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# RUNNING TIMES

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Bryce Thatcher runs the Grand Tetons. He held the FKT record from 1983-2012.

# Records not Races

Is the pursuit of Fastest Known Times the future of competition? BY ADAM W. CHASE

If a record falls in the woods (or on a mountain or in a canyon) and nobody's there to record it, does it make a sound? More than ever, the answer is yes. One of the newest trends in competition, particularly on trails, is to pursue Fastest Known Times or FKTs. This kind of race has no ribbon stretched across the

finish line, nor will you find aid stations, spectators or course marshals along the way. But increasingly, runners are finding a sense of accomplishment in setting FKTs on challenging routes of their choosing.

Accurate GPS watches and websites that provide a place to record times and course details have helped spur the growth

in FKT attempts and how seriously people consider them. Upload a run to one of the sites and suddenly everyone can track the details. One leading website is Strava, which keeps score attempts on uploaded routes and sends an alert when someone bests a known time. The effect is like the old-school arcade video games that listed the top 10 high scores on a worldwide scale. Another popular site is Fastest Known Time. On the site, which is administrated by multiple FKT-holder Peter Bakwin, users list and update most of the current records by region.

**FKTs by nature have no crowds, no prize money or awards, no official press coverage, and often no direct *mano-a-mano* competition.**

Besides improved technology, the cause for the growth is largely credited to runners who are fed up with races that fill in mere minutes, soaring entry fees, and the traffic and noise of a high-tech world. These factors drive runners to seek out solitude in a natural setting, where they can test themselves in what might be deemed a "purist" way, one that boils running down to the individual and the mountain or route, but that also allows comparison to previous attempts on the same routes. FKT is almost exclusively a trail-running phenomenon, but its popularity might prove contagious to the road scene.

FKTs by nature have no crowds, no prize money or awards, no official press coverage, and often no direct *mano-a-mano* competition (although virtually all long-distance attempts like Rob Krar's Grand Canyon Rim-to-Rim [see sidebar on page 68] are accompanied by friends, for safety reasons if nothing else). But it isn't a race in the traditional sense; thus, any pressure is from within, as measured by heartbeats and a satellite that circulates above, unseen in space.

All this is good clean fun that we're able to access as we please, without rearranging our schedules, getting to the starting line



early to find a parking space or having to file a park permit for a crowd and an event. Besides the Grand Canyon Rim-to-Rim, other high-profile FKTs include the longer Grand Canyon Rim-to-Rim-to-Rim (R2R2R) record, which has fallen several times in the last few years but at press time was held by Dakota Jones in 6:53:38. And on the Grand Teton, a record that stood for 18 years was recently broken and then, less than a week later, broken again. (At press time it stood at 2:53:02 by Andy Anderson.)



A route map of the Tetons on the Strava website.

Many FKTs are unsupported efforts, so runners carry their own sustenance and protection, be it extra food, hydration, weather protection or even rope and climbing gear. A lot of the reported FKTs are considered "extreme." Part of that is because the emerging subport resulted from a melding of mountaineering and trail running, which is why much of the rock- and mountain-climbing ethos is so pervasive in the FKT movement.

Lynn Hill of Boulder, Colo., is world-renowned for her climbing feats and is intrigued by the growth of FKTs in trail running. "I would say that runners, like climbers, are generally interested in evolving and seeing their performances improve," she says. "But for the majority of climbers, the game of competition [or comparison with others] is not as important as the experience itself." Hill sees parallels between the sports in that both take place in "beautiful, natural places with our friends or partners," but notes that in climbing "there is less emphasis on the achievement or 'record' and more importance placed on finding harmony within the environment, ourselves, and our climbing partners."

Because climbing isn't necessarily about

speed, the sport offers runners little guidance for documenting or verifying their feats. Questions have been raised as to whether GPS is enough. It's not too far a stretch to think that people could play the system by relaying the watch, cutting the route or riding a bike for some of it. Fortunately, many of the top FKT-holders also race in traditional events on a regular basis, so their speed and prowess are validated through head-to-head competition. Winning big races does wonders to erase suspicion — Krar, for example, won the 2012 LaSportiva Mountain Cup championship and competed on the Canadian National Mountain Running team at the world championship last year.

Still, most agree that it's a good-faith sport, built on trust, convenience and often a longing for a purist endeavor on the trails. While it's unlikely that FKTs will ever replace elite head-to-head racing or change the trail- or road-racing scene anytime soon, the concept is intriguing in light of the problems of overcrowding, adverse weather and the environmental impacts of gathering people for events. For now, the technology and online communities provide runners a means to have the best of both worlds: an empty, open trail and competition. **RT**

## FKT Attempt: Rim-to-Rim in the Grand Canyon

Last Memorial Day weekend, Rob Krar didn't pin on a race number, lace up a chip or join a mass of runners at a starting line for a race. As many a Flagstaff, Ariz., trail runner is wont to do, he joined a couple of buddies on the North Rim of the Grand Canyon early that Friday morning to see just how fast they could run to the other side.



Rob Krar (middle, white tank), after setting the Rim-to-Rim FKT record in May 2012. Past record-holder Jared Scott (shirtless) was also part of the group.

By 8:30 a.m. the trio had covered 21 miles, starting at 8,000 feet above sea level, dropping 4,800 feet, crossing the canyon floor, then climbing back up 4,800 feet to the South Rim. In the end, Krar, a 36-year-old pharmacist, made it first to the Kaibab trailhead in 2:51:28. The previous Fastest Known Time for that rim-to-rim route was 3:06:10, held by Jared Scott, who was one of the pack that day, too.

While Krar was aware of the previous record and the phenomenon of setting Fastest Known Times on trails around the world, it wasn't something he thought he'd do that day. After all, he'd never even run the Kaibab Trail before. But when he found himself alone, with an extra gear on the ascent up to the South Rim, he went for it. By the time he got home, his record had already hit the social media headlines in the ultrarunning and trail-running world.

"I thought it was exciting to do something I'd never done before," Krar says. "I went with no expectations — I was basing my run off of just trying to feel comfortable. That record comes down to the last four miles, really. It's just a matter of how you feel heading into that."

But the record attempt wasn't the sole reason Krar — and many other runners — decided to do the run.

"For me," Krar added, "the crossing of the Grand Canyon was a chance to hang out with some friends from town. It was the whole package that had me excited, as opposed to just the run itself."



## Q&A

# Early Adopter

**Bryce Thatcher held the known record for the Grand Teton Owen-Spalding route from 1983 to 2012, along with other famous Fastest Known Times (FKTs). Thatcher recently answered questions via email about the emergence of a movement that follows what he's been doing for decades.**

*To what do you attribute the recent swell in FKT activity?*

Going for a faster time is not necessarily a new thing, although trends toward minimalism and toward the ultra-end of the running community have recently converged. Pushing limits is the result, farther than ever before, thanks to the skill levels that athletes are achieving.

Minimalism defines an increasing trend

seen in every outdoor discipline toward going farther, carrying less and traveling faster. Minimalism has also become synonymous with a more pure you-and-the-universe attitude. In this mindset the quality of experience outweighs the potential risk. Now, many athletes are willing to discard virtually everything, enabling such feats as free-soloed speed ascents directly to the top.

I was never the fastest flat-course runner on the Grand Teton, but at the time, my uphill running and mountaineering skills tipped the scale in my favor. Over the years, more distance speed runners have developed substantial mountaineering skills and vice versa. It just took 29 years for this convergence to officially hit my record on the Grand, although I have been aware of some very serious attempts over the last two or three years.

*Do you feel that there ought to be tighter parameters on route choices and documentation, or is it OK to simply press "start" on your GPS watch and run the speediest course you can?*

Route choices should be optional — within certain parameters. Records should be for a specific route only, and should be further



delineated or distinguished by style, support, the extent to which it is achieved "solo" and other important factors.

The more documentation the better — every detail helps the next person to determine if he or she is going for that particular record or for a new or different one. An FKT is a fascinating label but may often cause confusion or be misleading in that it may fail to take into account degree of difficulty including route, style, support and other issues. For example, a supported oxygen-assisted ascent of Everest would be a different record than a solo, unsupported

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## RACING

and sans-oxygen attempt on the same route. Additionally, summiting the same peak on one route might be easier than summiting a different route on the same peak — especially if it is supported or paced. The physical, mental and mechanical issues change substantially based on external factors. When I set the FKT for the Grand Teton, had I done so on the Exum Ridge route instead of the Owen-Spalding — that would have been a different record than the speed ascent for the Grand, which I set twice.

The big emphasis should be on support versus no support and staying on the same route.

Starting the GPS is not enough. A GPS does not reveal whether an individual is solo, has stashed water, or is otherwise assisted in any way, met by pacers or rope fixers, all of which should be documented.

Where trails are available, I believe they should be chosen for environmental and ethical reasons. In those places where trail cutting is prohibited and other rules exist, such rules should be strictly observed. And violation should be absolute grounds for disqualification, not unlike blood doping or other illegal behaviors in other sports arenas. I like running the trails in Zion, the Grand Canyon, Bryce Canyon, Teton and other national parks too much to jeopardize the right of future generations to enjoy them, too.

Rules are there for good reasons. Environmental concerns involve not only soils and sedimentation, but ecosystems, plant and animal life. The old selfish attitude has really gone out of fashion with athletes making wise and ethical choices based on much more than a desire to set a record. For example, climbers used to leave empty oxygen tanks and other debris to pile up in an otherwise pristine place and runners refused to properly dispose of cups, chucking them onto a trail. Now, most runners carry trash out even when they are minimalist runners.

*Why did you gravitate to doing FKTs back when they were practically unheard of and even ultrarunning was just emerging as a recognized sport?*

I was a climber and mountaineer prior to being a runner. When I adopted a policy of being "off the top before noon" for safety reasons, I didn't have to carry gear for weather and temperature change or an overnight stay. I began running as much of a route as possible. I quickly realized that putting in faster times was a way of benchmarking my own personal improvement. It felt good to note these in my journal, but I really didn't even think about making most

of that information public or official. At the time, setting records was really not my goal. The Grand Teton and White Rim Trail are really my only published, properly documented and official records. I sometimes wish I had more formally documented my times on the Keyhole Route on Long's Peak in Rocky Mountain National Park, because I believe I could still have an FKT. But to me it's not a record, because I didn't properly document what I did with witnesses and other methods.

I was certainly not one of the first to attempt speed ascents, but quicker times allowed me to see and explore a lot more terrain with only the need for a lightweight jacket and a little food. In those days I drank from natural water sources. Such minimalism increased my speed exponentially, because I carried less weight. Both of my Grand Teton records involved no consumption of any food except a bottle of apple juice. If I were to approach a record now, I would carry specialty energy foods and electrolytes. In a record situation, I might still drink from natural water sources even though I risked contracting giardia.

*As a pioneer in the sport of FKTs, what advice can you offer?*

For reasons of ethics and fairness, records today should not be a free-for-all without limits. Despite climbers running and runners climbing, resulting records involve skill sets that cross over traditional lines. When traditions converge, ground rules or protocol should apply from each contributing discipline. From the Alpine tradition, style and route, level of assistance and other factors should be documented. The running community also has some fairly bright guidelines established as may be noted by the delineation of race courses usually stringently followed. Running events typically honor age categories and special achievements.

These all represent values and protocol that are useful to FKTs. It is not difficult to document details of an endeavor. It is the details that uncover the true nature of any particular record and whether it follows an old record or becomes a new or different record. Anton Krupicka has done a great job of documenting his routes, times and other important information. I would also recommend adhering to the rules suggested by Christian Beckwith, who is currently documenting Fastest Known Times, including contacting a record-holder prior to an attempt and giving others a chance to monitor an attempt. **RT**