

# A New Chapter for Devon Yanko

A conversation about Colorado life, health, and some downsides of professional ultrarunning

SARAH LAVENDER SMITH

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Around Mile 30 of last month's High Lonesome 100, Devon Yanko passed me on an out-and-back section traversing a mountain pass at an elevation around 12,000 feet. I'm always happy to cross paths with her, since she's one of the most accomplished and versatile trail and road runners I know.

We both started running ultras in Northern California 15 years ago when her last name was Crosby-Helms, and although Devon is a lot younger (she just turned 40) and always has been way out of my league, I can relate to her because we've run many of the same races, and we both remember when everybody knew pretty much everybody in the ultra scene.

As we passed—me in the midpack on the “out” section of the segment, she near the front-runners and thus at least three miles ahead of me—I asked how she was doing. She laughed and shook her head with a two-word answer, “Shit show!”

One of her trekking poles broke early in the race, her stomach turned, blisters erupted, but worst of all, she had severe PMS that made her legs feel like “200-pound blocks of wood” while “intestines quarreled with my uterus”—details she shared in an Instagram caption before she decided to take a break from social media.

She rarely holds back when describing her mental and physical health while writing or podcasting. She has [a new Substack newsletter called Devon's Dispatch](#) and also co-hosts [an excellent podcast called Women of Distance](#). She does this not to make money—so, refreshingly, her platforms are not clogged with sponsor plugs—but for the sake of writing and commentating, because she cares and finds it cathartic.









Devon Yanko on her way to setting a course record in 14:23 at the Umstead 100 mile race last April. Photo by Dennis Geiser

Devon's marathon and ultra credentials are beyond impressive and unusually balanced between road and trail. In April, at the Umstead 100 in North Carolina, she ran a blazing 14:23 to finish first overall and set a course record. She is the 2017 Leadville 100 champ, 2015 winner of the Javelina Jundred, and finished 3rd at Western States 100 in 2016. Wins at sub-100 ultras include Sean O'Brien 100K, American River 50, and Lake Sonoma 50.

As for road races, she had a top-10 finish each of the three times she raced South Africa's massive Comrades ultra, won three road national championships (twice at the 50 mile, once at 100K), and was on seven Team USAs for road events at the 50K and 100K. Her road marathon PR is 2:38 from the 2012 Olympic Trials, and she has run over 35 sub-3-hour marathons.





Devon winning and setting a course record at the hilly Oakland Marathon in 2019 in 2:42:46. She also won the event in 2015 and 2013.

But running is only part of her story. She has a complex background influenced by sexual abuse that took place when she was a teenager growing up in Seattle; she was the first girl on a high-level basketball team to speak out and tell police about their manipulative coach, which led to the conviction of the man, who was grooming and sleeping with her and others on the team.

She also has a kaleidoscopic career, from writer to chef to starting a successful bakery with her husband Nathan and running it for nine years. On top of it all, she has been a professional runner and [works as a coach](#). But running never comes easy or predictably, because she manages chronic health issues involving anemia and an autoimmune disorder.

I became curious to hear about her transition to a more rural and animal-filled life in the tiny town of Howard, Colorado (south of Salida), complete with work in a bakery and work with a new horse. Plus, I wanted to hear more about her evolving relationship with running, now that she has stepped away from sponsorship and social media, and her thoughts on the state of the sport.

Devon strikes me as a positive influence in ultrarunning by intentionally trying to cultivate a healthy relationship to elite-level competition while being aware of and vocal about the sport's pitfalls. She counters the ethos that more is always better.

For example, she dropped out of the Kettle Moraine 100 in June only seven miles into it due to her health. "I know I shouldn't have started, feeling as sick as I am, but everyone said try," she wrote. "From the start, it was wrong. I couldn't breathe, my legs were cramping. This is what anemia can do to you, and today, I just had to choose to stop. ... I was thinking, 'Who do I want to be when others look at me?' The answer is someone who shows themselves compassion, not just someone who can do hard things."

In her [recent Substack post](#), she wrote,

"I think inherently ultrarunning is simple, beautiful, and a huge source of joy. It is a place where we can challenge ourselves, push our limits, and grow. It a source of community and connection. I also think that there are aspects and attitudes that do not support health. ... Our sport has evolved to be a continual escalation, a more is more and enough is never enough. ... It is 'Death before DNF.' It is '200 is the new



100.' It is training through injuries. It is showing up at races like Western States and Hardrock while actively and knowingly sick with Covid. ... For a long time I have modeled strength, toughness, and an ability to overcome. I would like to now also model kindness, health, and a different way. We can do hard things. We also don't need to do exclusively hard things all the time at all costs."

What follows are excerpts from a conversation we had by email and by Zoom.



How did Devon end up here in Colorado? She and her husband of 10 years, Nathan, started the process of selling their bakery in Marin (north of San Francisco) in 2019, but the pandemic forced them to stay put and keep the business afloat until August of 2021. "We then hit the road with our cat to explore where we wanted to live. We knew we wanted to be in Colorado, but the Front Range where our friends live didn't really appeal to us. We came to Salida last December and fell in love. We moved here in December and then bought a house just outside Salida in May. ...

"We wasted no time getting into farm life and currently have a huge garden, 38 chickens, 3 pigs, a cat, and a dog. I have a horse, but he has not come home yet while we get the property ready. Farm life is awesome. I am truly living my dream as this is the life I always imagined living."

She now divides her time between working as operations manager for the Little Red Hen Bakery in Salida (where Nathan also works as the head baker), coaching, taking care of her animals, and focusing on her own training.





Devon with her horse, Tater Tot.



Back in Northern California, she said, "What really burned me out was being treated as 'the help' no matter how hard you're working, and not having people respect you or your employees. That's part of the reason I love living in this area, because most of the people are more working class. It's getting more expensive, but Salida hasn't gone the way of Vail or Aspen or Breckenridge, not just a playground for rich people."

I asked her to describe her High Lonesome 100 experience. She didn't have the day she wanted, but she finished her most mountainous 100 ever in 4th place, 8th overall, with a time of 26:41.

"High Lonesome was a struggle. The low ferritin combined with extremely debilitating PMS made things hard from the start. Then I developed the worst blisters of my career. So it definitely wasn't fun. But when the opportunities came where I could actually stop, I found that I always had a little more to give. When my feet were finally able to be treated and the pain lowered at Monarch, mile 68, I knew I would finish and was feeling pretty good, so I pushed as hard as I could those last 33+ miles. And I am proud of that. I gave things a chance to get better and they did.

"I would have loved to be able to compete where my fitness is, but someday that is not the body that shows up. I am proud of my fight. I had never done a mountain 100, and my goal was to embrace the adventure, and I did that."







Devon finishing the High Lonesome 100 in July. Photo by Mile 90 Photography

Staying healthy continues to be a big issue for Devon, so I asked her to explain the symptoms and conditions she struggles with.

"For many years, I would miss races for minor illnesses frequently, and I thought this just meant I was prone to sickness, but after suffering a bunch of symptoms for years and trying to get doctors to listen—it took like 10 years to really get my issues somewhat understood—I finally got better answers in 2018. I have Hashimoto's, latent lupus, chronic mono, anemia issues due to gastrointestinal issues (which is likely celiac, although despite lots of effort to diagnose remains inconclusive). So I do my best to manage those things, but as with most chronic illness issues, there is no easy straightforward answer or treatment. I take medications that help, like thyroid medicine, to manage the illness. However, things like major life stress generally cause my issues to be worse, so I am not overly surprised that completely changing every aspect of my life [by moving to Colorado] has led to some poor health.

"Right now, we are trying to get me feeling good again and get my iron up, and I'm in the process of rebuilding a trusted medical team that will actually listen to me and help me stay healthy."

We talked about her decision not to race in the Leadville 100 last weekend, because she wasn't feeling 100 percent to race her best, and the years she didn't go to South Africa to race Comrades because the extra-long travel there would feel too depleting before race day. It must be frustrating, I said, to have your body be unpredictable in terms of not knowing when you'll be able to show up and have a stellar race, like at Umstead last spring, or feel too sick to continue, as happened at Kettle Moraine.

"My whole life, I've never been in a healthy body, so I don't even know what a normal person's experience is," she said. "My version of healthy has always been tenuous at best. ... Part of what makes it harder is there's a big connection between autoimmune disorder and trauma. It's frustrating when my autoimmune stuff gets in

the way of my running, because running is mostly positive for my health and well being. ...

"People don't understand chronic illness, and because it's invisible, people use their own standards [to judge], like, 'You can still run faster than me, so you must be fine' kind of a thing. But you don't live in my body, and there's nothing I can say to a healthy person that will make them understand what it feels like to be in an unhealthy body. That makes it hard, because that's where the disapproval and how awful it makes me feel comes in."

Stepping away from social media is one way she is trying to enhance mental and physical health. (Her [@fastfoodie](#) account is mothballed and she has deleted many old posts, but she and Nathan occasionally post pics of their farm life at [@la\\_grosse\\_baguette](#).)

We talked about athletes in the sport who endlessly spotlight their ultrarunning training and accomplishments, ostensibly to be inspirational but more likely to gain a following and promote their products, and to stay relevant and earn more sponsorship deals.

"I've long struggled with having a healthy relationship with social media," Devon said. "I quit Twitter and Facebook in 2018 and never looked back. I hung on to Instagram because I enjoyed the connection with friends .... But as the sport has changed over the last few years, as has the Instagram algorithm, it has become more alienating to me. It has become a source of stress and triggers me in an unhealthy way. ... With Instagram, if I post a picture of my cat, nobody likes it. I have to show how epic my life is, or I don't get any engagement. It's self-perpetuating [in the sport] because people see that others are having success or getting deals because of it, so they're like, I'm going to do that too. ...

"I think of it like drinking—for some people having a healthy relationship with drinking is possible, for some people having a healthy relationship with drinking was once possible then wasn't, and for some people it is not possible to have a healthy relationship. I feel like I recognized that Instagram no longer was serving my health and was unnecessarily triggering some of my trauma-driven behavior, so it was necessary to reevaluate."



What does she mean by “trauma-driven behavior”? Devon says it relates to how she felt she had to portray herself and explain her training and racing on Instagram.

“I’m definitely an over-explainer, and that comes out of trauma and feeling like I need to make my case and defend myself and get people to believe me. People-pleasing is also definitely one. Being overly concerned with what other people think of me comes out of that. Wanting people to approve of me and validate my existence is part of the reason I was able to be taken advantage of. ... With social media, I realized it’s the perfect platform for me to over-explain myself and feel like I’m responsible to share these things and tell people what I’m doing with my life. I’ve made myself accountable to these 11,000 followers and given them power over me.”

(For background on what Devon went through earlier in life, I recommend [this Outside article](#) and Billy Yang’s excellent [documentary film \*Life in a Day\*](#) about the 2016 Western States 100, which profiles Devon and three other top female runners.)

How does Devon see her new Substack newsletter, along with podcasting, different from voicing views on Instagram? She said it has to do with how Instagram is more about creating a personal brand rather than about being creative and being heard. “I’ve always loved blogging and always been a writer. I used to write poetry in high school, and my undergraduate degree is in creative writing from the University of Washington.

...

“I’m not interested in being a brand, I just want to be a human. Writing for me is something that’s fun, and I enjoy it and enjoy sharing it, and that has resonated with people. Since the Instagram algorithm is moving away from having what you write matter, it makes sense for me to move to a platform where all that matters is what I write. ... I don’t necessarily need people to subscribe or go on a branding or push-it-out campaign.” (But I encourage you to [subscribe to her newsletter!](#))

As for podcasting, she and longtime friend Alison Naney started [Women of Distance](#) in spring of 2021 to give women more of a voice in podcasting. “There’s no goal for me other than to share what the guest wants to share, and that’s why I’ve let it organically grow. ... Alison and I have zero sponsorship; I pay for it, I edit it. It’s all real, and I rarely edit anything out.”

Devon used to be sponsored by Oiselle and Hoka, but now her relationship to brands is limited to two smaller partnerships with Gnarly Nutrition and Inside Tracker.

"The requirements to be an elite or a professional now inherently are creating division [in the sport], and it's like a struggle for a very limited resource. You're not just like, 'Hey, let's show up and see who can run faster'; you're like, 'Who has more followers? Who's getting paid more? Is that fair and is it based on anything I'm doing, and am I in control of any of these things?' .... I think back to when I was sponsored and making the most money, and it was a struggle for me constantly with my running, because I felt I no longer had ownership over it; it was the whims of some marketing team. I literally had sponsors ask me to race while injured because they're paying me and therefore I should be out there doing stuff. If that's happening to me, that's happening to any number of people."

Plus, she says, sponsorship never fully covered her cost of travel to races, nor did it come close to covering her cost of living in general. "It never paid the bills. The most money I ever made from a single sponsor was \$12,000 in a year. ...

"A lot of the things that are happening in the sport are undermining what's most important to me, which is community and connection. It's what we were talking about with branding yourself or becoming an influencer—the growth is driving an influx of that, and it's making people competitive with one another in a way that I don't enjoy. I don't enjoy being hit over the head with people trying to shove a product down your throat and trying to convince you this new shoe is going to change your life. I just want to go run with my friends in the woods and challenge ourselves."

Looking ahead, Devon is getting ready for Run Rabbit Run 100 in September, followed possibly by Javelina in October, an FKT attempt on the John Muir Trail, and/or the Tunnel Hill 50 in November. Originally, she planned a modified version of [the Grand Slam](#) with High Lonesome, Umstead, and Javelina added in, but her slam plans have evolved.

"I definitely still feel fired up—as fired up as someone with no ferritin can, ha—about the actual running part and challenging myself. My goal at Run Rabbit Run is to compete at



my best and run the best race I can on the day without being compromised by poor health. ... Since I am not doing Leadville and feel good about that, I'm contemplating whether or not I am interested in doing Javelina. I'm going to be guided by what I am most excited about, not by simply trying to follow through on what I had originally planned to do. Where I was when I planned this, and where I am now, are vastly different, so I am exercising the right to do whatever feels right."

*Thank you so much, Devon, for taking the time to share your perspectives here.*

UPDATE October 5: Read [Devon's post about her diagnosis of lupus](#).

If you want to check out the Women of Distance podcast, I highly recommend [this one featuring guest Pam Smith](#).

Related posts:

- [The High Points of the High Lonesome 100](#)
- [From Life-Changing Pain to 100-Mile Champ](#)

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