TRAIL RUNNING INFLUENCERS OF GROWTH

Top 20 North America & Global — 2026 Edition

The Awareness–Participation Influence Debate

A Comprehensive Research Report

Commissioned by Bob Crowley · History Expeditions

May 2026

"Who grows the sport — and how?"



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Trail running has undergone one of the most remarkable transformations in endurance sport history. U.S. participation rose from 8.2 million (2014) to 16.1 million (2024), a 7% CAGR that stands in sharp contrast to road running's stagnation at 0.5% annual growth. The global trail running market was valued at USD $4.0 billion in 2024, projected to reach $7.5 billion by 2032. UTMB World Series participation in H1 2025 was 2.4× higher than the same period in 2022, with over 800,000 race starts globally.

This report identifies and ranks the Top 20 trail running influencers in North America and globally through a deliberately bifurcated lens: (1) Awareness Influence — those who expand visibility and cultural reach; and (2) Participation Influence — those who directly convert people into active trail runners. The distinction is not academic: it determines who gets credit for growth, what interventions are worth investing in, and how the sport's future should be resourced.

"The most visible influencers are not always the most effective growth agents. Awareness without conversion is noise. Participation without awareness hits a ceiling. The sport needs both — in precise combination." — The Pipeline Principle

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CHAPTER 1

The Trail Running Revolution

The story of trail running's rise is not one of steady incremental growth — it is a story of cultural ignition, demographic disruption, and accelerating momentum. It is relentless forward progress as Bryon Powell so eloquently conveyed in his 2011 book of the same name: *Relentless Forward Progress - A Guide to Running Ultramarathons*. U.S. trail running participation grew from 8.2 million in 2014 to 16.1 million in 2024, a near-doubling at a 7% CAGR, compared to road running's 0.5% annual growth. The 2025 OIA report confirmed an 8.5% year-over-year increase, and 2025 race registrations on RaceID were up 39% versus January 2024 — indicating the trend is accelerating, not plateauing.

1.1 Participation Growth

The 2024 OIA Participation Trends Report recorded 175.8 million total outdoor recreation participants in the U.S. — a record. Trail running benefited disproportionately from the post-COVID outdoors boom. ITRA's State of Trail Running 2024 report documented 231% global participation growth over the preceding decade. RunSignup's 2025 Annual Industry Report confirmed 5% year-over-year growth in trail event registrations, with trail running outpacing all other running disciplines for the fourth consecutive year.

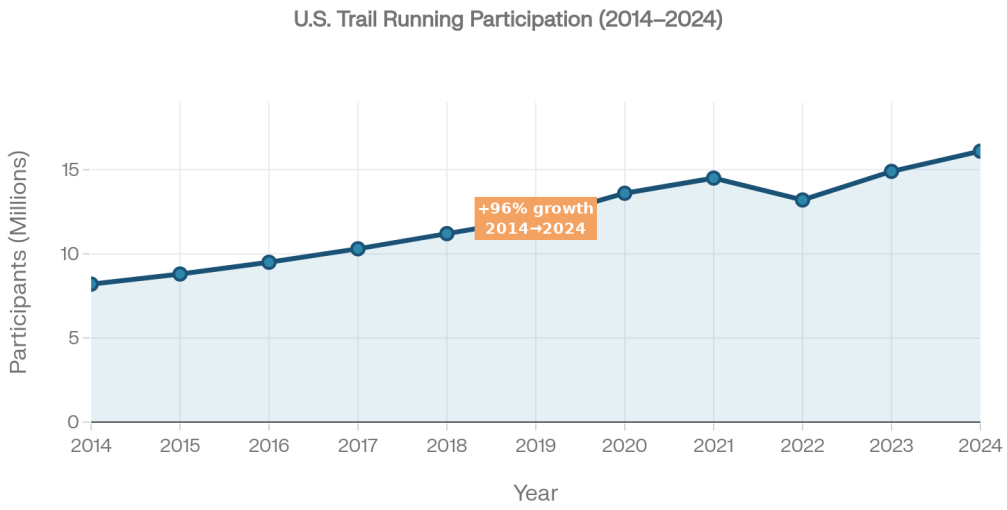


Figure 1.1: U.S. Trail Running Participation Growth (2014–2024). Sources: OIA, ITRA, RunSignup.

1.2 The Global Market

The global trail running market — encompassing event registrations, footwear, apparel, nutrition, and accessories — was valued at USD $4.0 billion in 2024 and is projected to expand at a CAGR of 8% through 2032, reaching $7.5 billion. The trail shoe segment alone is projected to grow USD $4.18 billion between 2024–2029 (Technavio CAGR: 9%). North America leads with 35% of global market contribution; Asia-Pacific is the fastest-growing region, driven by dramatic increases in China, Japan, and Southeast Asia.



Figure 1.2: Global Trail Running Market Size, Historical and Projected (USD Billions). Sources: FutureDataStats, Technavio.

1.3 The UTMB Effect

Founded in 2003 by Michel and Catherine Poletti with 700 starters in Chamonix, the Ultra-Trail du Mont-Blanc (UTMB) has become the most consequential institutional force in global trail running. The 2025 UTMB World Series encompassed 64+ events in 28 countries on 5 continents. Participation in World Series Index Races was 2.4× higher in H1 2025 versus H1 2022. Lottery applications for the flagship race reached 25,000 in 2025 — a 30% increase from 2024 — making it the most sought-after start line in endurance sport.

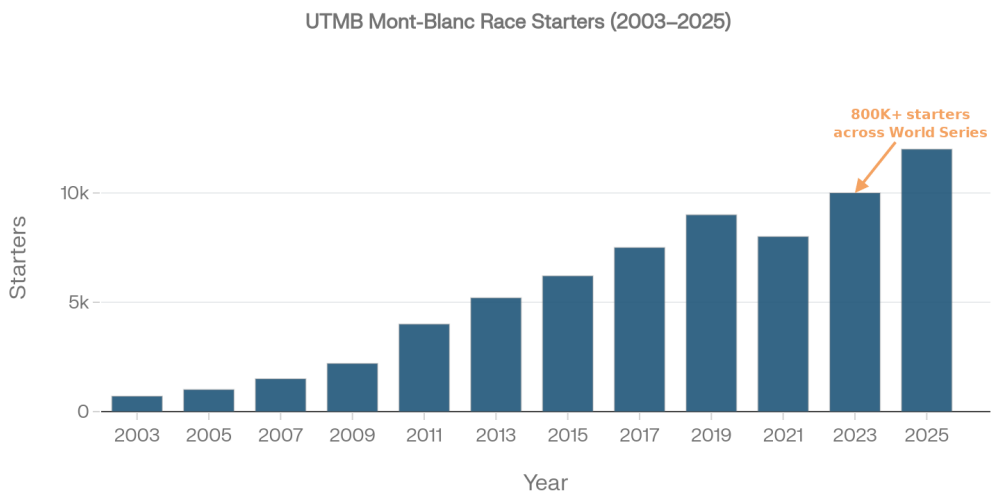


Figure 1.3: UTMB Mont-Blanc Race Starters Growth (2003–2025). Source: UTMB World Series / ITRA.

1.4 The Gender Revolution

Female participation in trail running rose from 16% in 2007 to 30.5% in 2025 per the ITRA database — nearly doubling in under two decades. In Oceania and South America, women account for ~40% of participants. At distances under 10K, female participation reaches 45.5%. The fastest-growing demographic for new race registrations is women aged 30–50, suggesting that trail running's entry-level distance accessibility is a powerful recruitment channel for this cohort.

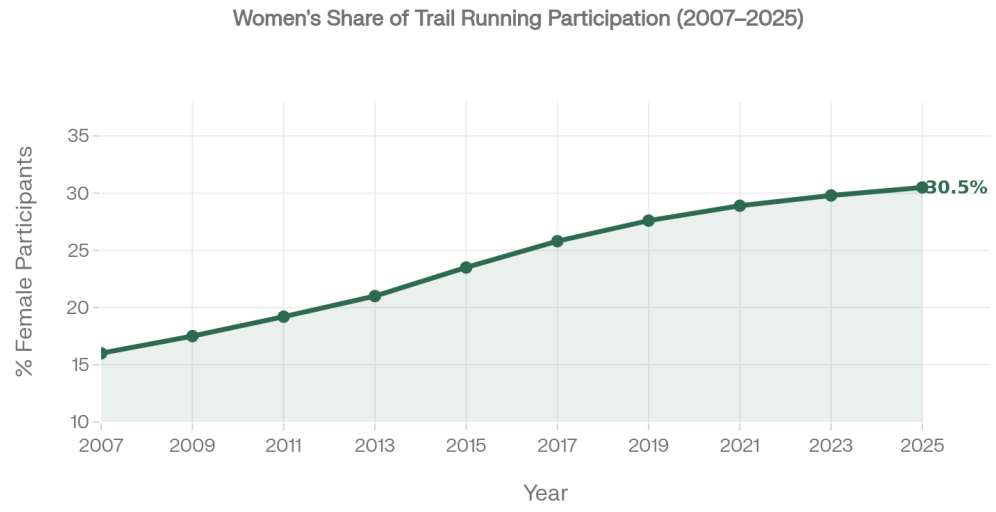


Figure 1.4: Women's Share of Trail Running Participation (% of Total). Source: ITRA Database, 2007–2025.

CHAPTER 2

The Influence Equation
Awareness vs. Participation — The Central Debate

Before any ranking can be constructed, a foundational question demands a rigorous answer: what does it actually mean to "influence" the growth of trail running? The field of influence research — drawing from marketing science, behavioral economics, and sports sociology — offers several competing frameworks, and the distinctions between them are not merely theoretical.

2.1 The Five-Stage Funnel

The most useful framework is the marketing conversion funnel adapted for sport participation. Five distinct stages: (1) Awareness — a person learns trail running exists; (2) Consideration — they gather information and evaluate appeal; (3) Intention — they decide to try it; (4) Conversion — they actually run a trail, register for an event, or join a club; (5) Retention — they remain active participants and recruit others. An influencer's ranking depends entirely on which stages they most powerfully affect.

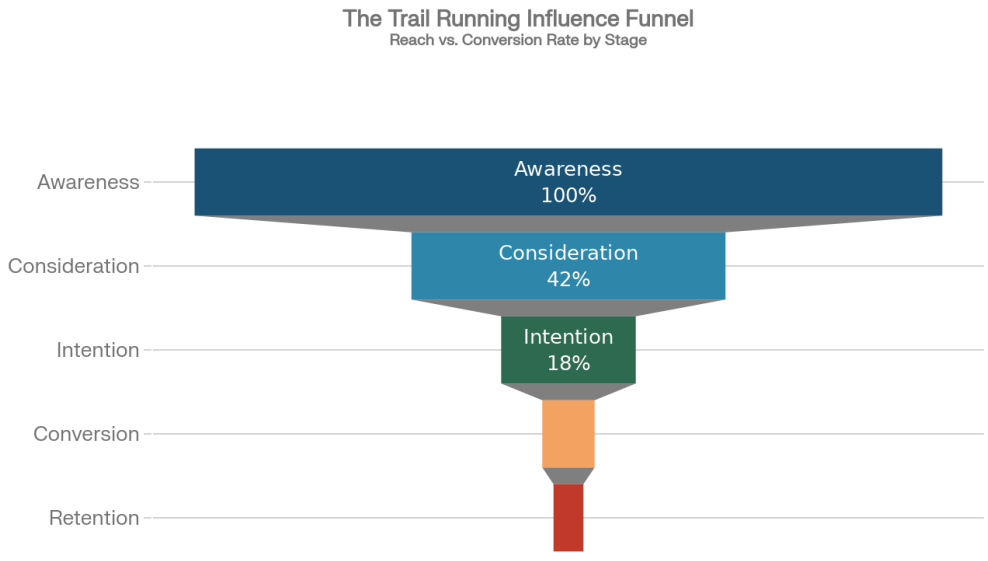


Figure 2.1: The Trail Running Influence Funnel — Prospect Volume by Stage.

2.2 The Case for Awareness-First Influence

You cannot convert someone who does not know the product exists. Christopher McDougall's *Born to Run* reached an estimated 3 million readers — many of whom had never considered trail running. A 2025 PMC/NIH peer-reviewed study (n=2,400) found a significant positive correlation (r=0.46) between sports media use and sport participation behavior. Nielsen's 2022 research found that a 1-point awareness increase correlates with a 1% market conversion — applied to trail running's 300 million potential global participants, even 0.1% conversion at scale produces 300,000 new trail runners.

David Goggins — #2 North America Awareness but absent from the Participation list — is the most instructive case for awareness's limits. His books sold 5+ million copies. His ultramarathon content reaches hundreds of millions of views. Yet Goggins actively discourages communal running, emphasizing individual mental endurance over community. His audience is inspired to endure, not to race. The result: enormous awareness footprint, extremely low participation conversion rate into trail running specifically. He is the definitive case study for what this report calls "reach without channel."

2.3 The Case for Participation-First Influence

Awareness is necessary but insufficient. Every race registration is an auditable act. Every coached athlete who completes their first 50K is a verified convert. The race director who creates 30 events per year serving 50,000 participants has moved those people through the full funnel — a feat no author or celebrity can claim with equal certainty. Research on sport participation consistently shows the most powerful driver of sustained participation is social infrastructure: a race calendar to train toward, a community of fellow runners, a coach who provides accountability.

Jamil Coury's case makes the argument with particular clarity. As founder of Aravaipa Running (50+ annual events, serving over 25,000+ runners) and acquirer of UltraRunning Magazine, Coury has built participation infrastructure reaching tens of thousands of runners with no significant mainstream media profile. He has never been the subject of a feature story in Outside Magazine. He does not have 1 million Instagram followers. But the number of people who have crossed a finish line at one of his events — and who became trail runners because of that experience — likely exceeds the participation directly converted by most awareness figures.

2.4 The Pipeline Principle — Resolving the Debate

The most defensible resolution is to reject the either/or framing and adopt the Pipeline Principle: sport growth is a pipeline, not a point. Width at the top (awareness) means nothing without conversion infrastructure at the bottom (participation). Neither end generates lasting growth without the retention infrastructure in the middle — community, coaching, socialization, event access, progressive distance ladders — that keeps participants active. Trail running is a sport and a community. Many come for the sport and stay for the community. This is the heartbeat that pumps the growth and sustains the high retention of participants.

Trail running is a sport and a community:

Many come for the sport and stay for the community.

Courtney Dauwalter is the purest example of multi-stage pipeline operation: her 2023 Western States/Hardrock/UTMB "Triple Crown" generated mainstream awareness across 20+ countries. Her accessibility — drinking beer at finish lines, self-deprecating humor, genuine warmth toward all runners — creates aspiration in non-elite runners. Her consistent presence at events of all sizes reinforces community norms. She is simultaneously an awareness architect and participation inspiration. This combination is the most powerful formula in trail running influence.

PIPELINE PRINCIPLE: The sport grows when awareness architects AND participation engineers work in concert. Awareness without conversion = wasted reach. Participation infrastructure without cultural awareness = a ceiling on potential. The best influencers do both — but most specialize in one. This report ranks them separately to reveal where each is strongest, and where the gaps represent the greatest opportunities for investment in trail running's future.

CHAPTER 3

Methodology and Selection Standards

3.1 Source Framework

This report builds on a methodology commissioned by Bob Crowley, Co-Founder of History Expeditions, and past president of the International Trail Running Association (ITRA), which establishes a multi-variable scoring framework across five dimensions: (1) Reach & Audience Scale; (2) Influence Quality; (3) Participation Infrastructure; (4) Media Amplification; (5) Longevity & Consistency. For the Bifurcated ranking, Reach & Media Amplification received 60% weight for the Awareness list; Participation Infrastructure and Influence Quality received 65% combined weight for the Participation list.

3.2 Data Sources

Primary data sources: ITRA participation database; OIA Annual Participation Reports (2020–2025); RunSignup Annual Industry Report 2025; UTMB World Series race data; book and film sales records; Google News coverage index; PMC/NIH sports media research; RunningUSA and Aravaipa Running event data.

3.3 Scope

North America lists include U.S. and Canadian influencers. Global lists include all influencers regardless of nationality; North Americans may appear on both. Where an individual appears on both lists, their Global ranking is noted in their Chapter 6 profile. For profiles appearing only on the Global list, a full profile appears in Chapter 7.

CHAPTER 4

North America Rankings

The following tables present the Top 20 influencers in North America across both dimensions. Full individual profiles with photographs appear in Chapter 6.

North America — Top 20 Awareness Influencers

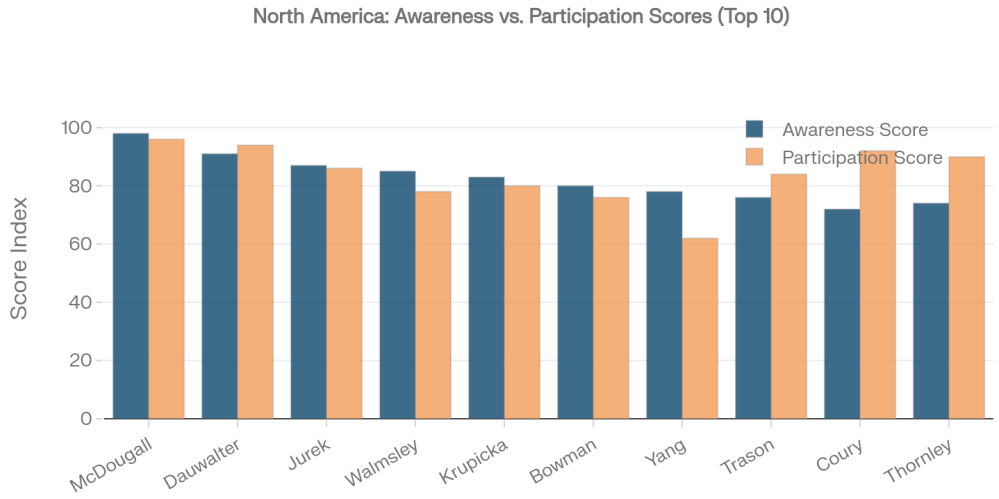


Figure 4.1: North America Top 10 Awareness vs. Participation Score Comparison.

Rank	Name	Primary Role	Power Score
#1	Christopher McDougall	Author — Born to Run	98
#2	David Goggins	Author / Ultra Athlete / Motivational Speaker	93
#3	Courtney Dauwalter	Elite Runner — 3× UTMB Champion / Triple Crown 2023	91
#4	Scott Jurek	Author — Eat & Run / 7× Western States Champion	87
#5	Jim Walmsley	Elite Runner — UTMB Champion / WS Course Record	85
#6	Anton Krupicka	Trail Philosopher / FKT Athlete / Colorado MTN Runner	83
#7	Dylan Bowman	Freetrail Podcast Founder / Media Entrepreneur	80
#8	Billy Yang	Trail Running Filmmaker / Documentary Creator	78

#9	Ann Trason	Pioneer — 14× Western States Champion	76
#10	Jesse Itzler	Entrepreneur / Ultra Ambassador / Living with a SEAL	75
#11	Craig Thornley	Western States Endurance Run Race Director	74
#12	Karl Meltzer	45× 100-Mile Champion / Appalachian Trail FKT	73
#13	Rob Krar	3× Western States Champion / Mental Health Advocate	72
#14	Rickey Gates	Every Single Street / Adventure Runner / Photographer	70
#15	Zach Miller	The North Face Athlete / UTMB Resilience Symbol	68
#16	Jeff Browning	Bronco Billy — Masters Elite / 31 Career Victories	66
#17	Timothy Olson	2× Western States Champion / Transformation Coach	64
#18	Geoff Roes	WS Course Record / Alaska Mountain Runners Founder	62
#19	Candice Burt	Destination Trail — Founder Bigfoot/Tahoe/Moab 200s	60
#20	Krissy Moehl	Author — Running Your First Ultra / Coach	58

North America — Top 20 Participation Influencers

Rank	Name	Primary Role	Power Score
#1	Christopher McDougall	Author — Born to Run	96
#2	Courtney Dauwalter	Elite Runner — Triple Crown 2023	94
#3	Jamil Coury	Aravaipa Running Founder / UltraRunning Magazine Publisher	92
#4	Craig Thornley	Western States Endurance Run Race Director	90
#5	Krissy Moehl	Author — Running Your First Ultra / Coach	88
#6	Scott Jurek	Author — Eat & Run / 7× WS Champion / Coach	86
#7	Ann Trason	Pioneer — 14× WS Champion / Role Model	84
#8	Sally McRae	Elite Runner / @yellowrunner Coach	82
#9	Anton Krupicka	Elite Athlete / FKT Inspiration / Mountain Philosopher	80
#10	Jim Walmsley	UTMB Champion / WS Course Record / Hoka Athlete	78
#11	Dylan Bowman	Freetrail Podcast / Trail Media Entrepreneur	76
#12	Karl Meltzer	AT FKT / Speedgoat 50K Race Director	74
#13	Rob Krar	WS Champion / Mental Health Advocacy / Coach	73
#14	Candice Burt	Destination Trail — 200+ Mile Event Creator	72
#15	Timothy Olson	WS Champion / Transformation Coach	71
#16	Jeff Browning	Masters Elite / 31 Career Victories / Longevity Model	69
#17	Meghan Laws	Masters Champion / Longevity Role Model	66
#18	Rickey Gates	Urban Running / Adventure Running / Every Single Street	64
#19	Billy Yang	Trail Filmmaker / Community Builder	62
#20	Zach Miller	Resilience Narrative / TNF Athlete	60

CHAPTER 5

Global Rankings

The following tables present the Top 20 influencers globally. Full individual profiles appear in Chapter 7 for figures not profiled in Chapter 6.

Global — Top 20 Awareness Influencers

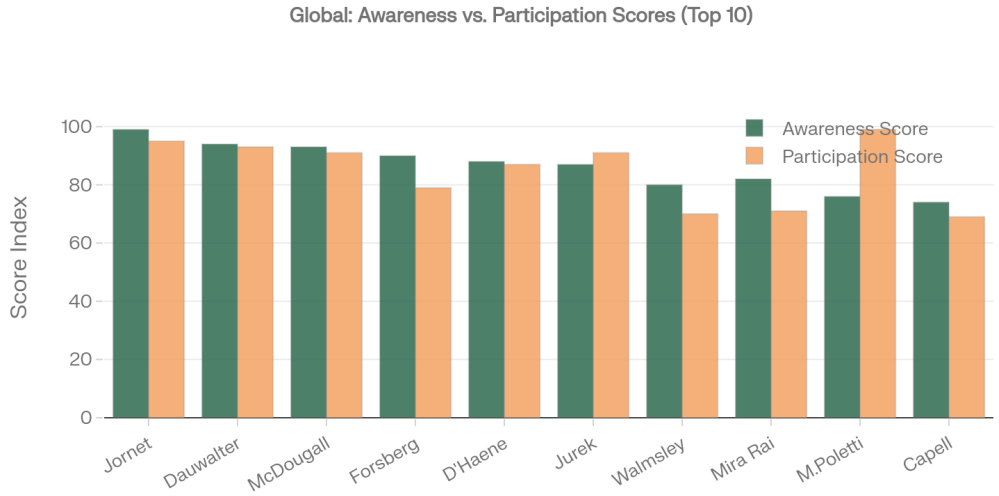


Figure 5.1: Global Top 10 Awareness vs. Participation Score Comparison.

Rank	Name	Country	Power Score
#1	Kilian Jornet	Spain / Norway	99
#2	Courtney Dauwalter	USA	94
#3	Christopher McDougall	USA	93
#4	Emelie Forsberg	Sweden	90
#5	François D'Haene	France	88
#6	Scott Jurek	USA	87
#7	Jim Walmsley	USA	80
#8	Mira Rai	Nepal	82
#9	Anton Krupicka	USA	80
#10	David Goggins	USA	78
#11	Ann Trason	USA	77
#12	Michel Poletti	France	76
#13	Pau Capell	Spain	74
#14	Xavier Thévenard	France	73
#15	Núria Picas	Spain	72
#16	Dylan Bowman	USA	70
#17	Billy Yang	USA	68
#18	Grégory Vollet	France (Salomon)	66
#19	Jean-Luc Diard	France (Hoka Co-Founder)	64
#20	Rob Krar	Canada / USA	62

Global — Top 20 Participation Influencers

Rank	Name	Country	Power Score
#1	Michel Poletti	France — UTMB Co-Founder	99
#2	Catherine Poletti	France — UTMB Co-Founder	98
#3	Kilian Jornet	Spain / Norway	95
#4	Courtney Dauwalter	USA	93
#5	Christopher McDougall	USA	91
#6	Scott Jurek	USA	91
#7	François D'Haene	France	87
#8	Jean-Luc Diard	France — Hoka Co-Founder	85
#9	Jamil Coury	USA	83
#10	Craig Thornley	USA	81
#11	Emelie Forsberg	Sweden	79
#12	Ann Trason	USA	77
#13	Krissy Moehl	USA	75
#14	Sally McRae	USA	73
#15	Mira Rai	Nepal	71
#16	Pau Capell	Spain	69
#17	Grégory Vollet	France (Salomon)	67
#18	Núria Picas	Spain	65
#19	Xavier Thévenard	France	63
#20	Dylan Bowman	USA	61

CHAPTER 6

North America — Individual Profiles

Profiles are ordered by Awareness list rank (#1→#20) followed by individuals who appear only on the Participation list. Each profile shows the individual's photograph, rank designation, biographical summary, and ranking justification. Where an individual appears on both lists, both ranks are shown.



#1 Awareness · #1 Participation

NA — Both Lists

Christopher McDougall

Author — Born to Run; Trail Running's Cultural Ignition Point

Background

Christopher McDougall (born 1962) is a former Associated Press war correspondent who became trail running's most consequential cultural ambassador through a single book. Born to Run (2009) chronicled his journey into Mexico's Copper Canyons to run with the reclusive Tarahumara — ultra-distance runners covering 100+ miles in huarache sandals with apparent effortlessness. The book reached an estimated 3 million readers, won the William Hill Sports Book of the Year Award, and was widely credited with triggering a 25%+ spike in trail and ultra running participation in the two years following publication. It also catalyzed the minimalist running shoe movement and a cultural reassessment of humans as natural-born distance runners.

Ranking Justification

McDougall holds the dual #1 North America position because no other individual in the sport's history has demonstrably created more new trail runners from outside the existing community. His audience was book readers — many who had never considered trail running — introduced through a narrative so compelling that they laced up and went looking for trails. The 25%+ participation spike following publication is the strongest single-attribution evidence in trail running growth history. His participation rank reflects that Born to Run specifically described trail and ultra running, not road running, so its conversions were trail-specific.



#2 Awareness (Awareness List Only)

NA — Awareness List

David Goggins

Author, Retired Navy SEAL, Ultra Endurance Athlete

Background

David Goggins (born February 17, 1975) is a retired U.S. Navy SEAL, former U.S. Army Ranger, and JTAC who became one of the most followed figures in extreme endurance through his 2018 memoir Can't Hurt Me (5+ million copies sold) and 2022's Never Finished. He completed the Badwater 135 three times, set a world record for most pull-ups in 24 hours (4,030), and has finished 60+ ultra-distance events. His social media following exceeds 10 million on Instagram and 6+ million on YouTube, reaching demographic groups trail running has historically failed to attract: military veterans, urban young men of color, and mainstream fitness audiences with no prior running background.

Ranking Justification

Goggins holds #2 Awareness and does not appear on the Participation list — the most instructive asymmetry in these rankings. His massive awareness footprint does not convert into trail community participation because his messaging is fundamentally de-communal: running is solo suffering, a mental discipline, not a social sport. He has explicitly discouraged group running. His audience is inspired to endure, not to race. He generates awareness of extreme endurance running — but not of trail running as participatory sport and culture. He is the definitive Pipeline Principle case study: reach without channel specificity.



#3 Awareness · #2 Participation

NA — Both Lists

Courtney Dauwalter

Elite Trail Runner — 3× UTMB Champion, Western States CR, Hardrock CR, Triple Crown 2023

Background

Courtney Dauwalter (born November 3, 1989, Minneapolis, MN) is a former science teacher turned elite professional trail runner who has established herself as the most dominant female ultrarunner in the world and arguably the most influential trail running athlete of any gender in the past five years. In 2023, she completed the "Triple Crown" — winning Western States (14:35:58 CR), Hardrock 100 (26:14:27), and UTMB (22:30:54 CR) in a single summer — generating mainstream coverage in the New York Times, Washington Post, ESPN, and national newspapers in 20+ countries. Her Instagram following exceeds 500,000. In 2026, at 36, she continues to compete at the highest level.

Ranking Justification

Dauwalter holds #3 Awareness and #2 Participation in North America because she uniquely combines elite performance with accessibility. She drinks beer at finish lines, responds to fan messages, and talks openly about hallucinating and failing — with genuine humor rather than curated invincibility. This combination makes her simultaneously aspirational (mainstream-crossing performance) and relatable (a human being who suffers like everyone). The participation conversion from her influence is notably strong in women aged 30–50, the fastest-growing trail running segment. She is proof that the awareness–participation distinction can be transcended.



#4 Awareness · #6 Participation

NA — Both Lists

Scott Jurek

Author — Eat & Run; 7× Western States Champion; Plant-Based Ultra Pioneer

Background

Scott Jurek (born October 26, 1973, Duluth, MN) won Western States 100 seven consecutive times, won Badwater 135 multiple times, and authored Eat & Run (2012, 1M+ copies sold), which introduced trail running to a mainstream literary audience overlapping heavily with wellness and plant-based nutrition communities. In 2015 he set the Appalachian Trail FKT (46 days, 8:07) generating front-page Washington Post coverage and NPR features. His dual influence — elite performance and written narrative — mirrors McDougall's impact but targets a different demographic: those drawn to plant-based performance nutrition as much as trail running.

Ranking Justification

Jurek's dual-list position reflects compounding influence modalities: books, records, race victories, and a nutrition narrative attracting wellness communities into trail running. His AT FKT generated crossover coverage in general outdoor and adventure travel media beyond trail-specific publications. The participation conversion from Eat & Run is particularly notable among runners who had been told animal protein was essential for endurance — his example directly challenged that assumption and removed a barrier to trail running for a significant demographic.



#5 Awareness · #10 Participation

NA — Both Lists

Jim Walmsley

Elite Trail Runner — UTMB Champion, Western States Course Record Holder, Hoka Athlete

Background

Jim Walmsley (born October 9, 1990) is a professional trail runner for Hoka and the 2023 UTMB Mont-Blanc champion — the first American male to win the race in its 20-year history (19:37:43). He holds the Western States 100 course record (14:09:28, set 2019) and won Western States in 2018, 2019, and 2023. Based in Flagstaff, AZ, he trained with ascetic commitment that earned him the nickname "the monk of Flagstaff." His UTMB 2023 victory generated substantial mainstream U.S. sports coverage — rare for trail running — and his Hoka partnership placed him at the center of the brand's global marketing.

Ranking Justification

Walmsley's #5 Awareness reflects the genuine crossover media impact of his UTMB victory — generating ESPN.com coverage alongside NFL, NBA, and MLB content. His #10 Participation rank is lower because his brand persona is remote and performance-focused: the monk who trains alone and sacrifices everything. He is aspiration without accessibility — powerful for awareness, less potent for direct participation conversion than figures who actively invite non-elite runners into the community.



#6 Awareness · #9 Participation

NA — Both Lists

Anton Krupicka

Trail Running Philosopher, FKT Athlete, Colorado Mountain Runner

Background

Anton Krupicka (born January 14, 1983, Norfolk, NE) is widely regarded as the aesthetic soul of a generation of North American trail runners — the archetypal minimalist mountain runner whose image (bearded, shirtless, running high ridgelines in 1970s-style short shorts with minimal gear) became the visual language of trail running's identity in the 2010s. A former Leadville 100 two-time champion (2006–07), he has spent the last decade focused on FKTs and exploration — setting records on Colorado 14ers, major mountain routes, and backcountry traverses. His blog and social media, while modest in raw follower count, are consumed with unusual intensity by dedicated trail runners who find in his writing a philosophical framework for why mountain running matters.

Ranking Justification

Krupicka holds #6 Awareness and #9 Participation because his influence operates at a depth that reach-based metrics significantly undercount. His followers do not just follow — they run more, explore more, and define their practice more deliberately because of his example. He represents the aesthetic ideal of trail running at its most pure: running as exploration, as relationship with wild landscape, as philosophical practice rather than competitive endeavor. His participation influence is particularly strong among road runners transitioning to trails, who find in his example a compelling case that trail running's value is not measured in race times but in accumulated mountain miles.



#7 Awareness · #11 Participation

NA — Both Lists

Dylan Bowman

Freetrail Podcast Founder, Media Entrepreneur, Elite Trail Runner

Background

Dylan Bowman (born 1986) is a professional trail runner turned media entrepreneur who founded Freetrail, a trail running media platform encompassing a top-rated podcast (The Freetrail Podcast), digital content, a Pro membership community, and trail running news coverage. As an athlete, he competed at elite level for over a decade with TNF sponsorship, finishing top-10 at UTMB and Western States multiple times. As a media builder, he has created the most structurally sophisticated independent trail running media business in North America — with paid subscribers and editorial independence that traditional running publications lack. He has also been a vocal advocate for professional trail running athletes' compensation and working conditions.

Ranking Justification

Bowman's #7 Awareness rank reflects a media platform that, while smaller in raw audience than mainstream crossover figures, operates with exceptional depth and engagement within the trail running community. His podcast routinely achieves 50,000–100,000+ downloads per episode. His #11 Participation rank reflects the specific mechanism by which Freetrail drives participation: it provides the information, community, and narrative infrastructure that moves people from consideration to race registration. He is the sport's most effective dedicated media participation engine.



#8 Awareness · #19 Participation

NA — Both Lists

Billy Yang

Trail Running Filmmaker, Documentary Creator

Background

Billy Yang is a California-based filmmaker, trail runner, and storyteller whose short- and long-form documentary films have accumulated tens of millions of views across YouTube and social media. His films — including "The Why," "Given," and "This Is Your Day" — are widely credited as the most emotionally compelling trail running content ever produced, routinely moving viewers to tears and inspiring race registrations. Yang is himself an accomplished ultrarunner who has competed at Western States, UTMB, and other majors, giving his filmmaking an authenticity external filmmakers cannot replicate. He has worked with Salomon, Hoka, TNF, and other major brands, and his Dauwalter and Jornet collaborations produced some of the most widely circulated trail running content in history.

Ranking Justification

Yang's #8 Awareness and #19 Participation ranks reflect filmmaking influence that is profound in depth but limited in mainstream media crossover. His films are consumed intensely within trail running communities — but they do not cross over into general sports or mainstream lifestyle media the way a UTMB victory or bestselling book does. His participation rank is lower than his awareness rank because his films primarily target people already in the consideration stage — catalysts for moving from "interested in trail running" to "I'm signing up for a race," rather than reaching audiences who have never heard of the sport.



#9 Awareness · #7 Participation

NA — Both Lists

Ann Trason

Pioneer — 14× Western States Champion, Ultrarunning Hall of Fame

Background

Ann Trason (born 1960) is arguably the greatest ultramarathoner of the 20th century and the single most important individual in establishing that women can compete at or near the overall level of men in ultra-distance running. She won Western States 100 a record 14 times between 1989 and 2003, frequently finishing in the top-5 overall — not merely among women. Her rivalry with Valentina Paliy at the 1994 Western States was documented in Born to Run and became one of the most celebrated competitive stories in the sport's history. She was inducted into the Ultrarunning Hall of Fame. Her historical legacy has been amplified by Born to Run, multiple iRunFar features, and her continued presence in the trail running community as mentor, pacer, and race volunteer.

Ranking Justification

Trason holds #9 Awareness and #7 Participation because her historical legacy functions as a participation driver in a specific and powerful way: she is the foundational proof point for women's capacity in ultrarunning. For every woman who has ever wondered whether she could handle the distance, Trason's 14 Western States victories — many finished top-5 overall — provide the most compelling possible evidence. Her participation rank is higher than her awareness rank because her influence is concentrated in participation conversion among women — the fastest-growing demographic in trail running.



#10 Awareness (Awareness List Only)

NA — Awareness List

Jesse Itzler

Entrepreneur, Ultra Ambassador, Author — Living with a SEAL

Background

Jesse Itzler (born 1968) is a serial entrepreneur (Marquis Jet, Zico Coconut Water co-founder) and husband of Sara Blakely (Spanx founder) who has completed Badwater 135, multiple 100-mile races, and organizes the Backyard Ultra-inspired 29029 Everesting event series. His 2015 book Living with a SEAL — about hiring David Goggins as a personal trainer for a month — sold over 1.5 million copies and introduced Goggins to the mainstream audience that made him a global phenomenon. His primary trail running content appears through @jesseitzler social media (1.5M+ Instagram followers), entrepreneurship podcasts, and the ultra-endurance speaking circuit.

Ranking Justification

Itzler holds #10 Awareness exclusively — absent from the Participation list — because his influence on trail running is primarily cross-referential: he introduces ultra-endurance running to entrepreneurship and business audiences who follow him for business content. His awareness impact is real but diffuse: followers are primarily motivated by business inspiration, and trail running is one of several extreme activities he uses as a metaphor for entrepreneurial grit. He is a gateway figure: creating curiosity about extreme endurance in audiences who would otherwise never encounter trail running.



#11 Awareness · #4 Participation

NA — Both Lists (Participation Dominant)

Craig Thornley

Western States Endurance Run Race Director

Background

Craig Thornley has served as Race Director of the Western States 100-Mile Endurance Run since 2013. Western States, founded in 1977, has shaped the cultural identity of North American trail running more than any other single event. Under Thornley's direction, the event has maintained its intimate, community-centered character while navigating the tension between growth demand (25,000+ lottery applications) and the 369-person field cap that preserves the race's character. Thornley participates actively in community discussions, runs the race's YouTube channel, and is known for deep respect for the race's history. He is also a competitive ultrarunner who has run Western States himself 9 times.

Ranking Justification

Thornley's inversion — #11 Awareness but #4 Participation — is one of the most instructive asymmetries in these rankings. Western States is the aspirational centerpiece of North American trail running: the race that runners train for, dream about, and define their careers by. By presiding over it with integrity and community-centricity, Thornley has made it the gold standard of participatory aspiration. Every runner who registers for a 50K saying "maybe someday I'll qualify for Western States" is an active participant partly because of what Western States represents — and that representation is, in significant part, shaped by Thornley's stewardship.



#3 Participation (Participation List Only)

NA — Participation List

Jamil Coury

Aravaipa Running Founder; UltraRunning Magazine Publisher

Background

Jamil Coury is founder and race director of Aravaipa Running, Arizona's largest trail running event organization, producing 30+ events per year spanning 5K to 100 miles and serving an estimated 50,000 participants annually. In 2024, he acquired and relaunched UltraRunning Magazine — North America's oldest and most authoritative ultramarathon publication — under his Steep Life Media umbrella, giving him both live event infrastructure and a national editorial platform. Coury is himself an accomplished ultrarunner, having completed Badwater 135 and numerous 100-mile races. Aravaipa events are specifically designed for accessibility: multiple distances at each event, strong volunteer infrastructure, and locations in spectacular Arizona desert landscape.

Ranking Justification

Coury holds #3 Participation because the arithmetic of his influence is auditable: 50,000 participants per year across 30+ events is a concrete participation footprint that no athlete's inspirational content can directly match. Every person who has crossed a finish line at an Aravaipa event has had their participation directly enabled by his race organization infrastructure. The acquisition of UltraRunning Magazine adds a national editorial dimension — a participation-driving publication reaching readers continent-wide — to what was already the most productive event organization in the U.S. Southwest. His absence from the Awareness Top 20 captures the fundamental trade-off of participation-first influence: enormous direct impact, limited mainstream reach.



#12 Awareness · #12 Participation

NA — Both Lists

Karl Meltzer

45× 100-Mile Race Champion, Appalachian Trail FKT, Speedgoat 50K Race Director

Background

Karl Meltzer holds the record for most 100-mile race victories in history: 45 wins over three decades. He co-founded Speedgoat 50K — one of the most technically challenging mountain races in North America — and in 2016 broke Scott Jurek's Appalachian Trail FKT (45 days, 22:38). A Red Bull-sponsored athlete for most of his career, Meltzer has maintained a public profile extending into energy drink and extreme sports audiences. Competing and directing races into his 50s, he embodies trail running's exceptional longevity appeal.

Ranking Justification

Meltzer's balanced dual-list position at #12 reflects broad but not top-tier influence across both dimensions. His Red Bull sponsorship delivered trail running awareness to non-traditional audiences. Speedgoat 50K creates direct participation infrastructure. His AT FKT generated mainstream media coverage. Most importantly, his continued competitiveness into his 50s sends a powerful participation message to older runners: this sport is for life, not just for the young. The 40+ demographic represents trail running's fastest-growing participation segment.



#13 Awareness · #13 Participation

NA — Both Lists

Rob Krar

3× Western States Champion, Mental Health Advocate, RunKrar Coach

Background

Rob Krar is a three-time Western States 100 champion (2014, 2015, 2016) born in Canada and based in Flagstaff, AZ, who is as well known for his open advocacy about severe depression as for his race victories. His public willingness to discuss living with depression while competing at elite level resonated profoundly with a running community in which mental health stigma had been historically suppressed. His coaching business RunKrar has worked with hundreds of athletes from beginner ultrarunners to competitive elites. His Flagstaff training documentaries attracted substantial viewership and helped establish Flagstaff as a trail running destination city.

Ranking Justification

Krar opened trail running to a demographic previously not explicitly invited: people managing depression, anxiety, and mental health challenges who find in running a genuine therapeutic tool. His advocacy is credible because he has never claimed to be cured — he describes running as management, not cure, making his message specific and honest rather than aspirationally simplistic. His coaching business has directly converted hundreds of runners, many entering the sport specifically because of his mental health advocacy and finding community and structure in trail running that they could not find elsewhere.



#14 Awareness · #18 Participation

NA — Both Lists

Rickey Gates

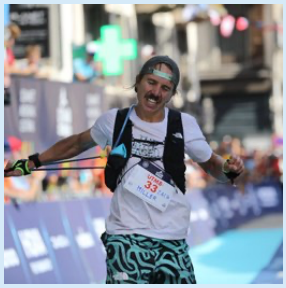
Ultrarunner, Photographer, Every Single Street / TransAmerica Creator

Background

Rickey Gates is a former elite trail runner turned adventure creator whose Every Single Street project — running every street in San Francisco over 46 days in 2018 — went viral and generated coverage in the New York Times, National Geographic, and international media. His TransAmerica run linked the Atlantic and Pacific coasts on foot. These projects expand the cultural definition of what a runner can be and do, attracting creative, urban, and adventure-seeking audiences who would not be drawn to traditional race formats. His aesthetic photography and literary approach to running narratives give him a distinctive voice in outdoor adventure media that few trail runners have achieved.

Ranking Justification

Gates represents the adventure-running provocateur who uses running as a lens for storytelling and creative expression. His audience includes journalists, urbanists, and travel writers outside typical trail running media targets. His Every Single Street specifically attracted people who had never considered running-as-exploration. His participation conversion is lower than direct-path runners, but the demographic expansion — into urban, creative, multicultural audiences — represents exactly the growth trail running needs to avoid demographic stagnation as an aging participant base.



#15 Awareness · #20 Participation

NA — Both Lists

Zach Miller

The North Face Athlete, UTMB Resilience Symbol

Background

Zach Miller became globally known through one of trail running's most dramatic moments: at the 2017 UTMB, his shoe sole separated with miles remaining, yet he continued racing without it. He did not win — François D'Haene won — but his refusal to quit was filmed and viewed millions of times, crossing from trail running into mainstream sports media. He continues to race at elite level, returning repeatedly to UTMB and competing across North American ultras, embodying the resilience culture that defines trail running at its most compelling. He has been featured by The North Face as a central brand ambassador for authenticity and mental toughness narratives.

Ranking Justification

Miller's 2017 UTMB shoe story is one of trail running's few genuinely viral moments — content that crossed into mainstream sports media and general social media sharing. For participation, his resilience narrative speaks to injured runners, people who have DNF'd, and those who fear failure — a counternarrative to "if you can't win, don't try" that removes a specific barrier to participation for a meaningful demographic. His participation rank is lower than awareness because the shoe story was a one-time viral event rather than a sustained participation-driving platform.



#16 Awareness · #16 Participation

NA — Both Lists

Jeff Browning

Bronco Billy — Elite Masters Champion, 31 Career Trail Race Victories

Background

"Bronco Billy" Browning is a 50-something ultrarunner with 31 career victories whose primary influence comes from making aging look not just survivable but triumphant. Competing at elite level well into his 50s — against athletes half his age at Western States, Hardrock, UTMB, and dozens of other majors — Browning has become the unofficial patron saint of the 40+ demographic, which per industry data is one of the fastest-growing segments in trail running participation. Based in Bend, Oregon, he is a sponsored Tailwind and Hoka athlete and has been profiled in Outside Magazine and Trail Runner Magazine.

Ranking Justification

Browning's balanced #16 position on both lists reflects the specific demographic he has unlocked: older runners who feel left behind by age-related performance decline. Trail running's emphasis on completion over competition and its culture of age-group achievement welcomes older athletes — and Browning is the most prominent living proof that a 52-year-old should not only dare to sign up for a 100-mile race but might actually podium. The 40+ demographic represents both trail running's fastest-growing participation segment and a high-value commercial segment, making his demographic targeting simultaneously a participation driver and economic growth driver.



#17 Awareness · #15 Participation

NA — Both Lists

Timothy Olson

2× Western States Champion, Transformation Coach

Background

Timothy Olson won Western States 100 in 2012 and 2013, setting a course record of 14:46:44 in 2012 that stood for five years. His story has a powerful personal dimension beyond athletic achievement: growing up in a difficult family environment, he struggled with substance abuse before finding transformation through ultrarunning. This redemption narrative has been told across multiple media platforms and resonates with a demographic — people seeking radical life change through physical challenge — that has become an increasingly significant growth segment for trail running participation.

Ranking Justification

Olson's personal transformation narrative is a participation conversion tool precisely because it is not a performance story. "Running saved my life" speaks to people who are not athletic, not competitive, and not drawn by aspirational performance — but who need the idea that movement can be genuinely transformative. His coaching business deploys this conversion story into actual participation results: athletes who come to him not to race faster but to use running as a framework for personal change, who then become trail runners and remain active because the activity has genuine therapeutic meaning for them.



#18 Awareness · (Not in Participation Top 20)

NA — Awareness List

Geoff Roes

Western States Course Record Holder (2010), Alaska Mountain Runners Founder

Background

Geoff Roes was one of the defining runners of the "golden era" of American ultrarunning (roughly 2008–2014). His 2010 Western States course record of 15:07:04 stood as one of the great individual performances in ultra history. His rivalry with Kilian Jornet and Anton Krupicka during this period defined the narrative arc of American trail running's emergence as a globally competitive discipline. After injuries forced his competitive retirement, Roes built Alaska Mountain Runners — a coaching and community platform based in Juneau, Alaska — serving athletes who want to run in some of North America's most spectacular and challenging wilderness terrain.

Ranking Justification

Roes' influence is primarily historical — his 2010 WS record and the competitive era he defined created an aspirational template for a generation of trail runners. His coaching business has converted that historical credibility into ongoing participation growth through direct athlete development. His lower current-year rankings reflect a reduced public footprint, but his contributions to the foundational competitive mythology of American trail running remain essential context for understanding how North American trail running earned global credibility during its emergence period (2008–2014).



#19 Awareness · #14 Participation

NA — Both Lists

Candice Burt

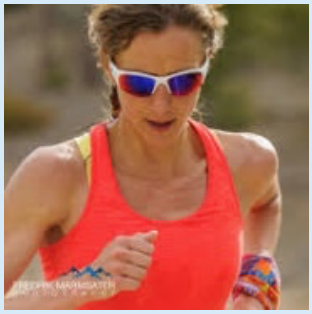
Destination Trail Founder — Bigfoot 200, Tahoe 200, Moab 240

Background

Candice Burt is founder of Destination Trail, a race series that includes the Bigfoot 200, Tahoe 200, and Moab 240 — multi-day stage racing events that expanded the definition of trail running participation at its extreme end. Her events emphasize experience, landscape immersion, and personal adventure over competitive timing, making them among the most accessible extreme events in terms of psychological profile. Burt is an accomplished ultrarunner who has completed all of her own races. Her events have attracted participants from road running, hiking, backpacking, and adventure sports communities who would not typically identify as trail runners.

Ranking Justification

Burt's Destination Trail events created a participation category — multi-day stage ultra racing in spectacular landscapes — that did not meaningfully exist before she invented it. The Moab 240 and Tahoe 200 have attracted mainstream media attention, generating awareness that flows into participation as runners from adjacent outdoor communities discover that trail running encompasses not just 100-mile races but multi-day wilderness traverses. Her #14 participation rank reflects the concrete participation infrastructure her events provide to a growing adventure-running niche.



#20 Awareness · #5 Participation

NA — Both Lists (Participation Dominant)

Krissy Moehl

Ultra Runner, Author — Running Your First Ultra, Coach, Chuckanut 50K Race Director

Background

Krissy Moehl is a former professional trail runner, two-time UTMB champion (2003, 2009), and author of Running Your First Ultra (VeloPress, 2015) — the definitive entry-level trail ultramarathon guide in North America. The book is notable not just for its practical content — training plans, race selection, gear guidance, nutrition — but for its explicitly welcoming tone: written for people who have never run an ultra, may never have run a trail race, and need both tactical information and psychological encouragement. Moehl also runs a coaching business and directs Chuckanut 50K in Washington state. She has been involved in the community as coach, mentor, race volunteer, and elder presence for over two decades.

Ranking Justification

Moehl's dramatic inversion — #20 Awareness but #5 Participation — captures the essential dynamic of participation-first influence: building the on-ramp. Running Your First Ultra is the most direct participation recruitment tool in North American trail running — a book written specifically to answer "how do I actually start doing this?" and structured to move the reader from curiosity to 50K finish line. Her coaching business multiplies this impact through direct athlete development. Her relatively modest awareness ranking reflects a profile that operates almost entirely within the trail running community rather than reaching outward to mainstream or crossover audiences.



#8 Participation (Participation List Only)

NA — Participation List

Sally McRae

Elite Runner, @yellowrunner Coach, Badwater 135 Champion

Background

Sally McRae (also known as @yellowrunner) is an elite professional trail runner and running coach whose social media platform — 253,000+ Instagram followers — is among the most engagement-dense in trail running. A former professional volleyball player turned trail runner, McRae has won the Badwater 135, podiumed at Western States, and competed at elite level for over a decade. She is notable for sharing not just victories but injuries, failures, DNFs, and the full complexity of a high-performance running life with rare openness. Her coaching business serves athletes from first-timers to competitive elites, and her content specifically targets women in the 30–50 demographic who are considering trail running for the first time.

Ranking Justification

McRae's #8 Participation and absence from the Awareness Top 20 captures a specific and valuable influence type: the digital community builder whose follower depth exceeds her follower count. Her 253K Instagram followers engage at rates substantially higher than most athletes with larger audiences — her posts generate genuine community response, not passive consumption. Her coaching business has directly placed hundreds of women on trail start lines who would not otherwise have been there. She is the most prominent example of a participation influencer whose primary tool is community formation through social media authenticity.



#17 Participation (Participation List Only)

NA — Participation List

Meghan Laws

Masters Trail Champion, Longevity Role Model

Background

Meghan Laws is an elite masters trail runner who has become one of trail running's most compelling longevity advocates. Competing and winning at the masters level in events ranging from 50K to 100 miles, she demonstrates with consistent results that women's performance need not decline sharply with age — a message directly counter to mainstream athletic culture and powerfully relevant to trail running's fastest-growing demographic. She has been featured in Trail Runner Magazine and iRunFar for her masters results and her advocacy for older runners entering or returning to the sport.

Ranking Justification

Laws' #17 Participation rank reflects a specific and underappreciated influence mechanism: demonstrating that trail running is a sport for life, not just for the young, and specifically for women over 45. In a sport where the 40–60 female demographic is the fastest-growing participant cohort, a dominant masters competitor who is visibly available and community-engaged is a participation trigger of documented significance. Her relative absence from the Awareness list reflects a profile that operates within the trail running community rather than crossing over to mainstream media.

CHAPTER 7

Global — Individual Profiles

The following profiles cover individuals appearing on the Global lists who have not already been profiled in Chapter 6. For figures profiled in Chapter 6, their Global ranking is noted within their Chapter 6 entry. Profiles below are ordered by combined Global Awareness rank.



#1 Global Awareness · #3 Global Participation

Global — Both Lists

Kilian Jornet

Skyrunner, Mountain Athlete, NNormal Co-Founder, Environmental Advocate

Background

Kilian Jornet Burgada (born October 27, 1987, Sabadell, Catalonia, Spain) is the most decorated trail and skyrunning athlete in history. He has won UTMB four times (2008, 2009, 2011, 2022), Western States once (2011), Hardrock 100 five times, and the Zegama-Aizkorri mountain race eleven times. He holds FKTs for the Matterhorn, Mont Blanc, and Everest (twice in one week in 2017 without supplemental oxygen). In 2022 he co-founded NNormal with Camper, departing Salomon after 19 years. In 2025, he completed "States of Elevation" — linking 72 U.S. peaks above 14,000 feet in 31 days, covering 3,197 miles and 403,690 feet of climbing. His Instagram following exceeds 1.9 million — the largest of any trail athlete globally.

Ranking Justification

Jornet holds #1 Global Awareness because his achievements consistently generate mainstream international media coverage that reaches beyond any running community. His Everest FKT was covered by mainstream media in 20+ countries. His States of Elevation in 2025 was covered in the New York Times and National Geographic. On the participation side, the correlation between his competitive dominance and UTMB's 240% growth during his peak years (2008–2022) is the most compelling macro-level evidence in this study of an individual athlete's role in global event growth. As NNormal co-founder, he now has a commercial brand extending his participation influence into the gear market.



#12 Global Awareness · #1 Global Participation

Global — Participation Dominant

Michel Poletti

UTMB Co-Founder — Creator of the World's Largest Trail Running Series

Background

Michel Poletti, along with his wife Catherine Poletti, co-founded the Ultra-Trail du Mont-Blanc (UTMB) in 2003 in Chamonix, France. The inaugural race had 700 starters; the 2025 World Series encompassed 55 events in 28 countries with over 800,000 race starts. What began as a grassroots mountain loop became the most consequential organizational force in global trail running history. Poletti's vision — combining authentic mountain running culture with professional race organization — attracted global participation and spawned imitators on every inhabited continent. In 2021, UTMB entered a strategic partnership with the IRONMAN Group, providing institutional infrastructure for global expansion. Without Poletti's specific vision, UTMB does not exist.

Ranking Justification

Poletti holds #1 Global Participation because the evidence is overwhelming and direct: 800,000 race starts in 2025 across a platform he created from nothing. No other individual in the history of trail running has created more finish lines, more participation infrastructure, or more scalable participation growth. His #12 Global Awareness reflects the degree to which UTMB's awareness footprint is attributable to the institution rather than the individual — a founder's dilemma in which the brand has eclipsed its creator. This should not obscure the reality: without Michel Poletti, UTMB does not exist.



#2 Global Participation (Participation List Only)

Global — Participation List

Catherine Poletti

UTMB Co-Founder — Operational Architect of the UTMB World Series

Background

Catherine Poletti is the co-founder and operational architect of UTMB alongside her husband Michel. While Michel has often been the public voice, Catherine has been the organizational force that made the vision executable at scale — managing logistics, volunteer coordination, international partnerships, and the systematic expansion of the UTMB World Series across continents. Her operational leadership created the model for professional trail race organization that has been adopted globally. She was instrumental in the IRONMAN partnership negotiations and in managing the political complexities of the World Series's expansion into existing race ecosystems in Asia, the Americas, and Oceania.

Ranking Justification

Catherine holds #2 Global Participation because a complex multi-continent race organization requires both vision and execution — and the person responsible for execution at UTMB is Catherine. Without her operational leadership, the 55-event, 28-country World Series is impossible to manage at its current scale. She deserves separate recognition from Michel because the roles are genuinely distinct: he provided the vision; she built the machine that made the vision real. Ranking her separately — rather than as "the Polettis" — reflects the report's commitment to attributing influence to specific individuals whose specific contributions can be identified.



#4 Global Awareness · #11 Global Participation

Global — Both Lists

Emelie Forsberg

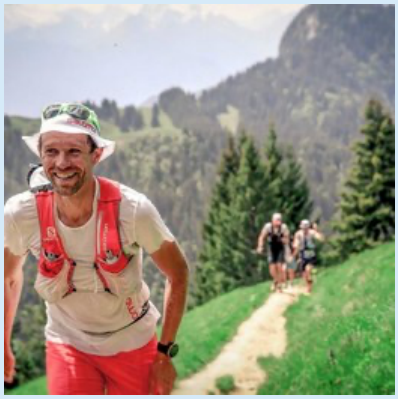
Skyrunning Champion, NNormal Co-Founder, Environmental Advocate

Background

Emelie Forsberg (born November 29, 1986, Sweden) is a trail and skyrunning champion, partner of Kilian Jornet, and co-founder of NNormal. She won the Mont Blanc 80K and Ultra Pireneu 100K among major victories across a decade-long elite career. Her Instagram account (@tinaemelie, 317,000+ followers) generates exceptional engagement rates driven by authentic content about training, mountaineering, family life, and environmental advocacy. Her NNormal co-founder role gives her a brand platform extending her influence beyond pure athletic performance. She competes across trail running, ski mountaineering, and alpinism at elite level.

Ranking Justification

Forsberg's #4 Global Awareness rank reflects a social media presence that is unusually authentic and integrated across multiple demographics: trail runners, skyrunners, ski mountaineers, environmental advocates, and parents of young children. Her content is not performance-first — it includes family life, nature appreciation, training reality, and environmental messaging — which broadens her audience beyond the typical trail running profile. Her participation influence is concentrated in European women's trail running, where her authentic multi-dimensional persona is a particularly powerful participation model for women who do not see themselves fitting the "elite runner" archetype.



#5 Global Awareness · #7 Global Participation

Global — Both Lists

François D'Haene

4× UTMB Champion, UTMB Speed Record Holder, Burgundy Winemaker

Background

François D'Haene (born July 6, 1985) is the most successful UTMB competitor in history, winning four times (2012, 2014, 2017, 2021) on four starts. A French winemaker from Burgundy, he also won Hardrock 100 in 2021, breaking the record; holds the UTMB speed record (19:01:32, set 2017); and set the John Muir Trail FKT in 2017. He is a national hero in France — the world's largest trail running participation base (~12.5 million runners, trail running ranked #1 activity). He continues to compete at elite level into his 40s. His combination of athletic dominance, French national identity, and the romantic narrative of the winemaker-champion has made him a uniquely compelling public figure in European trail culture.

Ranking Justification

D'Haene's #5 Global Awareness and #7 Global Participation reflect his massive influence in the world's most important trail running market. Four UTMB victories by a French competitor generates domestic mainstream sports coverage that would not occur for a non-national champion. In a region where trail running is already culturally embedded, that national hero effect is a potent participation driver. D'Haene's consistency — four starts, four wins — creates a narrative of mastery particularly aspirational within French sporting culture, where athletic excellence is celebrated as a cultural value, not merely a sports achievement.



#8 Global Awareness · #15 Global Participation

Global — Both Lists

Mira Rai

Nepal's Trailblazer — From Maoist Army to Mont Blanc 80K Champion

Background

Mira Rai's story is one of the most extraordinary in all of sport. Born in rural Nepal, she joined the Maoist Army at age 14 during Nepal's civil war. In March 2014, wearing $4 shoes, she won her first trail race. Sixteen months later, she won the Mont Blanc 80K in her first major international competition, beating the course record by 20 minutes. National Geographic named her Adventurer of the Year 2017. She founded the Mira Rai Initiative to train young women from impoverished backgrounds in Nepal as trail runners and has organized multiple races in Kathmandu to develop local participation infrastructure.

Ranking Justification

Rai's #8 Global Awareness reflects a story that crosses every cultural barrier trail running typically struggles with: young, female, non-Western, not wealthy, found the sport by accident in conditions of armed conflict. Her human interest story has been covered by mainstream international media in languages trail running content rarely reaches. Her participation impact (#15) is concentrated in South Asia and among female participants globally — the Mira Rai Initiative has created concrete infrastructure for women to enter trail running in a region where female participation in endurance sport faces significant social and economic barriers. She is trail running's most powerful demographic expansion story.



#13 Global Awareness · #16 Global Participation

Global — Both Lists

Pau Capell

Spain's UTMB Champion — The North Face Athlete

Background

Pau Capell (born 1992, Catalonia, Spain) won UTMB in 2019, becoming one of the youngest champions in the race's history. A TNF-sponsored athlete and university graduate in physical education, he represents the new generation of European professional trail runners who combine elite performance with intellectual engagement in the sport's science and culture. His UTMB victory made him a national hero in Spain and drove a significant spike in trail running participation across the Iberian Peninsula. He continues to compete at the highest level globally and has been a vocal advocate for trail running's environmental responsibilities.

Ranking Justification

Capell's rankings reflect the regional multiplier effect of a domestic trail running hero. Spain's trail scene is among the most developed in Europe — the country hosts multiple world-class skyrunning and ultra events and has deep mountain running traditions in the Basque country, Pyrenees, and Catalonia. A UTMB victory by a Spaniard generates domestic mainstream sports coverage that would not occur for a non-national champion. In a region where trail running is already culturally embedded, a young national champion with intellectual and environmental credibility is a potent participation driver for the next generation of Spanish trail runners.



#14 Global Awareness · #19 Global Participation

Global — Both Lists

Xavier Thévenard

3× UTMB Champion — On Running Ambassador

Background

Xavier Thévenard (born 1990, Champagnole, France) is a three-time UTMB champion (2013, 2015, 2018) from rural France. His record would justify a higher ranking in most systems, but his relatively modest social media presence and the competitive shadow of D'Haene's four UTMB wins place him slightly below the top tier of global influence metrics. His consistent excellence has made him one of the most respected athletes in the sport, and his representation of rural France — far from Chamonix's cosmopolitan trail culture — gives him a specific demographic connection to grassroots French runners who feel that elite trail running has become too urban and commercial.

Ranking Justification

Three UTMB victories make Thévenard undeniably one of the greatest competitors in the sport's most prestigious race. His influence on French trail running participation is real — each UTMB champion creates a domestic visibility spike — but his lower media profile relative to D'Haene and Jornet limits his overall global influence score. He represents the category of elite athlete whose competitive legacy is undeniable but whose broader influence infrastructure has not been built to the same scale as figures ranked above him. His rural authenticity is, paradoxically, both a participation strength and a media visibility limitation.



#15 Global Awareness · #18 Global Participation

Global — Both Lists

Núria Picas

Trail World Champion, Adaptive Athletics Advocate

Background

Núria Picas is a Spanish ultra trail champion whose racing career includes victories at UTMB (2012), Transgrancanaria (2015, 2015), and numerous other major events across Europe and North America. Beyond her athletic record, she has become a prominent advocate for adaptive trail running and inclusive sport practices, using her platform to promote trail running accessibility for athletes with disabilities. She has organized events specifically for adaptive athletes and her public advocacy has opened community-level conversations about accessibility and inclusion that were not previously prominent in trail running culture.

Ranking Justification

Picas' unique contribution is her adaptive athletics advocacy — a dimension of participation growth that is systematically underweighted in conventional influence rankings. By creating space for adaptive trail runners and championing their inclusion, she has expanded the sport's demographic reach in a direction that no other figure on either global list has pursued with comparable commitment. Her rankings may understate her long-term impact: opening trail running to the global adaptive athlete community represents a structural demographic expansion with compounding participation implications over the next decade.



#19 Global Awareness · #8 Global Participation

Global — Both Lists

Jean-Luc Diard

Hoka One One Co-Founder — The Equipment Revolution That Built a Market

Background

Jean-Luc Diard, along with Nicolas Mermoud, co-founded Hoka One One in 2009 after both left senior positions at Salomon. Their radical insight — maximally cushioned, maximally rockered trail and road shoes that departed from every prevailing design assumption — was ridiculed by the running establishment and embraced by ultrarunners who needed to cover 100-mile distances comfortably. Hoka is now a $1+ billion annual revenue brand (owned by Deckers Outdoor Corporation), the fastest-growing major running shoe brand in history, and the footwear choice of a majority of ultramarathon podium finishers globally. Diard's co-founder role at a brand that has directly lowered the physiological barrier to trail running participation makes him one of the most consequential non-athlete figures in the sport's growth.

Ranking Justification

Diard holds #8 Global Participation because Hoka One One's product innovation directly lowered the physiological barrier to trail running participation for a specific and large demographic: older runners, heavier runners, runners with joint concerns, and runners who had been told they were not built for long distances. The democratization of comfortable long-distance trail running that Hoka enabled is a concrete, measurable, and massive participation driver. His #19 Awareness rank reflects the reality that brand founders rarely become public figures — the product has eclipsed the person. But in terms of structural impact on trail running's growth, Diard belongs among the most consequential individuals of the past two decades.

CHAPTER 8

Synthesis — The Future of Trail Running Influence

8.1 What the Rankings Reveal

Comparing the Awareness and Participation lists side by side reveals several structural truths. The most valuable influencers operate at multiple funnel stages simultaneously — McDougall, Dauwalter, and Jornet appear near the top of both their respective lists. The highest-awareness figures who do not appear on Participation lists — Goggins and Itzler — illustrate the limits of reach without specificity. The most dramatic list inversions — Thornley (#11 Awareness / #4 Participation), Coury (absent from Awareness top 20 / #3 Participation) — reveal the systematic undervaluation of participation infrastructure in standard influence rankings.

The global lists amplify this pattern at planetary scale. Michel and Catherine Poletti, with combined UTMB World Series infrastructure producing 800,000+ race starts annually, are #1 and #2 on the Global Participation list while ranking #12 and absent, respectively, from the Global Awareness list. They are the world's most effective trail running participation engineers — and among the least celebrated in mainstream media. This is not a failure of coverage; it is a structural feature of how participation infrastructure works: it operates at ground level, invisible to mainstream media, relentlessly effective.

8.2 The Investment Case for Brands and Governing Bodies

For sponsors, brands, event organizers, and governing bodies seeking to maximize trail running growth, the analysis yields a clear prescription: invest in both awareness architects and participation engineers at different stages and through different vehicles. Awareness investment should prioritize figures with crossover mainstream reach who can introduce trail running to demographics not yet in the sport: women 30–50, urban professionals, multicultural communities, and the Global South. Participation investment should prioritize infrastructure creators: race directors who build accessible events at multiple distance levels, coaches who work with beginners, and authors/coaches who answer "how do I start?" with authoritative, accessible guidance.

The return on investment case for participation infrastructure is particularly compelling. A new trail runner who registers for their first event and has a positive experience will likely run 3–5 more events in their first year, spending approximately $400–$800 on registrations, $300–$500 on gear, and $200–$400 on nutrition and accessories in their first 12 months. A new trail runner created by a race director costs the sport substantially less per acquisition than one created by a national media campaign — and is demonstrably more likely to retain and recruit others.

8.3 Emerging Influence Categories

Three categories of influencer are underweighted in the current lists and likely to grow significantly through 2030. First, TikTok and short-form video creators, whose content reaches younger demographics (18–30) that trail running has historically struggled to attract — a 2026 study found ~33% of TikTok users say the platform motivates sports participation, and 73% believe TikTok makes new sports more accessible. Trail running's spectacular visual environment is uniquely well-suited to short-form video, and creators in this format have not yet been systematically cultivated by brands or governing bodies.

Second, health and wellness influencers whose primary identity is longevity, preventive health, or biohacking — trail running's documented benefits for mental health (reduced cortisol, improved serotonin), cardiovascular fitness, and cognitive function make it ideal content for this audience, which is massive and growing. Third, community organizers in underrepresented demographics — Black, Hispanic, Asian, and disabled runners building trail running communities within groups historically underrepresented in the sport. OIA 2025 data found Black outdoor participation grew 12.8% and Hispanic participation grew 11.8% — the fastest growth rates of any demographic cohort — and investment in community organizers within these groups has the highest untapped potential in the sport.

CORE CONCLUSION: Influence is not a single variable — it is a pipeline. The sport grows when awareness architects and participation engineers work in concert. Ranking them separately reveals which individuals are doing one job, which are doing both, and where the gaps represent the greatest opportunities for deliberate investment in trail running's future. The data is clear: the most underfunded category in trail running influence is participation infrastructure. Race directors, coaches, and community organizers who build and maintain finish lines deserve the same strategic investment as athletes with 1 million Instagram followers.

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