

How to Aim (Very) High

Set an Outrageous Goal

These 7 relatively normal people aimed incredibly high — and made it.

BY ELISE CRAIG

FROM THE WARM confines of our couches, or even the finish line of a standard, 26.2-mile marathon, the idea of going after an ultramarathon or a 2,650-mile hike or taking a channel swim between islands might sound extreme, even impossible. But every day, normal, nonprofessional athletes are hitting the pavement or the pool to go after gigantic physical goals, and finding themselves stronger than they ever thought possible. Here are seven people who pushed themselves to go after big, bold athletic targets and conquered them, one step, stroke or paddle at a time.



Enock Glidden, 39

CLIMB YOSEMITE'S EL CAPITAN

IN 2013, NICK HALL, a high school friend of Enock Glidden's and a ranger on Mount Rainier in Washington, fell and was killed during a rescue. "That day," Glidden says, "I was looking at the pictures he used to post from Rainier and Yosemite, and I realized I wanted to see those places for myself."

Glidden, who was born with spina bifida and is paraplegic, went online and found Paradox Sports, an adaptive-climbing organization. He signed up for one of its climbing trips and discovered his community. "Before that, I was more exposed to people who accepted that they couldn't do things, even though they really could," he says. "I always knew that wasn't what I wanted my life to be."

After a big climb, Glidden decided to train to go after the Zodiac route up El Capitan in California. To do it, he would use a T-bar ascender — essentially a pull-up bar that slides up a rope — to climb to the top. To prep, Glidden hit the gym to do pull-ups and lift weights and also got in as much time as possible climbing a rope tied to a tree.

In 2016, after five days and the equivalent of 3,000 to 4,000 pull-ups, Glidden reached the top. "It was probably the most amazing, overwhelming, happy feeling anyone could have," he says.

The hard part was coming down. Glidden couldn't go back the way he came, so 12 people climbed up the mountain's East Ledges to carry him down. The descent took 17 hours, and included a 400-foot stretch where he had to be lowered on a rope.

Still, it was worth it, and Glidden is already planning his next big ascent: Mount Rainier.



Sarah Eismann, 39

SWIM 40 MILES OF OPEN-WATER RACES IN ONE YEAR

SARAH EISMANN, a stage actor, director and producer in New York, was mourning the end of her marriage and funding cuts to Shakespeare in the Park. "I needed to do something different to get myself out of the dark place I had found myself in," she says. Though Eismann has a deep fear of sea creatures, she decided to swim more than 40 miles' worth of open-water swims before her 40th birthday, raising money for an organization that brings Shakespeare plays into prisons.

Eismann, who also works as a swim instructor and the aquatics-program finance coordinator at the Marlene Meyerson J.C.C. Manhattan, created her own training schedule, building up mileage in the pool until about a week before each race,

then tapering off. She also started swimming with the Coney Island Brighton Beach Open Water Swimmers to help get her over her fear.

In the last year, Eismann has swum to San Francisco from Alcatraz (1.5 miles) and has completed the Waikiki Roughwater Swim (2.4 miles) as well as the Maui Channel Swim (9.9 miles) and the North Shore 5K swim (3.1 miles). She has also swum across Lake Tahoe (10.5 miles), which was her favorite. "It started at 3 a.m.," she says, "and I swam through the sunrise." And before her birthday at the end of the month, she plans to swim around the island of Bermuda, a roughly 37-mile swim that she guesses will take her about 30 hours.



Bryan Allemang, 38

COMPLETE THE YUKON RIVER QUEST

WHEN BRYAN ALLEMANG was finally going to marry after a seven-year engagement, he wanted to do something significant to mark the end of his bachelorhood. For years, he'd been thinking about paddling the Yukon River Quest — a 444-mile race through the Canadian wilderness. But he wasn't quite sure how to prepare for 50 hours solo in a canoe.

Luckily for Allemang, there was a huge paddling community where he lived in Ottawa, Canada, and a veteran of the race took him out on the water to work on technique and connect with other paddlers. To work on his endurance, Allemang queued up "Breaking Bad" and did upper-body exercises with five-pound dumbbells as he binge-watched. "I wasn't going for heavy weights and tons of muscle mass," he says. "I was going for long-term repetitive action."

Once Allemang got on the water for the race, he made good time, following the current and drafting with fellow canoers until the fog became so thick, he had to try to navigate just by sound. After a seven-hour rest stop, Allemang, an electrician, got stuck in open water in the middle of a lightning storm. Not long after that, he began to hallucinate. By the time he hit the finish line, he knew he was way beyond the 55-hour finish time. But, because he was the first to finish in his class, at 62 hours 13 minutes 36 seconds, Allemang won the coveted trophy, a tiny gold canoe. He loved the race so much, he has done it twice since — and actually moved to the Yukon.

Noelle Northcutt, 36

THROUGH-HIKE THE PACIFIC CREST TRAIL



NOELLE NORTHCUTT grew up camping and hiking, but before she and her fiancée, Kelly Schoeppler, took on the Pacific Crest Trail in 2016, the longest backpacking trip she had ever been on was about 70 miles over five nights. Trekking the 2,650 miles from Mexico to Canada was a whole different kind of commitment, one that would require them both to quit their jobs, as a hospitalist and a pharmacist, respectively. "It wasn't a small deal," Northcutt says. "But we wanted to have an adventure."

To prepare, they cut back on spending and socked away enough money so that they could live for nine months to a year without working — six to complete the trail, the rest for job-hunting afterward — and added weight to their backpacks as they took on shorter backpacking trips on weekends. Northcutt also went to a CrossFit gym.

Once the two hikers got on the trail, the distance wasn't that intimidating — but crossing cold rivers carrying heavy packs was scary, as was a snow-covered trek up California's Mount Whitney, where it was hard to see the trail and falling could have meant death.

But 158 days later, the duo hiked through a blizzard and into Canada, wet and freezing and ready to get back home.



Gisela Perez, 65

FINISH AN ULTRAMARATHON

GISELA PEREZ was already an accomplished marathoner when she joined Black Girls Run. The New Yorker started running in high school gym class, completed more than 100 half-marathons in the years after she gave birth to her son and took on her first 26.2-miler in 1996. But by 202, most of her running buddies had hung up their sneakers, so she joined B.G.R. to find new people to train with. "I was like their mother, because everyone there is so young," she says. "But I went, and they were so encouraging, I didn't look back."

In 2016, Perez's new friends helped her go after her ultimate goal — an ultramarathon, 37.2 miles long. Despite her accomplishments, she was afraid to make the jump presented by the NYC 60K, which takes place in hilly Central Park. To prepare, she ran two marathons in the three weeks before the race.

On the day of the ultra, Perez was struggling before she saw her B.G.R. friends on the sidelines cheering her on. Their support helped her get over the finish line. "It's the greatest accomplishment," she says. "It's like no one can touch me. Once you do an ultra, you can do anything."

In her case, "anything" includes the Empire State Building Run-Up (Page 4), which she completed in just over 31 minutes in February, as well as three more marathons. And she's currently learning to swim, so that she can take on her first triathlon.



Josh Zitomer, 44

COMPLETE THE QUINTUPLE ANVIL

EVEN FOR JOSH ZITOMER, a personal trainer who has completed 10,000 burpees in 43 hours, the Quintuple Anvil was hell. The race is about as extreme as a triathlon can get — a 12-mile swim followed by a 560-mile bike ride and then a 131-mile run.

To prepare, Zitomer relied on three months of interval training — for example, running two miles at high intensity, then slowing down for 400 meters, then speeding back up, increasing the lengths over time. He also switched to a vegan diet; he finds it helps put him in the right mind-set and improves his finishing times.

Still, the event was "disastrous." The 12-mile swim took Zitomer nine hours, the last of which he spent vomiting. It rained for 75 percent of the race, and, after only three hours total of sleep, he started to lose it. "I'm not joking when I say I was hallucinating and crying," he says. "The emotions ran the gamut — happy one second, in tears the next. I started seeing things."

Zitomer finished in just over five days, one of only four in a field of seven to make it to the end. And after all that pain, he loved the challenge. "When you get to a point where quitting all of the sudden makes perfect sense, that's when you determine who you are at your core," he says. "I think we're all looking for that moment."



Sarah Cooper, 46

WIN THE RACE ACROSS AMERICA

FOR SARAH COOPER, the hardest part about the Race Across America (or RAAM), the 3,000-mile bike race from Oceanside, Calif. to Annapolis, Md., wasn't the hallucinations, the 175,000 feet of climb, or even the stormy weather. It was a condition called Shermer's neck. From Colorado on, Cooper felt as if she were being stabbed in the neck, and toward the end of the race, she could barely hold her head up. "It was not what you want to happen in the race of your life," she says.

Cooper didn't become an athlete until her late 30s and didn't start biking until a foot injury forced her out of triathlons. She discovered that she was not only winning races in the women's division; she was also often coming in first overall, beating all the men. Cooper decided to go

after the biggest race of them all, training for months. But there wasn't much she could do to prevent the injury, which is common in RAAM participants — and in a race where athletes are only off their bikes for two hours or less per day, there was very little relief. The only benefit was that she was allowed more showers than her team had planned.

Cooper had hoped to reach Annapolis in 10 days or fewer, but didn't end up crossing the finish line until the 11-day mark. Still, she won the women's division. "What was great about that ride was the mental and physical challenge of riding with that pain for 2,000 miles and finishing," she says. "So, while that result will fade into RAAM history, it was my best race personally." ♦