

0:00:00.0 Nicole Antoinette: I'm Nicole Antoinette, and this is Real Talk Radio, a podcast filled with honest conversations about everything. In today's episode, I'm joined for a second time by National Geographic Adventurer Of The Year, Heather Anderson, known as Anish on Trail, the only woman who has completed the Appalachian, Pacific Crest and Continental Divide National Scenic Trails three times each. This includes her historic calendar year Triple Crown hike in 2018, when she hiked all three of those trails in one March to November season, making her the first woman to do so. Since 2003, she has logged over 40,000 foot miles, including 15 through hikes and many ultra marathons. Heather's here today to share stories with us from her 2015 record setting hike on the Appalachian Trail, which is chronicled in her new book, *Mud, Rocks, Blazes: Letting Go on the Appalachian Trail*. Some terms you'll hear again and again in this conversation are PCT, short for Pacific Crest Trail, AT, short for Appalachian trail, and FKT, short for fastest known time.

0:01:04.1 NA: Speaking of fastest known times. In 2015, Heather broke the record for the self-supported fastest known time on the Appalachian Trail. And this conversation is all about that epic adventure. We talk about why she went after the record, the difference between trying to prove something to others versus trying to prove something to yourself, what a day in the life of a record setting hike looks like for her, how she thinks about when to push and when to quit, as well as a measuring metric that she used on this hike, the question of, "Have I done my best today?" I love talking with Heather about these wild treks, and I hope that you enjoy it just as much.

0:01:40.9 NA: And huge thanks to my Patreon community, a group of 400 plus people who make it possible for me to create this 100% listener-funded show with no ads or sponsors, where all guests get paid. If you love these conversations, if you believe in paying creatives for their work, and if you've been creating a community of like-minded people, I bet that you would love our Patreon community. It isn't just a funding source for this podcast, it is so much more. We have a Discord community, so folks can chat with each other, we have small group live virtual hangouts, I host a live reflection and journaling circle on the last Sunday of every month, that's a lot of fun, and so much more. And we operate on a sliding scale where all tiers get access to absolutely everything regardless of how much you're able to pay, and you can find out more about that, and everything that we do, at patreon.com/nicoleantoinette. That's patreon.com/nicoleantoinette. And I thank you so much for making these conversations possible. And now on to the show.

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0:02:45.6 NA: Alright, we are good to go. Heather, welcome back to the show.

0:02:49.8 Heather Anderson: Thank you, a pleasure to be here.

0:02:51.8 NA: I have to tell you, so I binge read your new book. I maybe read it in like a day, maybe a day and a half, and the whole time I'm live texting my partner about it, who is also a long distance hiker. He and I met on the PCT. He actually met you briefly when you were on this AT hike.

0:03:11.0 HA: Cool.

0:03:11.7 NA: I think in Vermont. And as I read... As I read your book, like when I got to some of what to me were the most astonishing parts, I was basically just texting him in all caps. Like the part where you were like, "It had been 800 miles since my last and only shower." And I was like, "Oh my God, she hasn't showered in 800 miles."

[laughter]

0:03:33.7 NA: The other part, I think the part where I basically just sent him a bunch of nonsensical emojis was when you were reflecting back on your PCT hike, which we talked about last time you were on the show, and you were talking about how dry it was and how you were getting nosebleeds so bad every day that you would just tip your head back and drink your own blood until you almost felt like you were gonna vomit. And I texted him and I was like, "We are not this hard. There is no scenario in the world where I am drinking my own nose bleed blood for day... I'm done, I'm quitting, I'm out." So your ability to choose and commit to your own suffering is beyond.

0:04:06.3 HA: Yeah. I don't know, when I was a little kid they always said, tip your nose back when you have a nose bleed. So that was what I was doing. I don't know.

0:04:15.2 NA: Oh my God.

0:04:15.3 HA: But, yeah, it's pretty gross.

0:04:16.8 NA: No, it's great, it's great, it's fantastic. Tell me the note-taking process for writing a book like this, because it's... Your almost hour by hour recall and detail is so fantastic, and I can't imagine taking those kind of notes whilst so exhausted.

0:04:37.0 HA: So I didn't really take notes. And it's kind of the same on my PCT hike. I did journal a little bit here and there, but most of what I write is from memory. And my husband will tell anyone that I have a ridiculously thorough and accurate memory. He's always really, I think, frustrated by it because it's not like a photographic memory, per se, but it's pretty close. So I can remember in a lot of detail. And, I don't know, I feel like you've probably experienced this as a long distance hiker because every day is so full, if you're remembering one moment on the trail, you can be like, "Oh yeah, that was right before I did this and then I did that, and then I camped there that night, and then what did I do the next morning?" And through that process, you can retrace a lot of your hike just in your own mind by correlation of events that followed one another. And so a lot of that when I was writing Mud, Rocks, Blazes, I was just scrolling through my Guthook app along the trail and being like, "Oh yeah, at that place I did this and at this place I did that." So that helps me with recall, for sure.

0:05:48.4 NA: Yeah, I think that's fascinating. Yeah, there's definitely some stuff from hikes of mine that stands out in my memory, but I don't know that I have that detailed of a recall. I suppose it probably helped that this wasn't your first time on this trail.

0:06:00.8 HA: Yeah, for sure. There's definitely familiarity that comes from repetition, and also I think too... I think this is tying in kind of with our primitive selves to some extent. The more intense something is, the more neural connections you're gonna make to what's going on, and your body is remembering things that were painful or pleasurable or safe, and it's making these connections and it's tying them into places, and so I think in a lot of ways, my memory actually improves on trail for trail specific things. I can still go hike the AT and point out places I slept six years ago. Like, "Oh yeah, I camped there." And it's just things like that.

0:06:50.6 NA: Yeah, being able to have that level of detail, yeah, I get it completely. Well, yeah, that was one of things I wanted to ask you. I was like, "Man, this is so detailed." I know this is potentially jumping around a little bit, and I think that we will do that going forward and backwards in time, but the other thing kind of off the top that I wanted to ask you about... I was really surprised when you shared that you weren't gonna be calling home during the hike, that you weren't gonna call home until the hike was done. I don't know, in my mind, I envisioned the calls home to be like a big emotional support or... And maybe that was just me projecting something that I was gonna do, but will you talk about that decision, why didn't you wanna call, or why didn't you wanna call home during the hike?

0:07:34.1 HA: So there were several reasons. On my FKT on the Pacific Crest Trail, I did call home and I called home often, just basically any time I had cellphone reception, I called my mom and talked to her. And my mom is somebody who talks a lot, and so I would end up losing time to phone call and then it drains your phone and then you have to sit in town an equal amount of time to charge your battery. And since an FKT is all about time, I was being as judicious as possible with the battery of my phone. So making extraneous phone calls was one way to make my battery last longer, is a very pragmatic thing. And secondarily, and I talk about this in the book, my mom had a stroke a couple of months before I started hiking, and my dad never talked on the phone, and my mom couldn't talk on the phone when I left, so there really was no reason to call home other than I knew that if something happened that I needed to know about, my sister would call me. And so I knew that if I didn't hear anything from them, that everything was fine, and that if I called home, it would probably just be difficult and it would take away a lot of emotional energy, and I knew that I needed to invest all of my physical, mental and emotional energy into what I was doing if I was gonna be successful.

0:09:01.3 NA: Yeah, that mix of what you just shared, pragmatic reasons and emotional reasons, I mean, it makes complete sense for sure. Especially like you said, with your mom having had the stroke. I just... Yeah, when I read that, I was like, "Oh wow, that is commitment. Not calling home to the task at hand." So going back in time, the PCT FKT, obviously that's what we talked about when you were on the show last time, and... So take me back. You've finished that. You've done that successfully. It's this big deal. And in the book, you talk about how everyone that you met or talked to around that time, was really asking, "What's next?" This idea that you owed the world something or an encore of sorts. Let's start there. How did that feel to be seemingly defined by this one thing that you had done?

0:09:50.5 HA: Honestly, it just felt really awful. It seemed as though... It reinforced the idea that I

was never going to be enough. Because here I had done this thing that I felt like was earth-shatteringly difficult. I learned so much about myself, I was so much stronger than I thought that I was. I had completely, I felt like, reinvented myself. And now everybody was like, "Well, now what? What's next?" And not like, "That's amazing." And rest in that, it was, "Well, now what? What are you going to do now?" Reinforcing this idea that no matter what I achieve, no matter what I did, I was never going to be enough for anyone. And that definitely tied into a lot of my self-esteem issues and baggage that I had from childhood of not ever being enough or being good at anything or being adequate, and it was really, really terrible... A really terrible period in my life. And it's funny because people probably assumed that I felt great 'cause I had just achieved this big thing, but really I felt confused, and hurt, and it was hard too because of a lot of the responses that I got.

0:11:05.6 HA: I mean, this is kind of unrelated to what you asked, but it's along the same theme. So my entire life, I had struggled with body image and disordered eating and all of this stuff, and when I finished the PCT, I was extremely emaciated, I was very unhealthy, I'd lost 8% of my body fat, I was skeletal, and basically everybody told me how great I looked and I knew I was the un-healthiest I had ever been in my life, and I was dangerously thin and unhealthy. And so here I was, it was the most horrible thing that can ever happen mentally to somebody who struggles with body image and eating disorders and things like that, because it was being reinforced that, "Oh, now you look great," and "Oh, now you need to do more," these twin aspects of, "You were not enough before and you're still not enough, 'cause what are you gonna do next?"

0:12:00.8 NA: Yeah, that's an unbelievable weight to put on someone, this idea... Like you said, first of all, reinforcing disordered eating, all that, that's its own thing that I think could be damaging just on its own, and then also this thing of you've done this incredible thing that maybe no one else thought you could do, that maybe you didn't think that you could do, and it's like... And obviously, we're talking about this in the context of a hike, but I feel like there's so much that relates to all other areas of our lives, this just sort of like relentless goal pursuit. That you're only as good as the current thing that you're working on and you always have to be going. When do we get a chance to just rest, actually, and celebrate the things that we have done? I don't know, there's something in that that feels inherently really destructive to me.

0:12:42.4 HA: Yeah. Very much so. And while I was in the midst of it, I could tell that it was wrong, but I couldn't sort out exactly why. I mean I was sorting through a lot at that time, and it's only retrospectively, and a lot of it was what I processed on the Appalachian Trail two years later. A lot of what is in Mud, Rocks, Blazes, I was finally able to look back at that period and at that turmoil before, during and after my PCT hike and recognized the unhealthy patterns, the things that were being reinforced and find my way through it, because it was just such a maelstrom of negative mental impact on me. I didn't get a chance to celebrate what I'd done and just be like, "Yeah, I did that. That was awesome. That's great."

0:13:31.6 NA: Yeah. Well, and it's like if we're only being celebrated for our results, then it's really easy to put ourselves in that feedback loop of, "Oh, if I do another big thing or if I impress people the way that they want me to, or if I behave the way people want me to, then I'm gonna get

adoration or acceptance or... " I don't know, I'm speaking for myself. It can be very easy to get caught in that trap of, "People like when I do X, so let me just do more of whatever X is."

0:13:56.3 HA: Right. Yeah, we're very, very conditioned to continue to perform, to receive attention, accolades, approval, whatever, and it's in all aspects of our life from the time we're children and never really getting a chance to rest in what you're doing and constantly moving on to the next thing. And I think that that's very damaging, psychologically for us. A big part of what I've been doing in my personal life this last year and a half or so has been focusing on cultivating mindfulness and meditation, and really re-orienting myself to be in the present, 'cause in the past the only time I was in the present, was on the trail, and as soon as I was off the trail I was planning the next trail to get to the next presence that I could enjoy. And, yeah, it's definitely a constant cycle of the future, the future, the future instead of the present, which is the only part that matters.

0:14:58.1 NA: Yeah, I would love if we have time later to come back to meditation practice, 'cause I'm definitely interested in that, but sticking with this theme of the world seems to think you owe them an encore, did you feel like you did? Is that what made you want to attempt going forward in this record setting way?

0:15:16.5 HA: Initially, yes. And I talk about it in Mud, Rocks, Blazes where the very next summer I go out and I attempt to set an FKT because I feel like, "Well, obviously, this is what I do now, I guess. I have to set records, and if I don't set records, I have no identity because basically, I've been told that who I was before I set a record didn't matter, wasn't enough. So if I don't set any more records, then I'm never going to be anything. I have to continue this." And my personality is very much, from a very young age, always wanting to make other people happy, a people pleaser, trying to do it right. My husband laughs at me 'cause I'm always like, "I just wanna do it right." And that's always my thing, and so I wanted to do it right, I wanted to, "Okay, well, so this is my new identity, I'm an FKT setter, I'm gonna go set FKTs, I'm gonna do that because I need to do that. I need to do what's next, I need to keep doing bigger and better and more." And obviously that... I worked through that to the point where it's no longer... That's not my driving force anymore. But yeah, very much initially, I believed what people were telling me and adopted it for myself.

0:16:33.3 NA: Yeah, it's almost like taking an identity too far, potentially. So you just mentioned it's the summer after you set your sights on the speed record for the John Muir Trail. For folks who aren't familiar, that's a super beautiful and challenging, what, 211 mile trail through the High Sierras... Something like that? And so you just spoke a little bit about the motivations for that, that feeling like I need to prove something to other people. In a nutshell, will you share what happened on that attempt?

0:17:00.3 HA: Yeah so I was out there, I was attempting to prove something to other people, but I was also something to prove something to myself because what I didn't realize at the time, and I didn't even know there was a name for it, until much more recently, I began to... Out of this whole mental resorting and confusion that followed my PCT record, I'd started to develop Imposter Syndrome, and began to believe that my PCT record was an accident because I didn't see how it was possible that I did it, and I saw how astonished people were that I had done it and that people

were like, "Well, there was nothing about her that indicated she could do that, and then she did," and so I started really believing that, "Well, then this must have been an accident, and there's no way that I could have done that."

0:17:50.3 HA: And so not only do I feel like I owe people another FKT, but now I must set another FKT because if I don't then it was an accident. If I can't repeat history then clearly this was just a fluke. And so that was all in my head when I went out there to try to set the FKT on the John Muir Trail, and in the end, I didn't set it, and that ended up being a huge mind trip and I really just walked away from long distance hiking, and was like, "Well..." I switched to a completely different sport. I was like, "Well, I guess that was a fluke and I need to go do something else in my life because obviously everybody was right." Like, "That wasn't enough, and I'm not enough, and I've gotta do something else now."

0:18:39.3 NA: You said that you have since learned more about Impostor Syndrome, will you talk about that a little bit more, like how... What's my question here? 'Cause I think that Imposter Syndrome is something that we talk about a lot, or hear about a lot, it's sort of in the lexicon now, what was it like for you to learn like, "Oh, this is an actual thing. I'm not the only one who's feeling this way"?

0:19:00.5 HA: Yeah, I actually learned that it had a name and that it was a real clinical common experience while I was writing Mud, Rocks, Blazes because when you're writing a book, you're looking up details about things and whatever... I was just doing Google searches, and somehow I stumbled across it and I started reading it, or I watched a YouTube video or something, and it all just suddenly clicked. I was like, "Oh my God, that is exactly what I was dealing with." And I had no idea, and I didn't think that anybody else had ever experienced that. I really, truly believed that I had actually not only set this record and I wasn't good enough that it was a complete accident and that I was an imposter. And I remember saying that to someone close to me back the year or so after I had set my PCT record when I was going to compete at the Barkley Marathon, which is this really challenging ultra marathon in Tennessee. And I remember saying to somebody, "I'm worried that people are just gonna find out that I don't belong here, that I'm not really good enough to be here with these other elite ultramarathoners from around the world."

0:20:17.7 HA: And I really 100% believed I wasn't good enough. And it was really just like... I had already dealt with it, so it was kind of like anti-climactic when I found out that it was a real thing, 'cause I had already dealt with it personally and come to terms with the fact that I had been just in my own head, and it was not true. But to realize that I wasn't alone, and it made me very much more determined to make that part of... When I talked about my book, like to talk about this is what it is, and this is how it can present, and this is what I experienced, so other people aren't just thinking that they're all alone out there in that.

0:21:02.1 NA: Yeah, 'cause it's gotta feel really isolating to feel like, "Oh my gosh." If you feel like you're an impostor and that you don't belong there, it's like the waiting for the other shoe to drop. "Oh gosh, what's gonna happen when other people find out that I am a fake or a failure or that..." It can be really lonely.

0:21:21.1 HA: Absolutely, yeah. In a lot of ways, that was why I just... After I failed to set that John Muir Trail record, I just started climbing mountains instead of hiking or running, and I still did that kind of a little bit, but I was just like, "Well, I'm done, I'm not doing that anymore, because sooner later..." Or at least it was more like, "And now everybody knows that I really was an imposter. This isn't me."

0:21:48.1 NA: It's sad, too, that feeling of... We set up this paradigm for ourselves where if I can't be the best, whatever that... I don't know, whatever that means, whatever that looks like, then I might as well just quit the whole thing entirely. I don't know, it's really relatable and obviously not your specific experience, this level of FKT, but just that feeling of, "If I can't do it right, if I'm not the good girl, the good hiker, the good, whatever, and it doesn't look a certain way, then I might as well just quit." I don't know that really all or nothing mindset feels very relatable to me.

0:22:18.3 HA: Right, yeah.

0:22:21.7 NA: Okay, so you come home from the JMT, where you literally, in all seriousness, almost run yourself to death out there. You've sworn off record attempts and like you said, you're getting into a different sport, but some time goes by and you eventually decide to try for the Appalachian Trail record, how did that decision feel different from essentially what you were trying to get away from by thinking you were quitting the sport?

0:22:48.8 HA: Yeah, it's interesting 'cause from when I set out to do the Pacific Crest Trail record, I wasn't certain that I could do it. In fact, I was confident I couldn't do it, but yet I felt this compulsion that I needed to try and I had to try with everything I had to do it. And I can't explain that, it's just something that happened to me. We like to label things, but there's no labeling it, it was a compulsion that came mainly from outside me, but probably more likely from the deepest part of me. And so going to the AT was very similar. I just had this feeling that I needed to do it for myself, because I realized that I didn't want to live my life believing that I wasn't enough, believing that I was an imposter and believing that the PCT was the only noteworthy thing that I would ever do in my life and that I needed to go out and basically deal with my own demons, so to speak, in the best place that I know how, personally, and that's in the woods, it's on a long trail. Being out there is where I get clarity of mind.

0:23:57.3 HA: And I had gone to the PCT FKT similarly. My life prior to that had really just completely come apart, and so I went out there because I was like, "Well, that failed, and I need to figure out what I need to do next." And so I kinda went there with that idea of like, "Alright, this is the best place I know to get clarity and figure it out." And so I went to the AT very much in a similar manner, feeling compelled that I needed to go there to figure things out, to understand what I had been through on the PCT and on the John Muir Trail, and to sort out what I wanted to do with what I had done. Essentially taking this paradigm shift of how I viewed myself. When I finished the Pacific Crest Trail FKT, all of a sudden I was like... I had learned to accept myself and I had learned to be okay with that and, yeah, obviously pursuing FKTs all the time wasn't really the answer I had thought that it was, so I needed to go and figure out what I needed to do with what I had learned out

on the PCT.

0:25:03.0 HA: And so it's a weird mindset to be in to feel like you're going to do something that you don't want to do... That's not even actually it, it's not even that you don't wanna do it, it's just that it's gonna be something that's tremendously difficult, that you're not sure you can succeed at and you're not sure why you want to do it, but you know you have to do it. It's a very complex frame of mind, and it was very similar for both the PCT and the AT.

0:25:31.2 NA: Yeah, that totally makes sense. It's almost interesting hearing you talk about how the coping... Like the hiking and being in the mountains as a coping mechanism for you to get clarity and figure stuff out, that in quitting hiking, you lost the thing that helps you figure out maybe why you quit hiking. Does that make sense? It's like this funny little loop, almost.

0:25:56.0 HA: Yeah, it was really... Yeah, it was really weird. Yeah, yeah, it's like that's your coping mechanism, that's your way of solving things, and then you're like, "Well, I'm just not gonna do that," it doesn't really work. And I think that's instinctively what I knew too, I had to go back to the trail because that's really where my heart is and what I love, so I had to go back.

0:26:18.0 NA: It almost sounds like you were going back partially to reclaim it for yourself too. That, okay, you had felt like an impostor, people had told you that your hiking has to mean x, y or z, and to be able to be like, "Hang on, this is the thing that I loved long before anyone publicly knew that I was doing it. Is there a way to potentially get back to that and have both of those things?"

0:26:39.0 HA: Yeah, definitely. That was a big part of it, for sure. I very much... I guess part of the... Part of the thing when I failed to set that John Muir Trial record, I basically was just like, "Well, screw it. Obviously, I was an impostor and I was a faker, I guess I don't care what anybody else thinks, and now I don't owe them anything really, because I tried and I failed. So now I'm doing this for me, it's my thing and hiking has always been my thing, and it will always be my thing beyond an FKT and I'm gonna go hike how I wanna hike and right now, I wanna do this thing." And very much taking it back for myself and not worrying as much about whether I was doing it right.

0:27:23.5 NA: Yeah, something that I think about a lot is my tendency to almost preemptively let myself off the hook or preemptively quit things out of a place of self-protection, and sometimes that's absolutely the right choice. It sounds like when you wanted to step away from hiking and tell yourself, "Okay, I'm gonna pivot into this other sport," whatever part of you needed to be protected by doing that was... It sounds like that was a self-care thing to do, it doesn't make it the wrong thing. But I do sometimes think about like, "Am I getting rid of this thing or quitting this thing, or letting myself off the hook for this thing almost too soon, or potentially even not for the right reasons?" and sometimes we don't know that until retrospect, I guess.

0:28:02.8 HA: Right, yeah, definitely. Yeah.

0:28:05.5 NA: So you go out on the AT, can you share maybe one or two specific things that you learned from the previous, both successful and not, FKTs that changed how you planned, prepped

for and approached this trail?

0:28:24.1 HA: Yeah. The biggest thing really was nutrition, and I talk about it a little bit in the book. But when I went into the PCT hike, to that FKT, I was very sick and nobody knew what was wrong with me, I had gone to a lot of specialists and doctors and had a bunch of tests, and basically I was really low on a lot of nutrients, and I was very anemic, really low on my vitamin B and my other things. And I just wasn't healthy, and I didn't know why. And I also was injured, I had gotten an injury running. And it wasn't until a year and a half after that, really. It was after that John Muir Trail attempt, even, that I found out what was wrong with me. I finally found out that I was gluten intolerant. And of course, as soon as I found that out, it all made so much sense. It was because when you're gluten intolerant, you have problems absorbing vitamins, but I had been feeding myself the standard hiker tortillas, and crackers, and cookies and just all this wheat. And so I've been making myself sicker and sicker and sicker, even while attempting to push myself to the hardest limits I had ever pushed myself. So just armed with that knowledge going into the AT, I was just so much healthier. I'd had a chance to heal up and get all of my nutrient levels back up and my re-supply boxes then, were full of food that nourished me instead of making me sicker, and so that was probably the biggest thing that I learned that was better on the AT, from those previous hikes.

0:30:11.0 HA: On the other hand, you also know what you're getting yourself into, which I think is actually maybe a little bit of a negative, 'cause on the PCT I was really blissfully unaware. I knew it was gonna be hard, but I couldn't imagine how hard and there was always this hope that at some point it was going to get better, and it never did, it never got easy. And so going on to the AT, it's like you just know from the beginning, this is never gonna feel easy and it's gonna be hard the whole way, and you know what it feels like to be badly sleep deprived. You know what it feels like to ache from head to toe. You know what it feels like to only sleep a couple of hours and get up and hike 50 miles. You know what it's like for real that time, and so it's almost harder to start out knowing the depth of that, when it's imaginary it's a lot easier.

0:31:04.5 NA: Yeah, there is definitely something to be said for that blissful ignorance as opposed to, "Oh God, I do sort of know what I'm getting myself into here."

0:31:12.6 HA: Yeah.

0:31:13.3 NA: It's really funny. So even with that said, I remember reading about the part, I think it was like five days in on the Appalachian Trail into the record attempt when you were off schedule, you were off from where you had planned to be, off from where you had expected to be, and it seemed like you are struggling with some of the inner critic self-talk. Like, "Wow, I'm really not capable, I can't do this," which obviously is not a super kind thing to say to yourself, and yet it's so relatable. I would love for you to talk about what helped you to manage self-doubt and that inner critic, specifically on such a punishing journey like this.

0:31:57.0 HA: Definitely I was still dealing with a lot of the mental baggage of this time period after the PCT and John Muir Trail hikes and still sort of believing that I'm not good enough. And in a lot of ways, I'm out there to prove to myself once and for all, "Are you good enough or are you

not?" And I'm a very all-or-nothing sort of person, I'm very stubborn and I'm very driven. Obviously, you can imagine this. And so I'm my own hardest critic, always. Nobody can ever be harder than I am on myself, and so of course, in a way that's necessary to push yourself to something at this level, because if you're not... It's a very fine line between this intrinsic motivation and this internal bullying, and that was what I had to learn over the course of my AT hike and that's what I did learn is that I didn't have to be a bully to myself, I didn't have to berate myself to get myself to do hard things because I was very capable of these hard things. And recognizing that the balance between those two took 2,189 miles of pushing myself very hard to really learn to balance that. But yeah, it's a very interesting thing.

0:33:26.2 HA: And when you're doing something very, very difficult and very, very hard, what I would try to tell people about an FKT of a through hike, it's basically just like any other through hike it's just more intense because instead of taking four months to do something, you're taking two months to do it, and so all of your highs are higher, all of your lows are lower, all of the pain is more painful. Everything, the mental battles are bigger, and so it's just... Everything is just more intensified, and so that's definitely a lot of what I dealt with out there on the trail.

0:34:01.7 NA: Yeah, what you just said about essentially that bullying yourself not only isn't necessary, but it doesn't work, and almost opening up an entirely new, "Hey, what if I could do the things that I wanna do or challenge myself, but not from a place of having to be an asshole to myself or shame myself in order to try to get myself to do this thing?" Yeah, which I would imagine feels a lot better, right? Like being an asshole to ourselves doesn't feel great.

0:34:28.9 HA: Absolutely, yeah.

0:34:33.0 NA: Yeah, will you... I have some more of these kind of mindset-related questions, but I think it would be useful for folks, if you will kinda describe a day in the life of this AT FKT. So you wake up at what o'clock and then just kinda take us through what a day is like.

0:34:50.3 HA: Yeah, sure. I woke up on the AT at 4:00 AM and ate breakfast and packed up, and that took me... Usually, my goal is to do that in 15 minutes. And so usually I was walking between 4:15 and 4:30 every day, and then I would walk until basically I couldn't walk anymore. And I didn't really take breaks, except if I had to get water or something and then stop and get water. And so I tried to let myself have one 15-minute break about halfway through the day, so usually I would try to walk somewhere between 20 and 30 miles and then take a 15-minute break, and then walk another 20 to 30 miles depending on the day. And so yeah, I was routinely walking 15 to 18 hours a day, some days more, and then I would find a place to camp, setup my tent, get inside, eat food and pass out and wakeup at 4:00 AM and do it again.

0:35:57.2 NA: Yeah, yep, that's it. One of the things that for me has been a point of real relatability in reading about your hiking is that you and I seem to be hikers who hike around the same pace. And so in my mind I'm always like, "Okay, well, in order to do an FKT or this kind of thing, I guess it's just, you're super, super fast." But I'm like, "Oh no, no, no..." "For you you just don't stop, let me hike 20 to 30 miles then take a 15-minute break and then continue just hiking until midnight or 1:00

in the morning. It's so wild. Yeah, you just don't stop. That's the answer, I guess. How to set an FKT, just don't stop. And so you're only sleeping like three or four hours a night.

0:36:35.7 HA: Yeah, I would say I averaged about four a night.

0:36:39.2 NA: That sounds horrendous. Congratulations.

0:36:40.7 HA: Yeah, it was terrible. Especially since I love to sleep.

0:36:45.2 NA: Okay, so I guess then that brings me to my next question, I'm interested in your own internal process of deciding when to quit and when to push it, 'cause one of the quotes that I highlighted in the book, you said quote, "most nights I felt an extreme hopelessness brought on by the bone deep fatigue of the day as I crawled into my sleeping bag, physically destroyed and always short of my goal," end quote. So you're way off your initially planned mileage schedule almost right from the beginning of that hike, it's so so hard. You're feeling this extreme hopelessness at the end of the day, how do you decide when to quit and when to keep going? 'Cause it's not like you hadn't quit an FKT attempt before, and so I'm just sort of interested in maybe what your decision-making process is for yourself?

0:37:31.4 HA: Yeah, I think that that varies based on circumstance. For me, on the John Muir Trail, I quit because I knew my life was in danger and that I had to quit, and so I quit. On the AT it's more subtle, of course you're pushing yourself physically and some would argue that my life was in danger because I was pushing myself so hard, but it wasn't at the same level as it was. I had very acute mountain sickness on the John Muir Trail, I didn't have something like that on the AT. And that's part of where knowing what I was getting myself into from the PCT was actually helpful, because I knew that every night when... Every night was gonna be bad. Every night I was gonna feel like, "Why am I doing this? This is awful." And I knew that it was the fatigue and the hunger talking, and that when I woke up in the morning, I was gonna feel pretty crappy 'cause it was pouring down, and I didn't wanna get out of my sleeping bag. But once I got going and walked for a while, everything would be positive again, and so I knew that that was just the normal cycle of emotion, and I learned that from the PCT. So when I could identify that this is the normal cycle of emotion, it makes it easier to keep going.

0:38:56.7 HA: And when you know that this is just like the dip and then in the morning, it's going to be better, and we're gonna do this dip again the next night, and the next night, and the next night until you get done, that's just the way this is going to go, it makes it a lot easier to accept and to recognize that it's not... There's no reason to quit. You're just experiencing the cycle.

0:39:17.2 NA: Yeah, right, it's just hard. It's like what you're talking about before, sort of the difference between expectations and reality, if you're clinging to the expectation or the hope that it's eventually gonna get easier, then it's... I think you're just continually on that roller coaster, as opposed to if you learn to accept that it's not gonna get easier, you can stop leaching out energy, desperately wanting it to be different than it is.

0:39:38.5 HA: Totally. 100%.

0:39:38.7 NA: And I'm very fascinated by that, that ability to just accept that hard things are hard and stop waiting for them to get easier, it sounds like something that was useful for you on this.

0:39:52.2 HA: Yeah.

0:39:52.9 NA: So tell us the story of the moment that you ripped up your planned mileage schedule that you had fallen behind.

0:40:01.7 HA: Yeah, so starting out, my goal to hike the AT, the Appalachian Trail has a really long history of fastest known times in a lot of different categories. The one you mostly hear about is the supported category, and that's what I think a lot of people think of when you think of FKs. It's like you've got a crew following you in a van and they give you food and you people pacing you, and all you're doing is the movement and everything else is being done for you, you're being taken care of by a crew of one or more people. And that's not to style of FKT that I do. My style is what's called self-supported, it's where I'm carrying my pack, I'm going and kind of buying my own food or putting it in a box. I'm completely self-contained and self-reliant. And so in my head, I wanted to know how close or how possible it was to go in this self-contained style, this self-supported style, and what kind of parity you could bring to a supported record, because I fully believe that traveling these long distances is something very, very human and we're naturally made for that, and there's not necessarily an advantage, especially on a trail like the Appalachian Trail. It's not a runnable trail. There's no advantage in being a runner, and having a crew while you run, quote unquote, run. Being self-reliant and being able to just eke out a few extra miles and saying, "I'll stop in the middle of the road," just because. I feel like that's an advantage.

0:41:35.4 HA: And so my goal was to hike it in under 50 days, because the record, I think at that time, supported record at the time, was 46, and I felt like it was possible to come close to that record. I felt like it was possible for the self-supported and supported to be much closer than they were. And so that was the schedule I started with, and retrospectively... And this is just not how I work, like we mentioned earlier, I'm just an all-in sort of person and people have more than once observed, they're like, "Why didn't you like maybe pace yourself a little better or something?" And I'm just like, "Because I don't pace, I just go." And I think there is a certain level of wisdom in this idea of maybe creating a Plan B schedule, and I didn't do that. I didn't have a schedule for just breaking the self-supported record. I only had 50 days, that was my schedule. 'Cause that's basically what I had done on the PCT, and it actually worked out there.

0:42:39.9 HA: And so going into the AT, obviously like you know, everything went wrong from the very moment I started hiking that trail, and I was just losing time constantly, and falling further and further and further and further behind this ideal schedule that I had. And when I finally experienced this final set back, I'm probably only a couple hundred miles into the hike... Maybe a little bit more, maybe 300 miles into the hike. Anyway, early on in the hike, I had had all these hurdles and I finally just was like, "You know what... " I had reached this river that I couldn't cross, it was too high, and at that point, I really did just think I just should quit. This is the second time I've been on

an FKT and it just seems like I can't do it, I need to just give up now and go home because clearly, whatever it is that I think I need to figure out out here, it's not happening. Mother nature herself is just saying, "Go home."

0:43:41.7 HA: And what I did is I went to bed, and then I woke up the next morning and I forded the river, and it was almost unintentional, it was almost like I was in a day dream. But once I was across the river, I was like, "You know what, I don't care about the schedule because I'm out here for me, I don't need to prove this to the world, I'm here to prove to myself what I can do. And of course I'm gonna continue the ethos of the FKT. I'm going to continue to do it in this manner, whether I set a record or not, I simply want to push myself as hard as I can, see what I'm capable of, see what happens, and hopefully sort through all of this mental baggage from prior."

0:44:26.8 HA: And so this was in the White Mountains of New Hampshire, which they have this little hut system, very like European, Alpine. And I walked into the next hut and threw my... Took my piece of paper that I had been tracking my mileage and everything on, and I threw it in the trash and walked out, and from then on, I didn't even really know how far I went each day. I just went off of what I knew my body could do. When I reached the point where I felt like my body literally couldn't do anymore, if I wanted to hike the next day, that was when I stopped. And that was how I went through the rest of the hike. So in a lot of ways, there was just a very freeing moment to just do it. "The schedule doesn't matter, what matters is the intent and the execution of doing my best and doing what I can do out here."

0:45:20.5 NA: And it sounds like that question, "Have I done my best today?" that that became your new metric for evaluation. Which I love, and yet I'm also really curious about how you felt like you honestly and objectively determine that for yourself, especially, again, when you're so exhausted. How do you know what your best really is?

0:45:40.0 HA: Yeah, I mean, it is very subjective. There is no metric that I can measure it by. I really just went by... A lot of days, it was just when I... When I hiked the Continental Divide Trail in 2006, this is kind of a tangent, but bear with me. Back then, it wasn't marked and we had to carry a lot of maps 'cause people didn't even really have GPS devices, GPSs were new. And amongst CDT culture, there was this phrase and it was like learning whether you're lost with all small letters or whether you're lost with a capital L. And the difference between being lost, small letters, and lost with a capital L is humongous, and you know the difference after you have done that CDT hike, because when you're lost with a capital L, you are off your map, you don't know where you are. You can't find any landmarks. And that was the goal, was to never reach lost with a capital L. You could be lost, small L, you're on this map somewhere, not 100% sure where you are or where the trail is in relation to you, but you know you're on your map. You can at least see landmarks.

0:46:53.5 HA: And in a way, I feel like when I was doing my best every night, or every day, that was when I learned to read my body map. To know when my body was saying, you're lost with small letters, or you're lost with capital letters, and my goal was to never reach loss with capital letters. When my body said, "You're on the map, but you're approaching the edge of the map," that was when it was time to stop. And that varied from day to day.

0:47:19.8 HA: But that's kind of the closest analogy I can come up with, it was very much just biofeedback. When my body said, "You're done for the day." Then I was like, "Okay, we are done for today."

0:47:29.8 NA: That's a spectacular analogy. I already know that I'm gonna think about that many, many times throughout my life going forward. So thank you for that. Are you all caps lost or not? Yeah, well, and like you said that it involves checking in with yourself. It's like the difference between shaming, bullying, punishing yourself with outward either expectations, or the record itself, where you're like, "Well, I have to hike X number of miles today, otherwise, why am I out here?" It's like those types of things can really divorce you from your own body or that own feedback when you're only relying on sort of these external metrics. And it sounds like the process you went through was, "I'm gonna throw a way to schedule and actually do what I came out here to do, which is, do this for me. And be more in touch with how I'm actually feeling."

0:48:19.7 HA: Yeah, absolutely.

0:48:23.6 NA: Yeah, so how did that feel, to make... Emotionally, to make that switch?

0:48:29.3 HA: It was just such a relief, initially, to just feel like this weight of expectation. 'Cause it was not only like the perceived external expectation of others, but it was like this expectation I had put on myself, which was very heavy. And to just be like, "Well, alright, I guess I can't do the AT in under 50 days, but I don't know what I can do it in, and I'm going to find out." And so being able to just walk away from that very precise and specific expectation was really freeing and liberating. But you are trading it for this commitment of, "You are going to push yourself really hard to your max, that is what you're out here to find out." And so that was the part that became the challenge was pushing yourself to the limit regardless of an actual framework or a schedule, because in some ways when you have a schedule, you're like, "I'm doing X." Like, "Okay, well, this is what I do today." So it almost sort of makes it easier because it's like, "Well, I'm just doing what it says." This is why we make training schedules if we're training for an ultramarathon or something. "Today I have to run this far," and so you just do it.

0:49:40.0 HA: But I think that there was a lot of value. Even though it was really hard, there was a lot of value in all of a sudden removing that external framework and then just being like, "Well, now it's up to you. You don't even have a piece of paper telling you what to do, you are doing this for you. And it's all on you to motivate yourself to do it." And when you sit down at 10 o'clock and you're tired and you don't wanna get up and hike five more miles, you can. But if you want to find the answer, if you want to push yourself to do your very best, you're going to have to get up and hike those miles, and so there's a lot of internal conversations to push myself forward because I didn't have a piece of paper to do so. Even though it sounds silly to say that it was a piece of paper that motivates you, but, I don't know, I think humans in general we're very motivated by very little. I mean like, how much will we do for a gold star sticker when we're a child?

0:50:30.9 NA: Or a child, I'll still do that. I still want the gold star stickers, please.

0:50:35.6 HA: Exactly. Or a cookie or whatever. You can be motivated to do a lot, for very little reward. And so just even having just a piece of paper saying, "You're supposed to walk 47 miles today," it somehow takes that responsibility load off of you mentally. So removing that all together actually puts a heavier load on you, motivationally.

0:50:53.6 NA: Yeah, 'cause you have that decision fatigue too. That if it's just paper says, I do this and then I do this, you don't have to think about it, but it put... What you're describing puts you into that... The question, we were just talking about it of like, "Have I done my best today?" And the fact that that is more subjective. And it's almost like... I don't wanna put words in your mouth, but what I'm hearing or what I'm personally taking from what you specifically just shared is sort of the difference between, "Can I be the best versus what is my best?" And I think sometimes, especially for people like me, and sounds like people like you, that can get in that all or nothing mindset, right? I'm either the best or I'm not gonna do it, or they can fall into that really binary way of thinking, which is something I... Thank you, therapy. I'm constantly trying to break out of that all or nothing mindset. But that I often disregard the fact that it is really valuable for me to get the best out of myself, even if that the end result that comes from that isn't impressive to anyone else.

0:51:53.8 HA: Yeah, you talk about what's your why. Knowing your why. Why are you out here on any through hike, not an FKT. Just like, "Why are you walking 2000 miles?" You have to know why you're doing it. Because if you don't have a why, if you don't have a reason, something intrinsic, then you aren't going to succeed, you're going to quit because there's nothing motivating you. And learning to know your why and that your why isn't like, "I must be the bast." Or at a certain point on this FKT it was like, "I'm not even gonna succeed, I'm not... There's no way I'm gonna set an FKT out here, but I'm going to walk the whole trail." That's my why. I am here to walk from one end to the other, doing my best and see what that is, that's the why. That's the base level, that's what I'm doing regardless of whether you're even the best, or even if I'm anywhere in the rankings of the best, if it takes me six months, well then that's what it's gonna take and learning to shift that mindset is really important.

0:52:58.3 NA: So take me to, I don't know, let's say the last couple of days of the hike. You were just speaking about how maybe the motivations had shifted and changed going into it, and then getting rid of the schedule, in those last couple of days, what did you feel like your biggest driving force was?

0:53:14.7 HA: Yeah, definitely by the last few days the biggest driving force, honestly, was the animal driving force to be done. To sleep, to eat. I'd like to say that it was more than that, but at that point, I just wanted to be done. And when you get to within two days walk of your goal, it's just like, "Okay, I'm really exhausted, I'm really tired, I'm really hungry, I'm really tired of this. I just wanna be done." And so I think that that gives you kind of this additional power to it because your body knows, "Okay, instead of it being an indeterminate time in the future that we have to do this, it's like, 'Oh, this is actually... It's winding down. Okay, we don't have to do this many more times, we'll just give it all we've got.'" And so the last couple of days, I actually felt stronger and more powerful than I had maybe a week prior. But yeah, this driving force to just complete what I set out

to do and just sleep and eat, was very strong.

0:54:20.2 NA: Yeah, I bet. I bet. So, the other part of the book I really laughed out loud. So you get to Springer, the southern terminus of the AT, the end of your hike. You have absolutely no idea if you've broken the self-supported record or not. I feel like I would have been obsessively checking that the last couple of days. First of all, how were you able to just let that go and not look. Were you tempted to check and didn't let yourself? I actually cackle laughed out loud, at that.

0:54:44.8 HA: Yeah, yeah, it's funny. So there was a lot of cellphone reception in the southern AT. So the day before I finished, I think it was the day before, I managed to get cellphone reception from the top of a ridge, and I had entered the data into that calculator that I talked about, the online calculator, but it was a really crappy connection and I got an answer. I think I had put in further out 'cause I thought... I don't know, I don't remember what I put it. All I remember is I think I ended up with 55 days or something in there, and I was like, "Well, that's wrong. The internet messed up." And so I just put my phone away and kept hiking. I just was like, "Oh, I must have hit something wrong," and I didn't wanna stop and try to figure it out. Because I was like, "Well, that's clearly wrong. That's not right. And I don't wanna sit here and mess with this. I have hiking to do."

0:55:41.1 HA: And so it was really funny that then when I got to Springer the next day, and I sit down and I'm like, "Okay, now we're gonna put it in and we're gonna pay attention and we're gonna type it slowly." 'Cause there's all these little toggle buttons you've gotta do and make sure you're in the right time zone and the right day and the right year, so there's all these little button. And I was like, "Oh, I must have messed it up." So I put it in, and then I get like 54 days and I'm just like, "No, still did that wrong." And I put it in again. And then I texted my partner and I'm like, "Can you put this in and tell me what it says, I just can't imagine this. I can't believe what I've done."

0:56:18.7 NA: Because the record was what? 58 days the self-supported record.

0:56:20.5 HA: Yeah, the self-supported record was 58, and I mean, at a certain point, I was only on pace to tie that record. Around the halfway point, I think I was on pace to do... Yeah, I think I was on pace to do it in 60 days at the halfway point. So I gained six days, almost six days in the last half of the trail.

0:56:41.4 NA: That's wild. Yeah, I can just imagine you sitting there. You've finished this thing and you're like, "Oh fuck, I actually also broke the record, and I didn't even know."

0:56:49.4 HA: Yeah. Exactly, I was like, "Well, I'm probably in the ball park, I probably may be tied the record maybe. I know I did pretty good. I know it's less than two months, but not by a lot."

0:57:01.0 NA: That's amazing. Tell me about finally calling your mom when you finished.

0:57:07.0 HA: Yeah, that was the thing too, that... And I hadn't even thought about it, honestly. You're just so mono-focused. And you asked earlier how I could let go of the time and not be checking, and for me, because I had shifted this frame of reference from doing a certain thing to

doing my best, it just didn't matter anymore. And when you're sleep deprived and stuff... Doing math is hard for me when I'm well rested and fully caffeinated, so doing math while I was on the trail was just impossible, there was no way I was gonna do anything complicated. At the half-way point I basically was like, "Well, I'm on track to do in 60 days, so maybe I can tie his record." That was basically it, and then I just forgot about it. I'm like, "Well, that's where we're at, so I'll just keep pushing and you'll see where you land."

0:57:53.5 HA: And it was kind of the same thing with my mom, I thought about her so much, but I didn't... I didn't think about when I get done, I can call her. And it was like I got to the end and I sat there on the mountain and I had my cry. And then I was in the moment of realization that I had broke this record. And then the top of Springer... You can drive really close, the parking lot's like 0.1... Or 0.9 from the top. And so I had to meet my ride back at the parking lot, so I got up and I was like, "Alright. Well, time to walk the mile down." And then I remembered like, "Oh well, I have a cellphone reception up here." And it was just like all of a sudden I was just like, "I can call my mom now." And it was just this sudden thing. It wasn't like it was something I had been planning.

0:58:39.3 HA: And so I called her and she answered the phone, and it was really... I don't know, in a way it was probably the most important part of the day, versus inputting that record. There were a lot of important things that happened that day, I guess, but she was talking. She had gone through her therapy and she was able to talk, we actually were able to carry on a short conversation and yeah, it was just really amazing to be able to talk to her and to hear that she had been pushing herself really hard in her therapy and working diligently. And she said it to me at the time, she was just like, "I knew you were going through something hard, too." And it was funny because while I was on the trail, there have been all these times where I would just remind myself that my mom was going through something that was really hard and it wasn't her choice, and in ways I was choosing to be out there doing something hard, and that gave me strength. And so to hear her basically echo that back was really meaningful and powerful to me.

0:59:44.4 NA: Yeah, that that was a real bond that you shared and maybe didn't even know that you were each thinking about each other in that way.

0:59:52.2 HA: Yeah.

0:59:52.6 NA: I think that's a lovely place to start to wrap up. If you could leave folks with one little call to action based on our conversation, maybe a question to ask themselves or a small action to take, what would you love to invite folks to do?

1:00:08.5 HA: Yeah, the thing that I hope people do or believe or think when they... When they close my book or when they finish listening to this podcast, what I want them to realize is that they are enough just as they are and they don't have to prove themselves to anyone. And that's just really the reason I wrote this book, because I needed somebody to tell me that, and I needed to believe it. And I think that that's the key, is recognize that you're enough and believe it, do whatever it is you need to do to believe that for yourself.

1:00:49.2 NA: Yeah, you don't owe anybody an encore or anything sexy or shiny, right?

1:00:53.1 HA: Exactly.

1:00:55.9 NA: What is the best place for people to find the book, to find you if they wanna say hi?

1:01:01.4 HA: Yeah, so I'm the most active, social media-wise, on Instagram, and my handle there is Anishhikes, A-N-I-S-H-H-I-K-E-S. And the book is available everywhere books are sold, it's gonna be in paperback, audio and e-book format. The best way to support an author, though, is to purchase it from them. I sell autographed copies myself, and you can pick those up... There's a link in my bio on Instagram, or you can get it going to my website, which is anishhikes.wordpress.com.

1:01:37.3 NA: And I will put that direct book link in the show notes, for sure, so people can also just click there from there. Thank you so much for coming and sharing and telling stories.

1:01:46.3 HA: Yeah, absolutely, I'm really happy to be here. Thanks for having me on.

[music]

1:01:55.2 NA: And that's our show for today. Our music is by Adam Day, who also handles our sound editing. Thanks, Adam, you're the best. And huge thanks as well to every single member of our Patreon community for making this honest conversation, this entire podcast, and so much of my other work, like my twice weekly personal essay newsletter called Good Question possible. Your monthly funding allows me to keep creating resources and gatherings for folks who crave honest conversations, both with themselves and others, and I fully believe that these conversations can change our lives, our relationships and our world. To join us, just come on over to patreon.com/nicoleantoinette. Our community operates on a shame-free sliding scale, so you can feel good about supporting this work from within your own means. So I'll see you over in the Patreon community, yeah? And until next time, I want you to know three things. First that you are enough, second that you are not alone, and third, that I'm totally rooting for you.

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