

ALLY BEAVEN
BROKEN
2020: the year running records were rewritten



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Front cover Jo Meek on her way to breaking the overall record for the Nigel Jenkins Dartmoor Round in August 2020. © James Armstrong.

Back cover John Kelly heading off Sgùrr an Iubhair towards Am Bodach in the Mamores on his Grand Round. © Steve Ashworth.

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James Elson and the FKTs

James Elson is the man behind Centurion Running, a company that organises 50- and 100-mile races in the south of England. If runners thought Covid was tough on them, it was far worse for the people trying to make a living putting on events.

‘Our first event is the first weekend in April; we then have half our season in April, May and June. In the middle of March we were still a go for the South Downs Way in April, but very quickly that became untenable, so we postponed that. I postponed the first three at the same time, in fact, and cancelled the Track 100.’

The Track 100 was, as the name suggests, a 100-mile race on a track. Making its full debut in 2020, entry was by invitation only and some of the sport’s biggest names, twenty-four-hour world champions Aleksandr Sorokin and Camille Herron among them, were due to race in pursuit of world records. As James put it, ‘Organising races is my job, but the reason we do it is because we love the races. I was so, so excited to be part of the Track 100 and then it got snatched away from us. That was really, really shit.’

Although most runners' agonising about cancelled races came from the point of view of participants, fans of the sport were also missing out on the opportunity to see some much anticipated match-ups: Sorokin and Herron versus the world records at the Track 100, Eliud Kipchoge and Kenenisa Bekele at the London Marathon, Finlay Wild and Andrew Douglas at Cioch Mhor.

It turns out that postponing and cancelling races involves as much work as – if not more work than – putting them on in the first place: transferring entries to new race dates, processing refunds, renegotiating with landowners. From the outside looking in, the world of events had ground to a halt, but James found himself busier than ever.

With all racing cancelled, and unlikely to be making a return any time soon, runners had to find new ways to get their kicks. Originating in countries with more restrictive lockdowns, for a while stay-at-home training challenges were the in thing. The man who started it all was Pan Shancu, a Chinese marathon runner who ran fifty kilometres in his living room, 6,250 laps of two tables pushed together. (He also claimed to have run thirty kilometres on the spot in his bathroom. I have no idea how that works.) The concept caught on. There were balcony marathons, garden hundred-milers, people climbing the height of Everest on their stairs. Even in the UK, where outdoor exercise was never off-limits, people were drawn to these challenges by the novelty value and, in many cases, the sweet, sweet dopamine of social media approval.

But these things can only be taken so far. Once a guy knocking on for 100 years old has pushed his Zimmer frame round hundreds of laps of his garden, raised countless thousands of pounds for the NHS (seemingly now a charity), become a national icon and been knighted, few people are likely to be impressed with your '50k Allotment Challenge'.

And so the world moved on and virtual racing became the thing to do. Although nothing new, these events came into their own in an

increasingly physically distanced world. Organisers specify a time frame to cover a certain distance; runners then submit evidence in the form of screenshots from their phone or photos of their watch, and their medal gets popped in the post. Many runners are cynical about virtual racing. It has all the downsides of racing, like entry fees and race T-shirts that will survive long after mankind's rapaciousness has destroyed the planet; and none of the upsides: the race-day buzz, the thrill of competition and the opportunity to post verifiable times. Some race directors shared this cynicism, including James Elson.

'If you'd told me at Christmas that we would be putting on virtual races I would never ever have believed you. I mean, to me, it's just nonsense. It's not a thing, I had no interest. I would get emails from companies saying, "Do you want help organising a virtual race?" and I wouldn't even reply.' But after speaking to Hayley Pollack, a friend and race director in the US who had had great success putting on virtual events in place of cancelled races, and encouraged by many of Centurion's regulars, James overcame his reservations. Entries for the Centurion Running One Community virtual event opened on 1 May. Starting on the 25th, runners would have a week to cover distances from five kilometres to 100 miles.

'Three weeks after launching, we had 3,980 people signed up, I could not believe it. All our regular runners got their friends and family involved; we had 550 kids under eighteen who would never get a chance to race with us normally because of UK Athletics' age restrictions; there were siblings, parents, grandparents; it just went crazy. It brought the community together, it strengthened our brand because people realised the community was more important than the commercial side of things, it helped us with the online shop when that was tanking, and we raised well over £10,000 for charity.'

Virtual racing also offered runners a chance to support race organisers. While a handful of morons bitched and moaned about organisers' handling of the pandemic, and one events company in

Andorra even closed its doors after the abuse it received when it was only able to offer runners a seventy per cent refund, most realised that all the race organisers going bust would mean no more races, pandemic or no pandemic.

‘The runners have been very, very understanding throughout this situation. They’ve shown flexibility, understanding; they’ve rolled with the punches and they’re sharing the burden. And that is what the ultra community is about. Obviously we’ve had a few problems with individual runners who think it’s all about them, but ninety-nine per cent of them have been amazing. I think it’s been the lifeblood for a few organisers. The bills don’t stop coming in when races are cancelled or postponed.’

It turns out that community is a theme of running in lockdown. Not only was it keeping race directors afloat, it was helping athletes to stay motivated. James Stewart is a coach at Pyllon Ultra and he saw maintaining a feeling of connectedness among his athletes as a key part of guiding them through extraordinary circumstances.

‘As human beings, we’re quite tactile and we enjoy company. It’s why clubs and community things exist, it’s why we meet face to face a lot, and the virtual world will never replace that. But creating a sense of community and engagement and purpose virtually, using that as a way to keep people on the right side of well from both a mental and physical point of view during an unprecedented pandemic, I think was something we grew into quite quickly. For me it was less about performance and more about engagement because engagement creates ritual and habits from where performance will come.’

Predictably, the response of athletes to their empty calendars and changing circumstances was hugely varied. For some, the upheaval and uncertainty meant that training took a back seat. Concern for vulnerable relatives, fear of lost income, a house suddenly full of children as the schools were closed; in such circumstances it’s easy to see that the six-by-sixty-second hill reps you had planned for

Thursday might not be all that important. For others, this was an opportunity to take a long-term view, to chip away at their weaknesses and come back better than ever in 2021. For a lucky few, furloughed and with little or no family responsibility, the time had come to try and live the lifestyle of a professional athlete. For these runners, while virtual races might provide a sense of belonging and a goal to train towards, they were never going to be enough to scratch that competitive itch. Since the very first race cancellations, every bargain-basement Nostradamus was wisely predicting that 2020 would be ‘The Year of the FKT’!

A comparatively recent term, *FKT* stands for ‘fastest known time’ and is an import from the United States. In the early 2000s a couple of ultrarunners, Buzz Burrell and Pete Bakwin, found themselves frustrated with the difficulty of finding information on the fastest times for the trails they were running.

As Pete tells me, ‘In 1999 Buzz and I ran the 500-mile Colorado Trail for a speed record. A couple years later we decided to go for the John Muir Trail record, but it was hard to figure out what the record actually was. Even when we got in touch with the person who probably held the record, he couldn’t give us a straight answer. I didn’t like the vagueness, and set up a simple website to record these types of speed records on trails, and to record the stories surrounding them.’ That site is *fastestknowntime.com* and I ask Pete about the origin of the phrase itself.

‘It was something I heard around. Buzz was using it back in the 1990s, as were a few other people. It seemed a natural fit because we didn’t necessarily know what the *actual* fastest time was, only what we were able to find out about.’

As trail running and ultrarunning have grown in popularity, so traffic on the trails and the website has increased, with more attempts and more routes added every year. And then along came Covid.