

She Was the Smartest, the Strongest, and the Fastest—and Joined the Ranks of Women Winning Major Ultras Outright

Oregon-based engineer Elise Lagerstrom is the latest woman to beat everyone. We investigate how she did it, and what's up with this growing trend.

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(Photo: Courtesy of Racing the Planet)

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Early this summer, Oregon-based ultramarathoner Elise Lagerstrom did something unprecedented: she became the first woman in history to win outright one of the Four Deserts Ultramarathon Series races—a series of 250K, week-long stage races that began in 2002.

The formula for these races is, to put it mildly, challenging. For seven days, competitors traverse often-untracked terrain, carrying everything they need for the entire week save for tents and water. In 78 previous editions of these events, a man had won every single one. This year, in a race in Mongolia called the [Gobi March](#), Lagerstrom took the victory—by nearly an hour.

Her win is the latest in a 24-month interval that could be viewed as trail running's biennium of the woman. The cascade of results began in September 2024, when Tara Dower [finished the Appalachian Trail](#) in 40 days, 18 hours, and 6 minutes, besting the men's record by 13 hours. Then, in early 2025, Jasmin Paris became the [first woman ever to finish the Barkley Marathon](#), a 100-mile-plus ultra so tough that often nobody finishes before the 60-hour cutoff. The third women's victory to gain international attention came this May, when [Rachel Entrekin](#) not only won the 253.3-mile Cocodona 250 outright, but smashed the previous men's course record by more than two hours and 37 minutes. Then, less than two months later, it was Lagerstrom's turn.

Of these feats, Lagerstrom's might be most relatable to the average runner. She didn't enter the race with thoughts of achieving history. Two years earlier, she'd run another race in the same series, the Atacama Crossing, in Chile. She'd won the women's division, but figured that once was enough; in fact, she told friends, she would never do a race like it again.

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Never again, however, is often an invitation to thoughts of what if. That question nibbled at the back of her mind during her adventures, including a climbing expedition targeting 19,000-and 20,000-foot summits in Ecuador. She started making a list of things she'd do differently if she were to do it over.

All of this ultimately came together in Mongolia.



Oregon-based ultramarathoner and PhD engineer Elise Lagerstrom won the Gobi March stage race outright by nearly an hour. (Photo: Courtesy of Racing the Planet)

An Engineer's Optimization Meets a Mountaineer's Strength

Regarding her training, she says, "I didn't change a lot from my normal schedule, which is a lot of weekends doing something very long on Saturday followed by something very long on Sunday." Though, she says, she did occasionally add in longer runs on Friday.

During the race, she says, her biggest changes involved being "very mindful" about resting between stages and doing everything she could to get the best possible sleep each night.

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Lagerstrom also reevaluated her food plan. Race rules require runners to carry at least 2,000 calories per day. Beyond that, it's a tradeoff between pack weight and nutrition. Balancing those factors is a major part of the strategy, and one of the lessons Lagerstrom had learned in

Chile was that if you pack the wrong food, your body will start to rebel as the race progresses. “I had packed enough food,” she says, “but it ended up being things that after three days, my stomach did not want to digest any more. So, that becomes a losing battle: you’re carrying all this weight, and you don’t want to eat it.”

This time, she says, “I really focused on packing food I knew I was going to want to eat [and] that I could eat.” During the race, she says, she also stayed “very deliberate with hydration.” Even though most days were only 25 miles or so (with one longer 2-day stage of about 50 miles), she made sure she was treating this as a much longer race than any given day actually was.



Gobi March, and the other Four Desert Ultramarathon events, are as much a logistical puzzle as a physiological one, with runners required to carry all of their own gear and nutrition. (Photo: Courtesy of Racing the Planet)

Not that it was all about race-week strategy. Lagerstrom—who holds a Ph.D. in Human Factors Engineering and works in the aerospace industry—made a spreadsheet in which she listed all of the gear she’d carried in Chile, with notes about how well it had or had not served her. Anything that had not worked well in Chile got chucked. Her pack? Gone. She loved it when minimally loaded, but with 25 pounds of food and gear, it had caused her to chafe. She also opted for a new sleeping bag that was 1.5-pounds lighter, and a much lighter jacket than the one she’d used previously. She even cut the lanyard off the emergency whistle she was required to carry. “Probably five grams,” she says. “[But] it adds up.” Lagerstrom might have learned a thing or two about marginal gains from her world-class triathlete sibling, [Eric Lagerstrom](#).

Her mountaineering experience also helped because it not only made her more comfortable with being self-sufficient, but taught her that she could carry a much bigger pack than the one she would need for the race. “I think that confidence-wise, that helped a ton,” she says.

Why Women Are Winning It All



In addition to optimizing her nutrition and gear, Lagerstrom credits her mountaineering experience with helping her excel. (Photo: Courtesy Racing the Planet)

From a scientific standpoint, it can be argued that the “biennium of the woman” is simply a statistical fluke. In the ultra-triathlon world, for example, men fared better at the longest triathlon ever held—a triple-deca ultra-triathlon (30 times longer than a traditional Ironman)—says Beat Knechtle, a Swiss doctor, exercise physiology researcher, and ultramarathoner.

However, only seven athletes—four men and three women—even managed to complete the triple-deca, so the statistical significance of the men’s lead isn’t as strong as it could be with a larger sample size. At a shorter distance, the quintuple Ironman, Knechtle’s data in another study shows that women fared better than men in the swim and on the bike, but not in the run. From this, he says, “it is possible that the fastest women can overtake the fastest men, [but] in the case a woman beats all the men, the best men were not in the race.”

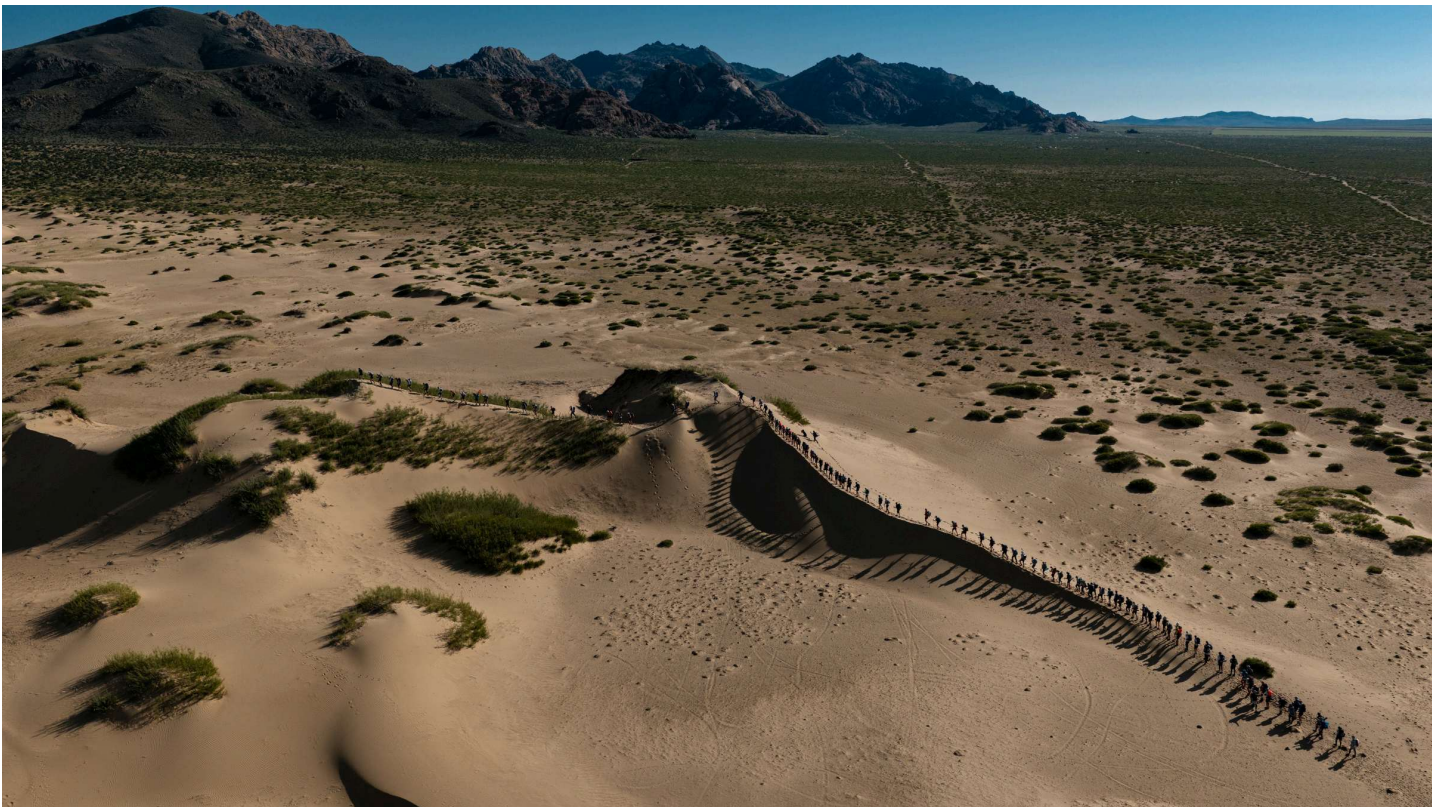
World record data from ultramarathons supports Knechtle’s claims. The International Association of Ultrarunners maintains world records in nine official distances or time-limited events ranging from 50K to 6 days, and, in all nine events, the men’s records are faster.

The IAU’s records, however, pertain exclusively to road and track races—a vastly different arena to the highly technical terrain in which female trail runners have been making waves in recent years. There has always been speculation that women’s better fat-burning metabolism, higher pain tolerance, and bonk resistance could compensate for male testosterone at some ultramarathon distance. “The longer you go, the more it evens the playing field,” says Yassine Diboun, an ultramarathon coach based in Portland, Oregon. Assuming it’s true, the question simply becomes how long the race must be for it to apply.

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The influx of women into the upper echelons of trail running is a fairly new phenomenon, particularly when compared to road racing. In 1971, when women first started entering major marathons, the difference between men's and women's world records for the marathon was 35.5%. By 1980, it had been cut in half to 17.4%. Now, it's been cut in half yet again to just 8.8%. To what extent is trail running soon to see a similar progression, as more and more elite women become involved in the sport? According to Diboun, the writing was already on the wall by 2021 — fifteen of the top 30 finishers at the Western States 100 were women. To put this in perspective, only two women cracked the top 30 in 1984.

"I think we're just beginning to scratch the surface of what women are capable of," says Liz Derstine, holder of numerous trail records, including the fastest known women's time northbound on the Appalachian Trail and the third-fastest self-supported women's time on the Pacific Crest Trail.



Gobi March covers 250K (155 miles) through Mongolia over the course of a week. (Photo: Courtesy of Racing the Planet)

Yes We Can

During her race, Lagerstrom was slow to realize she was in contention for the overall win. By day three, she says, she realized it was a possibility, but in a stage race, everyone starts together each day. A single person wins the stage each day, and she was less than halfway through the race. "We've still got 80 miles to go," she reminded herself. It wasn't until well after the halfway point that she began to think she might actually score the overall win. Until then, she'd just been running her own race, one piece at a time.

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Her advice for other trail runners is basically the same. Begin by finding what you enjoy training for, "because that's more important than the race." And in races, "accept that you don't know what the outcome is going to be."

"I didn't go into this race thinking, 'I'm going to win this overall,'" Lagerstrom says. She didn't even go into it thinking she'd be a contender to win the women's field. "That's not how I go into races," she says, "I think, I'm going to do my absolute best to be competitive."

But, "opening my mind to being competitive also means being competitive with the men's field," she says.