

ADVENTURE OF A LIFETIME

Eugene woman sets speed record on Oregon Pacific Crest Trail to celebrate her mother

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When Emily Halnon's mother died of cancer earlier this year, she decided to honor her memory by trying something big.

She chose one of Oregon's most grueling challenges.

In the early morning darkness of Aug. 1, the 34-year-old Eugene resident laced up her shoes at the Oregon-California border and stepped onto the Pacific Crest Trail.

Then she started running.

Over the next week, Halnon ran up mountains and down river valleys, through a frigid thunderstorm and boiling temperatures, felt her shins ache and feet swell up on 20-hour days in remote wilderness.

When she reached the Washington border on Aug. 9, Halnon had set a new speed record for the Oregon section of the PCT: 455 miles in 7 days, 19 hours and 23 minutes.

That's averaging 57 miles per day.

The supported speed record — meaning she was helped by a team along the way — is the fastest among both men and women, and the fastest overall, according to the website Fastest Known Time, the best metric for tracking trail times.

In the process, Halnon raised \$32,000 for the Brave Like Gabe foundation, which funds rare cancer research.

"It was a celebration of my mom — she was my fuel," Halnon said. "There have been days when the grief is crushing. Channeling myself into this, into something that would make her proud and that felt like it mattered, was my way of working through it."

But the run was also about fun. Halnon was supported by a team of friends who invented romance stories to keep her smiling, threw impromptu dance parties on the trail and created a wilderness spa one night near Diamond Peak.

"There was a lot of singing and dancing and laughing — Emily has fun with the process," said Eric Schuman, a close friend and social studies teacher at North Eugene High School. "But she's also very tough, very driven. When things are difficult, she can dig deep."

"Emily is a badass," said Danielle Snyder, who previously held the women's speed record on the Oregon PCT. "She can be laid-back and goofy. But in the end, she's a badass."

Distance running comes in the family

Emily Halnon was inspired by her mother.

Growing up in Vermont, Andrea Halnon modeled how to be an athlete and runner even in later years.

"She had a health scare when I was a teenager and that motivated her to start being more physically active," Emily Halnon said.

It started with walking 5 kilometer races. Then running them. Next came 10 kilometer races and a half marathon. The year Andrea raced and turned 50, she ran her first marathon. Not finished, she learned to swim so she could complete a triathlon at 60.

The mother inspired her daughter. The duo ran their first marathon together on Emily's 23rd birthday.

"She beat me by 20 minutes," Emily said.

The first time Emily visited Oregon was to run the Eugene marathon. But it was trail running in the Pacific Northwest that brought her in Oregon for good, where she started running major distance, including five 100-mile ultramarathons. Her mom supported her every step.

"The joke with my friends was how many times she would post on Facebook during those races," Emily Halnon said. "It was usually about 18 times per race."

Andrea Halnon was diagnosed with a rare form of uterine cancer in December of 2018 at 65 years old.

"When that first round of chemo didn't work, her oncologist had terrifyingly few options to offer her," Emily Halnon wrote on Instagram. "One of them was giving up, something my tenacious mother would never do. But dealing with rare cancer often means running out of options. And my mom ran out of treatment options within months of her diagnosis."

Andrea Halnon fought for 13 months, still riding her bike, walking and staying active amid chemotherapy.

"The way she fought was extraordinary," Emily Halnon said.

Andrea Halnon died in January. But her toughness lived on through her daughter.

Inspiring more female athletes

The idea of establishing speed records in the outdoors isn't a new idea, but its appeal has grown over the past decade.

In a time when every blank spot on the map has been filled, and every mountain route climbed, doing adventures in the fastest known time — known as an FKT — has become the way athletes test



Emily Halnon, 35, of Eugene, set a speed record on the Oregon section of the Pacific Crest Trail. PHOTO BY JON MEYERS

themselves.

Emily Halnon had been considering running the Oregon PCT since 2015, but once her mom passed, she decided she'd shoot for the FKT.

One of the first people she reached out to was Snyder, who'd set the women's speed record in 2019. Snyder responded with enthusiasm.

"I work with women to be bold and step into their own, and it was really exciting to have Emily go for it," said Snyder, who finished the Oregon PCT in 9 days and 15 hours. "Trail running draws a lot more males than females, especially for FKTs. Encouraging more women to go for them is about more than a record."

To prepare, Halnon upped her training. Having already finished multiple 100-mile races, so was building from a strong foundation. She ran the Timberline Trail and climbed Hardesty Mountain three times in one day to prepare.

"In a lot of ways, I've been training for this for eight years," she said.

How to prove a record

Part of the FTK isn't just accomplishing it, but being able to prove the record.

As speed records become popularized, some records have proved to be fraudulent. The bar is high for proving a FKT, especially on a high profile route like the Oregon PCT.

Halnon signed up for a Garmin In Reach that allowed people to track her, a blue dot on the map, from a computer screen. In addition to time-stamped pictures, she got a second GPS device — a watch — that took a computerized track she could submit.

"There's not a governing body for FKTs," she said. "But the process is pretty rigorous."

The run and her team

On Aug. 1, Halnon headed to the PCT on the Oregon-California border. It was dark when she began running, but that would become a common theme.

Her pace was straightforward: run strong and steady on flat, downhill or slightly uphill terrain, while moving to a "strong hike" for steep climbs.

Earlier that week she'd announced her attempt on Instagram, adding that she would be raising money for rare cancer research. She had modest expectations — maybe \$4,500.

"I waffled on the fundraising part of it in the middle of a pandemic," she said. "But I just decided, if people have to means to give, great. If not, that's understandable."

Halnon's attempt was for a "supported" record — as opposed to a self-supported record. It means she had a team that helped, and it turned the effort into a communal undertaking with friends helping and running with her.

Halnon's boyfriend Ian and dog Dilly met her at many trail crossings for supplies and tune-ups, sock changes and a rest breaks.

The challenge of eating and romance novels

The first two days spanned a massive area, taking her from California all the way to Crater Lake National Park — a total of 131.5 miles.

And it became clear what a big challenge might be: eating.

"Every half hour I'd say, 'time to eat again,' and she just hated that," said Snyder, who ran with Halnon on the second day. "When you're running like this, your body stops processing food as well. You feel crappy and don't want to eat. It makes you feel tired and nauseous."

"I'd say: 'I don't care what you say, you have to eat. If you don't, you won't make it through the day, let alone to Washington.'"

Far from the cliché of Cliff Bars and Gu Energy packets, Halnon and many ultra runners opt for tastier fare: Cheetos, gummy worms, Swedish fish, rice crispy treats and Fritos. At stops, she ate quesadillas and instant mash potatoes.

The days were long. She averaged 16 to 17 hours each day, reaching camp in dark-

ness, sleeping 2 to 5 hours and getting up before dawn to do it again.

Her feet swelled up a half size and shins ached. The mental willingness to keep going meant Halnon's running partners also had to keep things fun. They danced, played Taylor Swift music and made up romance novellas.

The best day on the PCT: hog dogs, friends and Diamond Peak

There were a lot of difficult days on the trail, but the highlight was day four — 48 miles from Windigo Pass to Charlton Lake.

The run brought her through emerald lakes and below Diamond Peak, and was close enough to Eugene that her friends threw a mini trail party.

After 22 miles, she stopped for a break and was surprised when her friend Eric Schuman brought her a hot dog, French fries and ice-cold Powerade from Dairy Queen.

"It was so perfect," she said. "I'd been fantasizing about a cold beverage for miles and love hot dogs."

That night, after passing the 200-mile mark, she ran into camp in daylight for the first and only time — and she was nowhere near alone.

"My Eugene running friends showed up in force," she wrote on Instagram. "They meet me 3 miles up the trail to run me in hooting and hollering, to a beautiful lakeshore set up with a grill, coolers, a fireside massage and friends! Everything a girl could dream of greeting her halfway through this PCT run."

"I am ready to head back out onto the trail with recharged legs and a fuller heart and soul."

She would need that boost. The weather had changed and would bring the biggest challenge yet.

The worst day: thunderstorm and darkness across Mount Jefferson

Day six was one Halnon had been waiting for the entire trip: 59 miles from McKenzie Pass to Brietenbush Lake, across the Three Sisters and Mount Jefferson wilderness areas, the most scenic stretch of the PCT in Oregon.

But the weather had turned against her. A cool thunderstorm blew in, bringing high winds, little visibility and rain that became a winter mix at high elevations.

"Records aren't supposed to be easy," she said.

From McKenzie Pass she ran across the slick lava rock in a thin rain jacket that wasn't nearly warm enough, then across exposed ridgelines.

"It was wet for 14 hours, but the winds on the high ridges were most dramatic," said Schuman, who ran with her that day. "There were times when we were almost getting blown over. There were no other people on the trail that day, but we passed a ton of tents that looked really warm and cozy."

As darkness fell, Halnon and Schuman reached a pit stop at Woodpecker Ridge.

"I shiver through changing clothes and burrow into a sleeping bag with hot ramen," she wrote, adding that she fell asleep. "I could stay here forever. Warm and not moving."

One problem: to keep on pace, she had to complete another 10 miles to Breitenbush Lake.

"I reluctantly stand up and groggily start moving," she wrote. "The next 10 miles are an unending torture chamber of running. Violent river crossings. Icy snow fields. Rocky trails that are hard to follow and travel. Harsh cold again."

They stumbled into camp at 4:30 a.m. Just a few hours later, she had to wake up again.

"I was totally broken the next morning," Schuman said. "But she woke up at 7:30 a.m. Honestly, watching her get out on the trail was one of the most incredible accomplishments I've ever seen."

Indeed, Halnon ran another 53 miles from Breitenbush Lake to Barlow Pass near Mount Hood on day seven, finishing at 2 a.m.

It set up a final sprint for the record

Fastest known times on Oregon Pacific Crest Trail

Supported, female

Emily Halnon: 7 days, 19 hours, 23 minutes (Aug. 9, 2020)

Lindsey Ulrich: 9 days, 13 hours, 39 minutes (Aug. 5, 2020)

Danielle Snyder: 9 days, 15 hours, 8 minutes (Aug. 31, 2019)

Supported, male

Scott Loughney and Yassine Diboun: 8 days, 12 hours, 5 minutes (July 25, 2016)

Self-supported, male

Brian Donnelly: 7 days, 22 hours, 37 minutes (Aug. 17, 2013)

Sprint to the finish, and huge amount of money for rare cancer research

Halnon posted on Instagram throughout the trip, and gradually saw the amount of money she was raising tick upward, all the way to \$14,000.

"What I heard from a lot of people was that in the middle of this darkness, the pandemic and everything else, a lot of people were looking for something positive to follow and be part of," Halnon said. "The run gave them a way to do it."

The morning of her final day on the trail, she posted: "I'm going for the overall (fastest known time). Can you help me get there with donations to @bravelikegabe?"

To get the fastest known time overall, she needed to finish the final 57 miles by 3:30 a.m.

"I thought: 'I can do this, but this day needs to go well,'" she said.

Normally, Halnon said she doesn't look at her phone during runs. But this time, she kept checking in because the amount of money raised began to rise quickly.

"I'd get service, press refresh, and see thousands more dollars coming in," she said. "And I thought: this is why I'm out here."

But her shin, which had hurt for days, was throbbing. Luckily, Joe Uhan, a physical therapist from Eugene, was along to help at the next stop.

"People spring into action when I arrive and I'm on Joe's table, his fingers digging magic into my shin, while Lucy spoon-feeds me ramen," Halnon wrote. "Ian reads me comments people have left about why they're donating. I am a puddle on Joe's table. Cancer has touched and challenged so many lives. And so many people are inspired by my mom."

The final stretch

The final push was not easy. Halnon was doing well time-wise, but the Bridge of the Gods at Washington's border felt as far away as Australia as she entered the rocky, uneven terrain of the Columbia Gorge.

"I thought about my mom a lot," she wrote as darkness fell. "I push as hard as I can, which doesn't amount to much speed or grace at mile 446. But I am emptying myself out for this run."

Finally, she saw headlights in the distance. Excited hollers. Then the outline of the bridge.

"I hit the bridge surrounded by a tidal wave of love," she wrote. "The Washington sign cracks me like an egg. I feel so strong and so raw as I finally stop running after 7 days and 19 hours and 23 minutes."

The final push raised the total over \$30,000, which has increased to \$32,000. All the money will all be donated to Brave Like Gabe for rare cancer research, Halnon said.

After the run, Halnon spent a lot of time sleeping and eating. And thinking about her mom.

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Emily Halnon's record, day by day

Day one: California border to Keno Access Road, 61.5 miles / 8,900 feet of elevation gain

Day two: Keno Access Road to Crater Lake National Park, 70 miles / 9,300 feet

Day three: Crater Lake to Windigo Pass, 58 miles / 6,700 feet

Day four: Windigo Pass to Charlton Lake, 48 miles / 6,400 feet

Day five: Charlton Lake to McKenzie Pass, 57 miles / 6,800 feet

Day six: McKenzie Pass to Brietenbush Lake, 59 miles / 8,800 feet

Day seven: Brietenbush Lake to Barlow Pass, 53 miles / 5,700 feet

Day eight: Barlow Pass to Bridge of the Gods, 57 miles / 8,500 feet

Total: 463.5 miles* / 61,100 feet of climb