



Meet Hellah Sidibe: The Vegan Athlete Who Ran Across the U.S. in 84 Days

By Megan Edwards
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Mali-born Hellah Sidibe grew up playing soccer before emigrating to the U.S. When visa issues prevented him from joining a Major League Soccer team, he pushed through the disappointment by starting a run streak. He hasn't missed a single day of running since 2017. In 2021 Sidibe ran across the United States to raise money for the nonprofit Soles4Souls, a journey that took him across 14 states over 84 days.

Forks Over Knives spoke with Sidibe about why he started running, his decision to become vegan, and what advice he'd give other [athletes](#) who want to go plant-based. Plus, Sidibe shares his top three tips for how to stay motivated when the going gets tough.

How did your run streak start?

Hellah Sidibe: When I couldn't play professional soccer, I didn't know what to do with myself. Looking back, there are a lot of signs I was depressed. Eventually I got sick of it and thought, "What is something I'm afraid of that I can be in control of?" Running came to mind. My college coach would make us run so much that I wouldn't sleep the night before a fitness test because I was so nervous. Even though there's lots of running in soccer, there's so much going on in a game that you're not focused on the painful part. Taking up running was about me saying, "I'm in control of this." There was no pressure. I planned to do 10 minutes a day for two weeks to conquer my fear. Within the first week, I knew I wanted to do this for the rest of my life.

What keeps you motivated to continue your streak?

HS: All my runs have to be outside, no matter the circumstances. As I started running, I saw more of the world. I saw people who don't have the privilege that I have to move my body, so my mindset shifted. I thought, "Do this for things that are bigger than yourself." It went from a personal motivation to something much bigger. That's when I knew my running needed to support a nonprofit.

In 2021 you became the first black man to run across america. What surprised you about that experience?

HS: America is not a perfect place, and I faced some racism and had tough times in certain states. But 99% of the people I met were good people. I'll never forget this one gentleman who saw me running and said, "You look like you need to eat. I have \$20." I told him that I had my own food, that I just looked depleted because I'd been running across the country to support a nonprofit. I said I could donate his money instead, and he agreed. I ended up raising nearly \$50,000 for [Soles4Souls](#) to help people in crisis get access to quality shoes and clothing.

What spurred you to go vegan?

HS: My fiancée, Belle, asked me to watch [Forks Over Knives](#). I remember sitting on the sofa completely dumbfounded, realizing I would never eat meat again. I made the decision because I was worried for my health, but the more I learned about animal welfare, the more it became an ethical choice.

Do you eat differently when you train for a race?

HS: My diet is a lifestyle, so I don't do anything special when I'm training for a specific event. I eat two cups of oatmeal for breakfast, and it gives me all the energy I need for the morning. I love rice dishes, [pasta](#), beans—you name it. Anything that is whole food, I'm here for.

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What advice would you give to other athletes who want to go WFPB?

HS: Do your own research, and do what's right for you. Even though I went cold turkey on [cutting out] animal products, I would recommend gradually working your way into it. It's also important to eat enough. If you're not eating [enough], you're not going to have energy, vegan or not. Don't just eat salad. Eat well and eat big to fuel your body.

How to Stay Motivated When the Going Gets Tough

Whatever your goals, Sidibe's advice for staying motivated in the face of a challenge will help you keep the dream alive.

1. Find a bigger purpose. "Having a 'why' is the only way I was able to complete the run across America," Sidibe says. "It wasn't for my own ego. All the things that I had to endure, I would think, You're doing it for a nonprofit. Keep fighting for them. When you have a reason, you hold on tight to your goal."

2. Leave room for change. "I give myself permission to quit my run streak every day. If I get out there and if it brings me back to the days where running made me anxious and depressed, I don't put pressure on myself to keep going," Sidibe says.

3. Set manageable goals. "I'm an athlete, so on the first day I started running I could've gone 35 miles, but it would have been a miserable 35 miles," Sidibe says. "I knew that jogging for 10 minutes was 100% attainable. No matter what your goal is, if you work toward it in small amounts every day, it adds up."

For more from Hellah Sidibe, check out his [popular YouTube channel](#), where he shares tips for maintaining a running practice and more!

Ready to get started? Check out [Forks Meal Planner](#), FOK's easy weekly meal-planning tool to keep you on a healthy plant-based path. To learn more about a whole-food, plant-based diet, visit our [Plant-Based Primer](#).