

Raymond's Guidelines for Setting a Fastest Known Time

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This material is excerpted from my book *Raymond's Checklist for Gear for a Long Hike*, Book 5 of *Raymond's Checklist Series*. The book is available from amazon.com. I present guidelines for record-setting considerations for the fastest hike of a trail. Records for fastest hikes are commonly referred to as *Fastest Known Times* (FKTs). These guidelines (Raymond's Guidelines for Setting a Fastest Known Time) are intended so that the following statements hold:

1. A performance can be (easily) understood and quantified.
2. A level playing field with fair rules is available to any challenger of a record.
3. Performances can be compared and evaluated.
4. The integrity of a performance is ensured.
5. Records are meaningful.
6. If the guidelines are followed and the existing record is broken, everyone will agree that the new time is the new record.

My guidelines are directed toward well-marked trails such as the Appalachian (AT) and Pacific Crest Trails (PCT), where record-breaking attempts have become popular even at the international level. I frame my recommendations so they apply to any trail.

Because my guidelines apply equally well to venues other than trails (roads, waterways, and so forth), I use the word *course* in my discussion. A course starts at point S (the *start*) and finishes at point F (the *finish line* or *terminus*). For a loop course, S and T are the same. These guidelines don't specifically address segmented or non-continuous courses—the triple-crown of hiking, for example. In extending them to such courses, the main issues are direction of travel, means of transportation allowed between segments, order of completion, and whether individual segments must be completed fully in one go.

When a course isn't well defined, a FKT doesn't make sense, unless the goal is simply to get from S to T via any route. In this case a FKT isn't set for a particular course but rather for going between two points. Once a route is fixed, a FKT can be discussed for that course. For example, there could be a FKT for the Bear Creek Route of the Continental Divide Trail (CDT). We can talk about a FKT from the US-Mexican border at Puerto Palomas, New Mexico to the CDT monument on the US-Canadian border between Waterton Lakes National Park, Alberta and Glacier National Park, Montana via any route, including road walking. Without qualifiers or course specification, talking about a FKT for the CDT doesn't make sense though because for CDT thru-hikers there are many options. The actual method of progression along a course and other factors are important, too.

I take the following statement to be self-evident:

If an athlete doesn't complete a course in its entirety, the athlete can't break the course record.

While keeping my original goals in mind, statements 1–6 presented earlier, I came up with a set of guidelines. I pared them down to the minimal set of rules that allows statements 1–6 to be satisfied. If I thought a point wasn't self-evident (to all), I added a rule for it. If adhered to, my guidelines are sufficient to guarantee a best time for a course is record worthy. If a challenger states: "I adhered to Raymond's Guidelines for Setting a Fastest Known Time," no one will question whether the performance is record worthy. In other words these guidelines are the gold standard. For more lenient sets of guidelines, not everyone will agree that a record has been set. This situation can lead to confusion.

For participants not interested in FKTs, simply enjoy your journey in any manner that you please. For those interested in FKTs, I suggest you follow a set of rules that respects the process and those who came before you. In such cases maintaining integrity is the key to having a meaningful FKT.

Note that in my guidelines I use ST (FT) to represent the actual starting (respectively, finishing) time. So for example, ST might be May 11, 2003 at 11:15:23 AM PT. My recommendations follow. Discussion continues after the guidelines.

Raymond's Guidelines for Setting a Fastest Known Time (FKT)

1. Progression: All forward progress must be made through one's own locomotion, either on foot or by crawling.
2. Recovery: If an athlete veers off course or gets lost, the athlete must resume forward progress from the point of deviation.
3. Timing: The elapsed time (FT – ST) from the starting time (ST) at the course's beginning until the finishing time (FT) at the end is the time taken to complete the course.
4. Performance Enhancement: Prior to ST, the athlete must adhere to the World Anti-Doping Agency's (WADA) rules. Once the journey begins, WADA's rules in effect at ST must be met until FT.
5. Record Holder: The record holder for the FKT is the athlete who completes the entire course in a continuous, single-direction traverse in the least amount of time, while complying with these guidelines from ST until FT.
6. Completeness: No set of guidelines can address every possible situation. Integrity, sportsmanship, and faithfulness to the course must be maintained in the spirit of these guidelines to address situations that aren't specifically covered.

Let me examine each rule in the guidelines in order, as they pertain to hiking. For other disciplines the majority of the rules apply as written. In some cases small modifications may be required. For example,

skis are allowed for setting a FKT on a skiing course. Following this material, I present some general discussion.

1. Progression: All forward progress must be made through one's own locomotion, either on foot or by crawling.

Discussion: No advancement is allowed by mechanical means or via any type of vehicle. Footwear worn should be publicly available and satisfy the requirements set by the World Athletics Association. Trekking poles are allowed. Ice axes are allowed. Skis and skates aren't allowed. Riding on sleds isn't allowed. Crampons and snowshoes are allowed. In general, safety equipment is allowed, but equipment to gain an advantage in one's forward progress isn't permitted.

2. Recovery: If an athlete veers off course or gets lost, the athlete must resume forward progress from the point of deviation.

Discussion: If assistance is available, an athlete may accept assistance to return to the point of deviation. For example, it's allowed to get in a vehicle to return to the point of deviation. Under no circumstances can an athlete make forward progress via mechanical means. No credit is awarded for making mistakes and covering additional ground. For example, traversing a longer and more arduous course, and rejoining the route isn't acceptable. The true course itself must be covered in its entirety. Setting a FKT includes the ability to stay the course.

3. Timing: The elapsed time ($FT - ST$) from the starting time (ST) at the course's beginning until the finishing time (FT) at the end is the time taken to complete the course.

Discussion: When the athlete (potential record setter) departs from the start point S, using an accurate timing device, the date and time of day shall be recorded to the nearest second ($T1$). This time should be published, as soon as is feasible. When the athlete crosses the finish line point F, using an accurate timing device, the date and time of day shall be recorded to the nearest second ($T2$). This time should be published, as soon as is feasible. The time taken to complete the course is the difference between $T2$ and $T1$. In other words there are no time adjustments for any reason. The time $T2 - T1$ should be published, as soon as is feasible.

A preferred timing device is a standard, accurate watch, for example, one recently synchronized to Greenwich Mean Time. Since many courses begin and end in remote areas, one might not have immediate access to standard time. In such cases the timing device used should be calibrated as close to the actual starting time as possible and re-calibrated at the finish. Small timing adjustments may be necessary. When the times are made available, the timing method should be published.

For example, I set my Timex Ironman watch to Greenwich Mean Time obtained from <https://time.is/GMT> on May 15, 2021 at exactly 14:00:00 PM. I started on May 16, 2021 at 10:21:17 ($T1$), according to my Timex. I finished on July 23, 2021 at 11:15:23 ($T2$), according to the same Timex. No adjustments were made to the watch during my journey. On July 24, 2021 at 15:33:14, I

checked [https://time.is-/GMT](https://time.is/), and my watch was slow by three seconds. I added three seconds to my overall finishing time, $(T2 - T1) + 3$.

4. Performance Enhancement: Prior to ST, the athlete must adhere to the World Anti-Doping Agency's (WADA) rules. Once the journey begins, WADA's rules in effect at ST must be met until FT.

Discussion: In preparation for the journey, the athlete must adhere to the World Anti-Doping Agency's (WADA) Rules. Most sports have a governing body to regulate performance enhancement. As in all sports, athletes attempting to set a FKT shouldn't be allowed to gain a competitive advantage by using performance-enhancing substances. In addition, once the journey begins, WADA's rules that are in effect at time T1 must be adhered to throughout the journey. In other words no performance-enhancing drugs (according to WADA's rules) are to be used, and if WADA's Rules change between times T1 and T2, the rules applicable at time T1 are those that are applicable throughout, until time T2.

As a further clarification, in 2021, according to WADA, it's illegal to use cannabis (things like hashish and marijuana). Thus a person who's legally smoking a joint in Oregon wouldn't be eligible to set a FKT on the PCT. Similarly, a person who is blood doping or taking IVs wouldn't be eligible for a record attempt. Certain types of asthma medications are disallowed. A person trying to set a FKT must obey WADA's rules. Only clean athletes may set FKTs.

5. Record Holder: The record holder for the FKT is the athlete who completes the entire course in a continuous, single-direction traverse in the least amount of time, while complying with these guidelines from ST until FT.

Discussion: The official record holder for the FKT is the person who completes the course in its entirety in the least amount of time, when complying with these guidelines. Small sections of the course that are closed may be traveled around on foot. The route covered isn't allowed to have any gaps. The traverse is done in a single direction. Why? It's easy to imagine a challenger using transportation to gain an advantage if two direction travel is allowed. For example, go north via car to the summit of a peak, descend the peak southward from a road crossing, get a ride back to the same summit, and descend the peak northward from the same road crossing. Thus the climb was descended twice rather than being ascended and descended. Other scenarios allow for similar unfair advantages to be gained if not proceeding in a single direction.

Normally, a public body or group of individuals knowledgeable about the associated course will verify that the athlete has complied with these guidelines. They will validate the timing presented by the challenger. To the extent possible, it will be verified that the athlete completed the course in its entirety. The challenger is encouraged to provide documentation.

Many courses increase in length over time. If a course decreases in length, the average speed of the previous record holder will be compared to the average speed of the challenger. The person with the higher average speed will be considered the record holder. A future challenge to a course of

similar length will be based solely on time. These are similar guidelines to what the Race across America (RAAM) employs. Since RAAM courses and distances vary from year-to-year, the fastest average speed dictates the record holder. Naturally, all other things being equal, this tends to favor those on shorter courses.

FKTs that have been broken by less than .1% are considered to be joint records. In other words a record must be broken by a reasonably substantial amount, in my opinion more than .1%, to be considered a new record, as opposed to a shared one. For a 50-day effort, this amounts to 72 minutes.

If a FKT is improved by less than .1%, the FKT will be considered to be jointly held. The rationale for this is that a challenger must break an existing record by a meaningful amount in order for it to be considered a better performance. Due to the tremendous number of variables involved in setting a FKT on a long course, I consider a slightly better performance to be an equivalent performance, not a better one.

For the purpose of listing records, the course's distance should be specified along with the time. Equivalent times on the "same" course should be listed together. Historical records, including their times and distances, should be maintained.

6. Completeness: No set of guidelines can address every possible situation. Integrity, sportsmanship, and faithfulness to the course must be maintained in the spirit of these guidelines to address situations that aren't specifically covered.

Discussion: No set of guidelines can cover every possible situation. In most years, even though an athlete may be prepared to challenge a record, Mother Nature won't allow it. Such athletes must acknowledge this fact. They shouldn't bend the guidelines, but rather return later for another attempt. To bend the rules or modify a course for a FKT attempt is a gross violation of sportsmanship and a disservice to other athletes.

While adhering to my guidelines, it's not possible to set a record for some courses at a particular time of year or perhaps even at any time in some years. That is to say, due to extenuating circumstances, it might not be possible to complete a course in its entirety. Sections of a course may be closed for a plethora of reasons. In such years some performances may be noteworthy. They can be footnoted and given an honorable mention.

A FKT applies to a particular, specific course. Consider the AT. It doesn't make sense to talk about a FKT for a course "equivalent" to the AT being used to set the FKT on the AT. To set the FKT on the AT, one must complete the AT. This point should be clear and self-evident. Note that the AT itself does contain white blazed high- and low-water routes. Any official part of the route suffices. Rules 5 and 6 are applicable here. Small deviations due to trail closures are acceptable if no advantage is gained. The course followed must be continuous and without gaps.

Note that some courses may recognize specialized or restricted records, for example, the fastest crossing in winter. My guidelines can be extended to cover these situations. For example, for winter records in the northern hemisphere, we can specify that the starting and finishing times are in

the interval from December 21 at 12:00 AM EST until March 20 at 12:00 PM EST. Another possibility is a fixed direction, for example, the FKT for a north-to-south versus a south-to-north traverse.

The Comrades Marathon is one well-known course that maintains both ‘up’ and ‘down’ FKTs. As of this writing, the men’s records differ by six minutes and thirty seconds, whereas the women’s by four minutes and ten seconds. In both cases the down records (Pietermaritzburg to Durban) are faster. As with most courses, separate records for male and female athletes should be maintained.

When FKT rules become overly complex, it indicates that the spirit of an activity has been lost. The competition is no longer sporting, and records become meaningless. Tarman and I joked that he bagged the FKT for an over-65 male with a total-ankle replacement to section hike the then-open PCT over a period of five non-consecutive years. Then we got into the details about what constitutes a total-ankle replacement, exactly when he turned 65, what sections were considered officially open, and so forth.

An athlete can set a FKT for a course that they dream up or for a reasonable alternative to a known course, and with enough qualifiers and modifiers, everyone can be a record holder, but such an athlete isn’t setting the record for a known, repeatable course such as the AT or PCT.

One should recognize that many hikers don’t support record-setting attempts or aren’t interested in such activities. While engaging in a record attempt, it helps to be mindful of this fact and to treat others courteously. Respect everyone. Let everyone complete their journey in the manner in which they choose. If you want to set a FKT follow well-established guidelines and fair rules and don’t compromise your own integrity and credibility. If less stringent guidelines than these are followed, someone might not agree that a record was broken.

In the interest of these guidelines evolving, unlike other parts of this book which are bound by copyright, Roxy Publishing gives readers permission to republish these guidelines in part or in whole with a proper citation to this book. For those following these guidelines and wanting to establish that their record was set under fair conditions, they may state: “My time was set while adhering to Raymond’s Guidelines for Setting a FKT.” In such cases I don’t think there can be any debate about whether a new record was established fairly. No qualifiers or footnotes will be needed.