

2019 Ultrarunner Profile: Heather Hoechst

When Heather Hoechst, of Durango, Colorado, laces up in a few weeks to race 50 miles in Central Pennsylvania's Rothrock State Forest, it will be a homecoming she is jazzed about.

Hoechst, a graduate of the Penn State School of Law, has run the Tussey mOUntaiNBACK 50 Mile Relay and Ultramarathon as part of a relay team, and as a solo ultramarathoner she won the race in 2015 and 2016.

Hoechst works as a public interest lawyer for the Native American Disability Law Center in New Mexico.

"My focus is working with Native American students with disabilities," said Hoechst. "I represent them in school discipline proceedings, special education matters, and abuse and neglect cases."

Outside of her professional work, Hoechst's personal running program has become a source of inspiration.

"I would say my focus has evolved from racing to adventuring," said Hoechst.

"Instead of targeting races, I have been targeting cool adventures, like

Rim2Rim2Rim (a double crossing of the Grand Canyon), some epic hikes in Glacier National Park this summer, biking the 100-mile White Rim loop in a day, exploring the trails in the San Juan Mountains near my house."

So why return to the Tussey mOUntaiNBACK?

"Even though I consider the mountain west my home and one of the most beautiful places in the United States, I feel the pull to once again run through the rolling hills of Pennsylvania," said Hoechst. "Tussey will always be special to me because it introduced me to ultrarunning. Every time I run it, I feel like I'm surrounded by old friends in the trees, rocks, and people lining that course."

While that may sound dreamy, Hoechst has no illusions about the challenge of racing 50 hilly miles.

"The beauty of the changing leaves in Rothrock will make your jaw drop," she said, "even when you may feel like puking at mile 40."

Hoechst ran her first ultramarathon at the Tussey Mountainback in 2011 while in her 3rd year of law school at Penn State. Since that auspicious day, she found some success in the sport, finishing on the podium in races such as the North Face Endurance Challenges in New York and Washington, DC, 4th at the U.S. 50 mile trail National Championships in 2016, and winning the 50 mile road National Championship here at the mOUntaiNBACK.

"After moving to the Four Corners three years ago, I got a bit too excited about running in the big mountains and vast deserts of the southwest and found myself fighting through several injuries over the course of the past few years."

During that time, she found joy in road biking and learning to move a bit slower on the trails. She also found love and a partner who shares both her passion for adventure and popcorn. After rehabbing her way back to health, she won the Silverton Alpine 50k in July of 2019 and is excited to run a race down at sea level again.

Hoechst will be the featured speaker at the Tussey mOUntaiNBACK's pre-race dinner on Oct. 26. Seating is still available. Tickets for the buffet dinner event are \$25, with proceeds supporting Centre Volunteers in Medicine. Anyone interested in attending should RSVP by Oct. 20 to info@tusseymountainback.com.

Photo: Heather Hoechst running the Grand Canyon on her 40th birthday.

