As trail running grew in popularity, hikers took note. Sadly, the reaction was often one of disapproval and disdain. Pfeffer's experience of trail running in the 1970s mirrors that of others who were moving speedily over the trails in that era: “The most common reaction I got from hikers I encountered was, incredibly, anger. It happened all the time, like I was being irresponsible for being out on the Gulfside in shorts, T-shirt, and running shoes, or somehow violating their aesthetic experience. Usually I would just get a stony stare and a subdued greeting, or none at all.”

Pfeffer vividly remembers one of the first times he came face to face with this attitude. It was in the mid-1970s, as he was running along Katahdin's airy Knife Edge in Baxter State Park. Says Pfeffer, “Just after passing the South Peak, before I started out across the Knife Edge, I encountered two hikers coming off the Knife Edge, from Pamola. They saw me coming from a distance, and as I passed, they said (in pretty grumpy tones), “Well, you're not going to be running much longer!” Later, Pfeffer's wife came across others he had run past. “They were complaining, to anyone who would listen, about the jerk runner who didn't have the aesthetic moral fiber to slow down and enjoy the view.” For Pfeffer, those negative interactions drove him to trail run on more obscure routes.

He was hardly alone in experiencing such disapproving attitudes. As late as three decades later, my friend Mike Micucci and I found ourselves running up the Tuckerman Ravine Trail early one morning, happily bouncing from rock to rock on a trail where every step felt familiar. As we passed by a couple, the very nonplussed guy announced to his partner—in a volume

intentionally loud enough for us to hear—“That’s a good way to break a leg!” (During the remainder of our run, we developed perfect retorts—including pointing out that I had once broken my leg *hiking* and opted now for trail running out of an abundance of caution. Or the irony of it all—we, longtime members of the local mountain rescue group, Androscoggin Valley Search and Rescue, or AVSAR, being called to rescue ourselves.)

Why the strong disapproval? Pfeffer’s observation mirrors my own sentiments: “While the supposed recklessness of running, or something about not appreciating the mountains, was usually the theme of the complaint, it sometimes seemed that what really bothered people was the thought that we were having too much fun, or somehow were devaluing their own experience.”

There are causes for concern, of course. By necessity, trail runners bring a bare minimum of equipment. They trade the reassurance provided by a full pack of clothing and gear for the safety of the modern alpinist, who can move quickly in the mountains. The equation is often equal, but not always. This past summer, Chamonix’s PGHM (Peloton de Gendarmerie de Haute Montagne, a mountain-rescue team) received a cell phone call from two climbers in trouble. Thin on gear and out of options, Kilian Jornet and Emilie Forsberg badly misjudged conditions. Unable to self-rescue, they dialed for backup and were saved from a potentially fatal situation. In fact, though, there have been few if any notable trail running rescues in recent memory. In large part, the rescuers I know attribute it to the belief that most trail runners today are among the more experienced outdoors people in the mountains. They know the terrain, they know their own abilities, and they know when to turn back and wait for another day.

For Pfeffer and many other trail runners, the regular line of commentary eventually ebbed, as hikers became more accustomed to sharing the trail with mountain runners. “When I moved to Colorado in 1976, everyone there was good with it; by the mid-‘80s, it was over; not everyone was trail running, but everyone had at least seen it.” By the time Nephew made his record-setting Presidential run last year, hikers and trail runners were more at peace. Said Nephew, in a blog post about his final dash to Crawford Notch, “Most of the hikers seemed to know exactly what I was doing, and it was fun to hear the supportive comments.”

Why Trail Run?

Writing this story, I became stuck. There are so many aspects to the topic. My outline was unraveling, and my thinking was becoming muddled. I knew the path forward. As is often the case, it was right out the door. Like breaking the glass window on a fire alarm, I called for my dog. “Let’s go for a run!” I heard her paws land on hardwood in my bedroom. She’d been sleeping, while I was endlessly typing, then deleting. A half hour later, we were both moving up the Nineteen-Mile Brook Trail. My brain was fully engaged and free of distractions. Like climbing, trail running requires it, as you calculate each footfall. I am an expert at the pointless art of spotting greasy lichen, the perilous wood water bar set on a double fall line, the verglas-topped boulder on the river crossing.

“The first 30 minutes is for my body,” said the late writer and runner George Sheehan, “and the second 30 minutes is for my soul.” Today, the first 30 minutes gets me to the junction with Carter Dome Trail. We veer left, and 10 minutes later, we’re switchbacking our way up toward Zeta Pass. My restless mind has settled down. I can see my routes forward—the one in front of me, and the one on my laptop at home. As we wend our way up into the low clouds hanging over Carter Dome on this overcast, rainy afternoon, other roadblocks dissolve. Work. Personal life. Run long enough, and I am convinced that I can find solutions to climate change and Middle East conflict.

Trail running settles my mind. And despite the pace, the beautiful details of the woods are not lost on me. They assemble themselves in a series of quick snapshots: A mossy corner, a rivulet, distant peaks filtered through boreal forest.

It’s adventure, too. I have found myself thigh-deep in spring runoff and huddled under krummholz, waiting out a passing thunderstorm. Racing the setting sun down Mount Crescent, I once nearly bumped into a moose. By far, I was the more shocked of the two of us. I have found myself between a mother bear and her cub. (A polite grunt told me I was intruding and to kindly leave, and we went our own ways. The stark rumors of danger proved quite unfounded.) Grouse and I surprise each other on a regular basis.

Working hard in the mountains is great exercise, too. The uphill bring pounding heart and burning lungs, while downhill allow for a relaxing cruise.



Val Stori and Doug Mayer take a fall trail run in Randolph valley, with Mounts Madison and Adams in the distance. JOE KLEMENTOVICH

My body gets put through its paces. Trail running is the most productive time of my day. It's hard for me to imagine not wanting to continue, as long as my body allows it.

WRITING IN THE DECEMBER 1936 *APPALACHIA*, ONE OF THE White Mountains' strongest hikers, Bert Malcolm, summed up the joy of moving quickly through wild terrain:

My answer is that it is thoroughly enjoyable and not really difficult, if you are in proper training. Dogs, birds, etc., seem to take a lot of exercise just for the joy there is in graceful motion. Why should not men and women get a thrill from using their strength just for the fun of it? There is an ecstasy in sustained motion among beautiful surroundings, in breezing over a mountain range seeing the whole gamut of views and lights and shadows in a single day, and coming in hungry and full of life at the end. . . . If you happen to find fog, or rain and high winds, on a peak at midnight, your body and soul may have some of the feelings you used to get from reading of giants battling with dragons, or of fairies with pale tresses and long gray dresses, skipping from tree top to tree

top or curling up like smoke from the ravines. There is an elemental joy in this struggle with mountain, darkness and storm, spiced perhaps with a dash of fear which weakens your pride in your strength just enough to make the battle interesting, a joy that lingers delightfully in your memory.¹⁰

A Generation Steps Back

The first generation of White Mountain trail runners—those mountain runners who overcame verbal haranguing, torturous sneakers, and inedible sports bars—has started to slow down. For his part, Pfeffer moved to Colorado in 1988.

A 1995 paragliding accident, combined with several knee surgeries, ended his running career. “These days when I’m out hiking, nursing my back and hobbling along on my second and third knee replacements, I greet all the runners I meet with a smile and a friendly comment,” says Pfeffer. “But I also wonder how many of them won’t be running much longer themselves—once their bodies catch up with them as mine did to me. Not that I’d do it any differently if I had it all to do over again. Well, actually, I’d leave off the helicopter crash, the paraglider crash, the avalanche, and the rock that hit me—but not the running.”

Those runs of more than 30 years ago still resonate for Pfeffer: “The New Hampshire running was terrific, and among the most satisfying thing I’ve done in the mountains.”

Looking Ahead

This last fall, Vermont’s Sterling College announced the launch of the country’s first collegiate mountain running team. Around New England, trail races now routinely fill to capacity, and more trail races are being added each year, from the Squam Range, to the Ossipee Mountains, and elsewhere. At the base of Mount Washington, Great Glen’s twice-annual trail running series continues to grow.

¹⁰ H. L. Malcolm, “Breaking One’s Own Record,” *Appalachia*, December 1936, XXI, pages 189–194.

In sports shops and online, a plethora of gear choices, courtesy of an ever-eager outdoors industry, tempt us. And on the trails, a generation of new mountain runners are shattering old records and opening the eyes of the recreational runners that follow. There is no shortage of signs that point toward the possibility that we might be in the start of a golden era in mountain running, in the White Mountains and elsewhere.

Where will it lead? One place to look for an answer is Europe. In the Alps, trail running has had a firm hold for decades. In a land where the topography seems near vertical, trail runners are exalted—hikers often clap and shout, “Bon Courage!” and “Allez, Allez!” as a runner passes by. The relationship is amicable. Runners mingle with hikers and climbers at local huts. The gear is different, the adventure takes another form, but the conversation is respectful and friendly. Alpine trail racing opportunities run the gamut, from friendly, supportive, low-key village races to the local mountain hut, to world-class races of near-mythical status that include live TV coverage with breathless announcers in anchor booths. An International Skyrunning Federation has formed, and events have fragmented into a variety of offerings, from the “Vertical Kilometer,” to races such as the 166-kilometer-long Ultra-Trail du Mont Blanc. A circumnavigation of Europe’s highest peak, the course passes through France, Italy, and Switzerland.

Recreationally, trail running in Europe has fragmented, too—there are runners on vacation adventures, climbers who mix in steep, technical terrain in the spirit of Kilian Jornet, and Nordic walkers, who move often as fast as trail runners, but with their own set of rules. Races often include a more casual “tourist” division and shorter distances for younger runners.

The European trail running scene is not without its sources of conflict. Record-breaking attempts create a circus-like atmosphere. As prize money in the world-class events increases, some elites have caved to the temptation of blood doping, leading to testing and, in some cases, multiyear suspensions. As the boundaries are pushed, European runners risk having experiences like Jornet’s rescue last summer become more commonplace. Though routine in the rescue-filled world of the Alps, the thought of phone-initiated, helicopter-supported rescues arriving on these shores is worrisome. It’s a concern that Chris Goetze might have written about, were he still writing in the pages of *Appalachia*, and one that sets him apart, philosophically, from many other mountain runners. In his obituary, his wife, Lydia, Goetze wrote, “He was

philosophically opposed to the concept of rescue services, and he planned trips to remote places knowing that he and his companions would have to avoid or get themselves out of their own difficulties.”¹¹ Will this loss of wilderness values also be a consequence of trail runners pushing the margins? As trail races proliferate, will the sheer numbers of runners on race day, on White Mountain trails, threaten the experience of others along the course? Or will American trail runners and race organizers work to protect the experience that comes with being deep in the wilderness and miles from a trailhead? Will they search out a middle ground?

AS WE ADJUST TO A NEW OUTDOORS WORLD THAT INCLUDES RUNNERS moving speedily through the mountains, yet one more surprise awaits many of us—at least, if you find yourself on the trails of the White Mountain National Forest’s Saco Ranger District. You might cross paths with Trails Manager Cristin Bailey on her way to check out conditions, visit a trail crew, or meet with the adopters from a local hiking club. She’s been doing this work for the past fifteen years. From the ankles up, she’ll look as she always has: wearing forest green federal shorts, U.S. Forest Service shirt and badge, and a backpack. From the ankles down, though, her boots have been traded for Brooks Cascadias. And there’s one other difference: She will be moving fast.

DOUG MAYER trail runs from his home in Randolph, New Hampshire. A producer for the NPR show, *Car Talk*, he also manages a new Swiss Alps trail running vacation service, Run the Alps. Thanks go to the more than a dozen trail runners and White Mountain historians who contributed to this piece, with special appreciation to Lydia Goetze, Judy Hudson, and Tad Pfeffer.

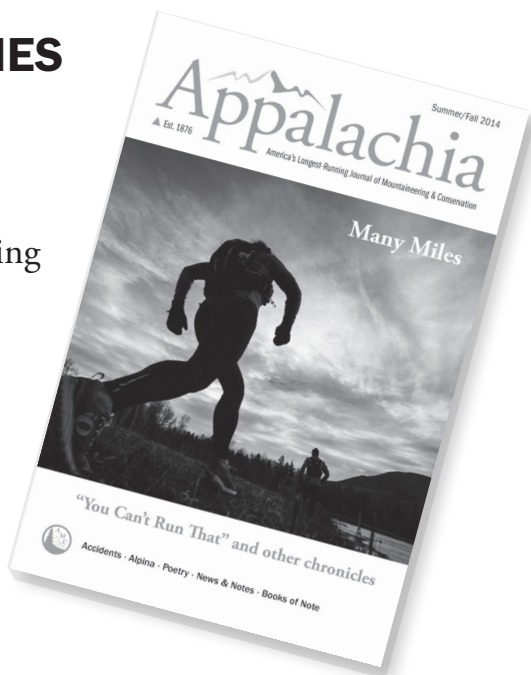
¹¹ *Appalachia*, June 1978, XLII no. 1, page 91.

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