

Epic Win, Epic Ouch: Bartram Trail and the 100 Milers

By Daniel Mallory (and a few additions from dad)

We did it. In June of 2009, 10 Scouts and 2 adult members of Troop 467 backpacked 100 miles of the Bartram Trail in five days, establishing a Boy Scouts World Record.

No scout in the 100-year history of Boy Scouts had ever accomplished a similar feat. Camp Daniel Boone estimated that our portion of the trail's total elevation change was 15,000 feet up and 13,000 down. Not easy and we had a few complications. Francis Gallego got lost for two hours beginning the second day, trail signs and other markers were nonexistent, extra miles were added from wrong turns, one of our "Ranger" guides from Camp Daniel Boone left unexpectedly on day three, and two members of the group, Nate Reineck and Sutton Birch, were evacuated. Nate got Swine Flu on day two and Sutton had vertigo on day three. However, Sutton's return 12 hours later was probably one of the best things that happened. When he returned by car at a service road intersecting the trail, Sutton's mom also brought a huge bag of snacks for everybody! Sweet!!!! After gorging ourselves, Sutton continued backpacking with the group for the remainder of our trek. Impressive.

"Beyond unique" is how I'd describe the trip. It was one of the most physically challenging things I had ever done in my life, besides the half marathon I ran that spring. Mentally, the five days taxed us in several ways including getting lost a few times, trying to find enough water on the trail (we were drinking 1 ½ gallons per day and needed to get off the trail 3 of 5 nights to find water), and barely being able to set up camp and eat before darkness descended on our tired bodies and minds. In fact, twice it was dark when we arrived at our campsite.

The team split between experienced older Scouts (Alex Mountford, Joey Gabianelli, Matt Goldman, Nate Reineck, Reid Midyette, and I) and younger ones (Francis Gallego, Jake Turner, Oliver Davidson, and Sutton Birch) who had only done a few overnights. Despite these challenges and differences, our team functioned well and the group chemistry continued to gel each day. By the end, we were one bonded unit. A lot of teamwork stemmed from our two leaders: Aaron Kala (19 years and technically an "adult") and Tom Mallory (50 years) both of whom attended all of our tough backpacking treks the last few years. My dad also organized and led 6 extensive training hikes starting in December. Only one Scout decided to not pursue the trip.

The order of our hiking formation usually went like this: Joey, the wild stallion and most in shape, in front wanting to set a crazy fast pace. Then Francis next since he was slower and would temper Joey's zeal so that the four younger scouts wouldn't fall behind. Matt was behind Francis to push him to go faster and keep up with Joey as much as possible. Poor Francis was pushed and pulled from two ends. I usually ended up behind Aaron, who had the stride of a giraffe which often caused me to accidentally step on his heels.

One interesting twist on our hike was the two guides. A day before the trip, the 20 year old “Ranger” who was supposed to lead us contracted Swine Flu. The head of Camp Daniel Boone asked two other staff members to substitute for that guide. One of the new guides had just returned from coaching Rock Climbing School over the past week. He found out at 8:00pm the night before we left that he had to go hike a hundred miles over five days. Ouch.

Of course, he probably thought there was no chance these Troop 467 Scouts and a dad would make the entire 100-mile journey. Turns out, these new rangers were not in the best shape and their feet not prepared for this endeavor. They were also clueless about navigating the trail which was not well marked. In fact, we became the guides for them. One of them also carried a 50lb backpack (much too heavy) and smoked unfiltered cigarettes. He abandoned the hike as soon as he could on day three. The other guide barely made it. On the last day, his foot blisters were so bloody and painful, we carried his pack and assisted him walking with his arms holding onto our shoulders.

On day three, we hiked 25 miles. It was the most grueling, intense thing I have ever done in scouting but there were moments of heaven. We hiked 13 miles up another 1,000 feet before descending 3,500 feet to a rendezvous point. Sutton and his mom drove to this spot to reunite Sutton with the group after his 12-hour evacuation. Dad had arranged this rendezvous place and time using a satellite phone. He also surreptitiously planned a surprise lunch at a pizza place. 12 large pizzas were ready when we entered the establishment. Ice cream followed after that. Thank god. We then drove to the Wayah Bald trailhead to begin the second half of our long day. But first, we all laid down in the grass under the cool shade of towering white pines at the trailhead. We fell gloriously asleep for an hour. A serious food coma enveloped us.

After our power nap, the group started backpacking again at 5pm and slogged on for another 12 miles uphill. The last two hours were in darkness so we used headlamps and ate snacks as we trudged onward. When we reached the top of Wayah Bald Mountain at 11pm, a 5,500 foot total elevation ascent, no one set up tents. Everyone just plopped down on the ground with sleeping bags and slept seven wonderful hours. The next morning, we watched an early morning sun above a sea of mist thousands of feet below us.

Although occasional tough situations surprised and hampered us, many aspects were pleasant and exceeded our expectations. Along with the surprise pizza lunch and extra snacks brought by Sutton’s mom, we ate enough to keep hunger in check after burning about 5,000 calories per day. Many views beside Wayah Bald were spectacular. Scaly Mountain also exploded with Mountain Laurel blooms. We had two fun swims; one in a creek on the first day and one in Nantahala Lake on day four. Boy, did those plunges feel good! While the first 48 hours were humid with some sprinkling of rain, the last three days were crisp and clear like Autumn.

One hilarious episode happened at Crabapple National Forest Campground on our last night. No campsite existed on the trail that 4th night so we found this local campground nearby and asked the camp director if we could pitch our tents. He was nervous about us staying and said, “120 girls from 14 to 18 years old were camping that night.” He further explained in his

Appalachian accent, “The girls are well fed, well rested, and inquisitive!!” To prevent any unwanted boy/girl interaction, he posted dads as guards around our campsite to protect us from the overly “inquisitive” teenage girls. He was concerned about the girls raiding us!! Hysterical. All we wanted was sleep, and we did.

The last day was epic. As the rock band Metallica’s title song says, “The Day that Never Comes.” But it did joyously for us as we descended from the mountains, like an airplane coming in for a landing with a full view of the valley below. We hiked 12 miles mostly downhill that day, the last half seeing the huge Nantahala Gorge. Our excitement at the bottom of the mountain at our final stop was enough to intimidate a Silverback Gorilla. We threw our backpacks off, hollering and hugging. Even quiet and composed Francis Gallego let loose with arms skyward, saying, “We did it. Veni Vedi Vici.” Francis, who had the least athletic and scouting experiences of the team, was a marvel of grit and calm during the trip.

Dustin from Camp Daniel Boone picked us up and started heading back to Camp Daniel Boone. But first, some diversions. To celebrate our victory, we lunched at Juke Box Junction, similar to Johnny Rockets, having a slaphappy good time (until we heard that Michael Jackson died), and then went to see the movie Transformers 2. After five days of arduous hiking and being around sweaty guys, the big screen shot of Megan Fox on the motorcycle looked so good.

Just like the 54 Miler last year at Camp Daniel Boone and Philmont the year before, the 100 Miler was an amazing experience in so many ways. It’s almost hard to believe that we made it with all the complications during the trip. 100 miles in exactly five days. I’m serious, it had been 11am when we left on the Saturday to start and exactly 11am when we threw our packs down on Thursday. But the trip felt more like three weeks than five days with everything we encountered.

Camp Daniel Boone staff were amazed at our feat, just as they had been when we completed the 54 Miler in 3 ½ days. No group had completed the 54 Miler in 5 days during the last 20 years. They also had no records going back to the 1930s of any group doing it in 3 ½ days.

Dan Rogers, the camp director, had suggested this Bartram Trail idea after witnessing our 54 Miler accomplishment. He told my dad, “You have to do something really big before they ‘Eagle Out’ next year.” Certainly, we met or exceeded his expectation.

We also raised money prior to this trip without any parent involvement. It was catchy to say our 100-mile trip commemorated the 100 years of Scouting. We raised several thousand dollars and gave it to a new inner-city troop named Troop 2010. Saye Sutton and Terry Tucker, two adult Scouting leaders, had created this troop of Atlanta kids, some of whom were homeless. The Georgia State House of Representatives and Governor Sonny Perdue heard about the trek and the fundraising for Troop 2010. They both honored the 100 Milers with a Georgia State Resolution and a signed award from the governor.

An epic win, epic ouch.