

Brutal...But Beautiful

Ten Months of Training for the Badlands

By Kat Ackerman, Jewish Educational Alliance

My husband, David, had this great idea to hike the Maah Daah Hey Trail in the North Dakota Badlands. I was the agreeable wife that joined him. We trained for ten months and thought we were prepared for the trip, but nothing can prepare you for one of this country's most unique, rugged and breathtaking terrains. Theodore Roosevelt called it "a place of grim beauty." There were majestic mountains, expansive plateaus, jagged peaks, rolling prairies and a few river crossings, two of which were across the Little Missouri River. We started on our journey on Memorial Day and our mortality did come into question a few times throughout the five days and 106 miles.

Day one, we got into our Airbnb around midnight and were up at 5:30am, hoping our host was going to drive us an hour and a half to the trail head. She did! Her name was



Leigh, she was amazingly kind and we will be friends for life. She took us for coffee and Danish and she offered to pick us up at the end of our hike and find us a place to stay.

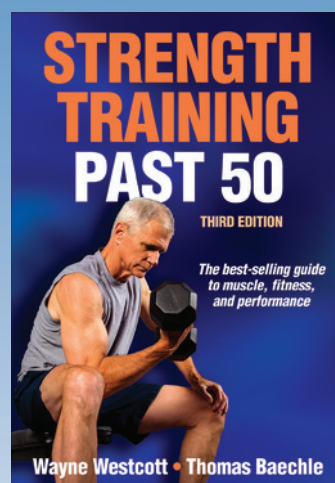
We started at a place called Sully Creek, and headed 19 miles to a rustic camp site called Wannagan. The first river crossing was the Little Missouri. I made Dave carry me across (I wasn't getting my feet wet this early!). There was so much horse manure on the trail it was hard to dodge and the smell was horrible for the first few miles. Suddenly, we came upon a herd of wild horses! Well worth the smell.

We entered the Southern unit of Theodore Roosevelt National Park and the start of the Badlands. The steep climbs, drop-offs and switchbacks were horrendous. It was so windy and cold; I thought at times I might be blown off the mountain. About half way up I nearly stepped on a rattlesnake, the first of six snakes that day! But, the panoramic view at the top was breathtaking. We headed down, then had another crazy climb to a beautiful high plateau. On the plateau we came upon our first and David's favorite experience with hundreds of Bison. They are huge and intimidating as they stand up and stare you down to protect their young. They truly are majestic creatures.

Following this we went back down to a prairie we nicknamed prairie dog alley. The prairie dogs were so cute as they yelled at us with their little noises. Next, we climbed through a forest where we saw antelope, which was very cool as I've never seen one before. At this point, we looked down and discovered ticks all over our legs! Yikes! Freaked me out! David proceeded to pull four out of my hair. I quit counting at 20! Thus began our regular half-hour tick checks for the next four-and-a-half days.

We were surprised by a water crossing that was not on the map. We started climbing again with only a few more miles to the camp when I had my first breakdown. The snakes, hard climbs, freezing windy weather

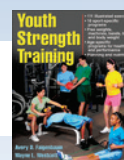
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and the ticks were about all I could take. I hurt so bad, everywhere; I was nauseous and felt sick. Finally we saw the camp and tears came to my eyes. We headed down to camp where there was a camper with people! I informed my husband, the man that brought me to this hellish place, that I would be sleeping in that camper! I didn't.

Our camping neighbors were Brian and Pam from Montana. They did two things to lift my spirits: they shared a beer with us and Pam gave me her hiking poles, which I believe saved me. I don't think I could have finished the trek without them. I will be forever grateful.

And that was just the first day!

Day Two of My Maah Daah Hey Trek: I froze the first night on the trail and didn't sleep much. But I started the next day with a different outlook. We had a 22-mile hike ahead of us and I was determined to conquer it! David wrote in our journal, "Kat started out on a mission." We started a steep climb with amazing views. I don't know what rose and fell more, the terrain or our heart rates!

Around each switchback we got a view of the Little Missouri River in the distance.



Again, it was brutally windy and cold, but now I had poles to keep me steady. We actually hiked 12.5 miles before lunch. There were no humans and very few animals, but the views were breathtaking.

I played head games with my body on day two. Over and over I told my gluts and lats to help my legs, triceps and deltoids. I spoke to lost loved ones, asking their spirits to guide me. I used the negative energy of anxiety, channeled it to my muscles to continue to endure. I used Pilates breathing and core engagement to get me through the day. I must say, I was a fierce female on day two! We entered Elkhorn Camp just before sunset.

Day 3: We started at Theodore Roosevelt's Elkhorn Ranch, desolate but it was cool knowing he lived and ranched there. We needed to cover 20 miles, including a river crossing and a rough, narrow traverse of Devil's Pass. This was the day we came to understand why they are called the "Badlands."

Right away we had several brutal climbs straight up! The most breathtaking vistas you could ever imagine were the saving grace. The descent also had amazing views of the valley and riverbed. Before reaching the river we crossed a mile-high stretch of grass loaded with ticks where I came very close to a breakdown, but the good news - I flew through it and was waiting for Dave at the river's edge. Before fording the river we watched three Pronghorn antelopes dancing and climbing the river bank. The current was much stronger than we anticipated; I would have been washed away if it weren't for my poles. The cold water felt amazing on our first aid-needing feet, which by now were covered in PAINFUL blisters! Beginning the hike again was excruciating, but as time went by we went numb to the pain.

As we started another climb into the Badlands, we hoped for no ticks and soon came around another steep switchback to see the post indicating the midway point of the Maah Daah Hey Trail and listing the names of the coordinator and crew that constructed the trail. Bless these amazing people! There was a metal box with a log book and items people have left (like TP, band aids). The first entry, dated 1999,



belonged to Curt Glasoe, the trail's founder. Since its inception, only 210 groups have logged and finished hiking the Maah Daah Hey. David and I were only the third group this year. More people climb Mt. Everest!

We sat, overwhelmed with emotion, and enjoyed our last breathtaking view of the river basin below. We talked about my brother, Mike; how close we were, how adventurous he was and how he would have enjoyed making this journey with us (I lost him to a car accident in 1992).

Leaving the mid-way point led us to the majestic Devil's Pass, a narrow sliver of land with panoramic views of steep, rugged badlands on either side. We were on top of the world! The highlight of the day was that my phone worked and we were able to talk to our daughter Skylar. She was so nervous for us, but also so proud.

After a few wrong turns during the day, we were ready to get to camp. This was the first day the temperature began to climb, which meant we needed more water and were out; hot, tired and really beat up. We came around a corner to a view of Magpie Camp but to our dismay all we saw was a grassy field with a post to tie horses. Uncertain of our survival, we came in to camp and were relieved to find the well. Dave started pumping and nothing happened! Dave's melt down! "We're done, we are going to die here" he said! I encouraged him to keep going and after what seemed like an eternity, brown water began to come out. I'd never been happier!

A lot of highs and lows on day three; we saw very little wildlife, no humans, my phone was left on and down to a precious 3%. Nevertheless, 58.2 miles were completed!

Day 4: Heading to the last camp, Bennett, we really weren't sure we could make the 24-mile trek as we were so dehydrated, wind burnt, sun burnt and completely depleted. David was starting to get infections in both his feet. Unfortunately, this day was not filled with beautiful vistas and wildlife, as were the previous days. Day four was the day of Grit and Guts. There would be no water source or shelter from the 95 degree heat. We packed extra water in bags leftover from our meals and duct-taped them shut. Yes, Dave drank hot spaghetti water. We also made our meals for the day before leaving Magpie. We had basically gone from "Freeze" to "Fry" in three days. Very few people make it from Magpie to Bennett Camp in one day, so we definitely had our work cut out for us.

We hiked through a dry gulch with petrified wood, fossilized trees and eroded lignite. Then Dave's pack strap broke! Luckily, I was able to fix it and he said it felt the best ever. We then had a long climb to a gumbo-covered flat where we hiked several miles, again being attacked by ticks under the scorching sun. We had hoped to see much wildlife here. Unfortunately, all we saw were a mauled antelope carcass and a dead chipmunk.

After crossing a rim of a broad tableland at MP75, we made a decision to take Cottonwood Trail, opened in 2005, which led north cutting off one mile, rather than stay on the more travelled trail. We chose wrong! We thought we would be traveling by a creek on flat terrain. Instead, we hiked for an eternity straight up a hill covered in dense sagebrush. We emerged on top of a scorching mountain ridge. When we sat down to rest, pick ticks and clean injuries, I could not stop my tears. I prayed, demanded my muscles to move, spoke to my mom, brother, father and dear friend Gregory who I lost just the day before we started our trek. But we regrouped and found ourselves traversing a narrow ridge with a breathtaking view; some of the trail was 12 to 20 inches wide, next to a plummeting cliff. I am willing to guess that few people have been on Cottonwood Trail since 2005.

We came into Bennett Camp silent in our thoughts. I was several yards behind Dave and not sure if I would even make it, with tears flowing again. Dave threw his pack off and sat about 50 feet away from me. We were both silent for the next few minutes before heading to the well, praying for water. It was amazingly refreshing! With a much depleted First Aid Kit, we doctored our feet, bites and cuts. We had saved our best meal for this night and watched a beautiful sunset; only to crash back to reality contemplating what to do about tomorrow. The coyotes howling right outside our tent all night helped us decide!

Day 5: Happy 20th Wedding Anniversary to us! This was the day of sheer, unrestrained emotion. The fear of stopping to rest a day and being done answered our decision to persevere and finish The Maah Daah Hey in five days! We started by treating our feet with the last of the First Aid supplies. After leaving the trail to Bennett Camp we began an imposing climb up to the China Wall, considered one of Maah Daah Hey's most scenic sections; but you sure have to work for it. It did not disappoint. There were all these cool formations that looked like animals - or we may have just been delirious by then! The descent was every bit as steep as the climb.

Back in a valley with giant sagebrush, under sweltering heat, we started to get lost. We came upon a very intimidating herd of Bison that did not want us to pass. We faced confusion from many fake bison trails and having taken a wide girth around them. I got the compass and map out and we plotted a course on our own. The wrong trails and excess hours with the sun beating down on us in “Death Valley” (my term) caused me to throw my pack off, sit down, cry and declare, “I’m calling 911.” David calmly told me to get up...we had no service!

We had several miles of climbs and switchbacks up to the dry Valley of Corral Creek in the relentless sun; often wondering if we were lost. We ended on a high plateau called Long X Divide. This stretch saved us with beautiful views in every direction and very few ticks. The descent off the plateau had breathtaking views of the Badlands. About a mile to the finish a Jackrabbit popped out right next to us, as though to congratulate us.

The sun was setting and we were wondering if our ride, Airbnb Leigh, would be waiting for us. On top of the plateau I’d left a message and text letting her know we were coming in late, not knowing if she received either. When we came upon the camp she was waiting. We still had to climb a ridge to the final marker. Once again tears were flowing! This is the Maah Daah Hey Holy Grail. At the post my soul mate pulled out a box with a beautiful necklace he couldn’t afford 20 years ago. Happy 20th Anniversary!



Trekking 106 miles in the North Dakota Badlands in five days! Beautiful but brutal.

If you’re considering doing a long, strenuous hike (or some other challenging or adventurous activity), please see me and I’ll help you come up with a routine to get prepared physically, as well as mentally. Over the past 30 years I have participated in and trained people for 5K’s, Marathons, Triathlons and Adventure Races. Contact me at (912) 355-8111 or fitness@savj.org for more information.