

Training for a 50/20 Hike

(2007 Update)

Preliminary discussions with several Troops have suggested that this year's hike will have an unusually large number of hikers attempting to complete all 50 miles. It is important for everyone going for this distance to understand that this is a performance event, and to therefore seriously consider undertaking a training program starting well in advance of the Hike. The following suggestive comments are from Dr. Bob Klein, SM-111, who has completed four 50/20 Hikes over the past five years:

If there is a magical formula to completing the entire 50 miles, it's training. Meaning a *lot* of hiking. Past experience has shown that the *average* hiker who hasn't trained can make from 20 - 25 miles. Those who are particularly determined, and who are also reasonably athletic, can make it up to about 35 miles. While it is possible to go further without training, doing so incurs an increasing risk of injury or being "wiped out" for weeks. The bottom line being, if you are unable or unwilling to properly train, you should limit yourself to a 20 or 25-mile distance, max.

For many years, my personal training consisted of doing daily 4.3-mile hikes for the three months leading up to the hike (doing the math, you can see that I was starting just after Thanksgiving). "Daily" meant every available day, so minus Scout trips, snowstorms, or heavy rain. I would also occasionally throw in a 10-mile practice hike, but not on a consistent basis. Although I was reasonably successful, routinely hitting 40 miles or more on the ASH's, I found it difficult to push through to 50, and I made it only once from 1995 - 2003 (in 2002). In late 2003, however, I decided to change my approach, as follows: In January, I did one or two 4.3-mile or greater hikes per week. In the first half of February, I did one 10-mile hike per week (in my case, hiking from my house to National Airport, then taking the Metro home). In the last half of February, I did one 20-mile hike per week, and in March, I would do one last "tune-up" hike of 25 miles the weekend before the ASH weekend. As a result, I felt a lot stronger during the last third of the last two ASH's, and finished the Hike each year from 2004 through 2006. In my mind, extending the training hike lengths was critical. That is, doing fewer hikes but longer distances was a lot more important than hiking on a daily basis. Most of the other hikers who have finished the Hike undertook similar training, have lifestyles that involve a lot of walking, or are otherwise very athletic with extensive running and/or biking exercising.

There are obviously some other issues, the first being adequate sleep. The 50-Milers will be up for between 18 and 22 hours on Hike Saturday. So it's critical to get a good night's sleep on both Thursday and Friday nights.

Next is equipment. Decent footwear is very important. It has to be reasonably stiff but not too heavy. The socks should be a "wicking" type, and should be changed at every support station. Some 50-Milers also change their footwear during the Hike. Your practice hikes should be done wearing the socks and footwear that you intend to wear on the Hike. Layering of clothing is critical - wearing or carrying needless clothing (or heavy daypacks or fanny-packs) for many miles weakens you for no value, and yet you need to overdress late in the hike to ward off the cold, when your body's natural reserves are close to or at rock bottom. It is routine for me to wear shorts and T-shirts during the daylight hours, and be dressed in winter clothing after 8 pm. We have had daytime highs as high as 75 degrees, and nighttime lows near 20 degrees, and a 30-degree temperature range through the hike is typical. The need for versatility in clothing is one of the reasons why we have escorting vehicles carrying personal gear.

Quality food intake is also important, especially the day before the Hike and late during the Hike. "Carbo-loading" on Thursday and Friday night is a good idea. Avoid eating candy bars and drinking sodas during the Hike.

Next, and maybe most importantly, hikers have to learn to minimize their rest-breaks. It is routine to see a group of Scouts hike strong for 25, 30, 35 or even more miles, and then decide to sit down and rest for 20 or 30 minutes - at which point, they're completely stiffened up and done for. In contrast, when I pull into the support stops, I sit down, change my socks, add or delete clothing as needed, shift my gear bag to the support vehicle that is heading to the next rest stop, grab something to eat and drink (that I eat and drink as I'm walking away), thank the volunteers, and leave. I shoot for 3 minutes, and I never stay more than 5 minutes unless I'm making a bathroom stop - and even those are as quick as I can manage.

Finally, it is important to recognize that there is a mental component to the Hike. For me, once I hit about 35 miles, pretty much everything hurts, plus I'm increasingly suffering from lack of sleep. Almost everyone else is in similar straits. Without trying to make it sound too macho, you either have to deal with it, or call it a day. The idea of 5 to 8 more hours of this sort of pain is more than a lot of folks can handle. This is one of the reasons why we encourage fresh hike partners for the last 15 miles (the Bluemont loops), and why we arranged the Bluemont loops in the first place (they're boring, but you get a support stop and verbal encouragement every 55 to 75 minutes, when you really need both).

Bottom line again, if you want to do 50 miles, **train** for it.

- Dr. Bob