

Now *That's* Real Cross Country

Brian Stark's Cross Country Run Covered the Entire United States, and Along the Way Revealed the Good Side of Human Nature

by Susan Dawson-Cook

After college, most people follow predictable career paths. But Brian Stark, now a seventh grade English teacher in Vail, Ariz., had a different idea back in 1998, when he took a hiatus from teaching to run from Delaware to California. According to Brian, around 120 people have completed cross country runs since 1850, and he was the third person to make such a passage largely unsupported by support vehicles or accompanying runners.

As Brian prepared to share his story with an audience at the Fleet Feet running shop, I watched him kneel on the floor in front of a map of the United States. Since nearly 10 years had passed since his journey, I expected him to draw a straight line from east to west representing an approximate route. Instead, he carefully carved out a sinuous line with a black Sharpie pen; his line meander through mountains, follows rivers and defines

every large-scale nuance of his route.

He delivered his story to a group of wide-eyed listeners in a voice similar to the one he uses in his book, "Getting to the Point in a Dozen Pairs of Shoes" – conversational and casual, as if he has known us for years. He described colorful characters he met along the way, places he stayed and the massive quantities of food he devoured to keep his energy up so he could run more than 20 miles per day.

His adventure began in March 1998, on a cold, rainy day at Cape Henlopen State Park, Delaware. Friends and relatives gathered as Brian prepared to begin his run, occasionally retreating to their cars for warmth. After photos and celebration, he ran 12 miles in the rain, reaching a town where there were no available hotels. He plodded onward,



Brian Stark begins his cross country run March 8, 1998 at Cape Henlopen State Park in Lewes, Delaware Photo by Brian Stark

covering a total of 21 miles that day, wet, hungry and exhausted.

He described that first night as his darkest hour. Wanting to give up, he encountered a house in the middle of nowhere and approached the door, hoping the resident would empathize with his condition. When a man opened the door, Brian told him he was running cross country alone, begged for a night's rest in any available barn or shed.

The man said "no problem," drove him down a narrow road into dark forest, which Brian found a bit terrifying at first, until they pulled up in front of a \$1.5 million dollar lodge that was to be his "barn or shed." As Brian sat in the cozy lodge before a fire, his eyes filled with tears of gratitude for the man's generosity. When the man invited him to his house for dinner, Brian knew that from then on nothing would stop him. That colorful evening with the man and his wife made him imagine many warm encounters to come and the stories he would have to share.

Brian elected to take the scenic route rather than to follow interstates, as most other runners had done. To see the country and avoid traffic, he chose the American Discovery Trail, 6,300 miles of established trails, linked to metropolitan area trails, that follow country roads. Brian could pass through remote, beautiful parts of the country, while

visiting cities such as Washington D.C., St. Louis, Denver and San Francisco. Parts of the trail were paved, parts dirt and, in places, the trail was even underwater. Where the trail was poorly marked, he often got lost and spent hours reading maps and trying to figure out where to go.

Running 20-plus miles daily would be difficult enough wearing only light-weight clothing, but Brian had to carry all his essentials on his back. Wearing a hip pack that weighed around nine pounds, he carried only water, light snacks, a one-and-a-half pound sleeping bag, a Gore-Tex running jacket, ground cloth, shirt, shorts, socks, mittens, sun hat, bandana (his only first-aid kit), bleach (to purify water) comb, toothbrush and toothpaste, trail decal, and paper. When he traversed the remoter parts of Colorado, Utah and Nevada, he sometimes had to pack extra water, which made running more challenging.

A woman asked Brian how he had the stamina to run so much nearly every single day for 238 days. "If you don't have what you need, you keep going," he says, shrugging his shoulders.

Before starting, Brian purchased 12 pairs of Saucony running shoes and mailed them to small town post offices across the country. That way he could pick up a fresh pair of shoes every 500

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The view from atop Crag Crest National Recreation trail near Weir and Johnson lake at the western edge of the Rocky Mountains. Photo by Brian Stark



Brian Stark runs through Garden of the Gods near Colorado Springs on a hot August day. Photo by Brian Stark

waiting for him at a nearby restaurant. Upon arrival, the manager offered him a pitcher of lemonade and water and a meal and then transported him to a comfortable hotel. These unexpected displays of generosity often seemed to find him at the most opportune moments.

Crossing a state line was one of the best parts of the journey, Brian said. Entering a new state gave him a great feeling of accomplishment. But with each state he crossed, more difficulties awaited, especially since services became sparser as he traveled west. On the heavily developed East Coast, services were usually available every 10-12 miles. In the central states, towns became increasingly sparse; every 20-30 miles in western Kansas and sometimes more than 100 miles

from the Rocky Mountains to the California coast.

While Brian was running in

Kansas, a preacher pulled off the road and asked him if he needed anything, then drove all the way back to the closest town to get him water. Eight days later, the same preacher stopped to give him water in eastern Colorado, while traveling back to Kansas from a Las Vegas convention. After he handed him the water, the man asked permission to pray for him before he went on his way.

Meandering through Leadville and Buena Vista and other high-altitude locales in Colorado, Brian's route was far from direct. He ran more than 800 miles in Colorado alone, often carrying extra water weight and struggling from bouts of light-headedness induced by the altitude. Brian felt right at home in Leadville, a town famous for molybdenum mining, where he encountered a group of runners preparing to compete in the Leadville 100, a 100-mile trail running race.

Brian found his run across Utah to be the most challenging. He had anticipated purifying water from the Colorado River, not realizing that the Kokopelli bike trail would be 1500 feet above rather than alongside the river. In August, 100 degree temperatures weren't uncommon and he needed water more than ever. Desperate for a plan, he visited a bike shop and inquired about water options on the trail. The merchant said some of their people would be supporting a group of cyclists and could place three gallons of water at intervals for Brian while they were out assisting the other group.

In Moab, Brian took a few days off,

hitchhiking to Flagstaff to surprise his girlfriend, Lydia, with a visit. His mother and girlfriend took turns supporting him throughout much of Utah and Nevada, as he crossed miles where services were often only available every 100 miles. Later, friends from Indiana showed up to keep him company.

After traversing Nevada and eastern California, Brian finally reached the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco, only 48 miles from his final destination. Instead of rushing to finish, he took a side trip to Los Angeles to audition for the Price is Right television show. Walking away with 12 stuffed teddy bears, two trips for two for Hawaii and Canada and \$9,000 in cash, Brian returned to San Francisco to complete his cross-country journey.

When he reached Point Reyes National Seashore, his girlfriend, Lydia, his mother and friends were waiting for him. It had taken him 238 days to run from coast to coast — about seven and a half months. He finished his run by taking a dive into the ocean, dragging Lydia along. Soaked and triumphant, he proposed, and his girlfriend soon became his wife.

Type A over-planners could learn a thing or two from this athlete turned adventurer, who traversed 13 states, often not knowing where he would eat or find shelter along the way.

When he was running late into the night, lost or his feet were sinking three feet down in the mud, he still managed to maintain a sense of humor and to believe that somehow it would all work out. His "go with the flow" attitude made what could have been a stressful endurance contest into a life-changing adventure, one in which he met people of all walks of life in the most unlikely places, completed a journey that most of us can barely imagine. *W*



Brian finishes his run on October 31, 1998 at Pt. Reyes National Seashore, Limantour Beach. Photo courtesy Brian Stark

miles or so. At these small town post offices, where the attendants usually knew him by name upon arrival, he would pick up his shoes, along with letters and care packages from family and friends.

Even when he wasn't running, he kept himself occupied. Reporters eager to speak with him along the way often scheduled interviews with him and whenever possible, Brian would visit area schools, sharing tales of his adventures with students.

"People were the best part of the trip," Brian said. Many went out of their way to help him and each person he met was another colorful brushstroke in an adventure he will remember for a lifetime.

He told us about Walt, whom he encountered in Missouri, making a return trip from Oregon to Washington D.C., after having traversed the country once already, towing a coffin-shaped box decorated with anti-war messages to protest the development of nuclear weapons. Even after the man was struck by a car, he merely taped his load back together and plodded onward.

On good nights, Brian would rest in a comfortable hotel with a swimming pool and HBO; more often, he spent nights sleeping behind convenience stores, in the home of a friend of a friend or on a bed of hay in a barn loft.

In Ohio, the connections between people he stayed with became so sinuous, he often wasn't sure which friend or relation had landed him each overnight stay. He once lodged with a couple who had been married 15 years. They made him feel very welcome, he said, serving him a home cooked meal and telling him stories of their courtship. Their home was unheated and so run-down that duct tape held down strips of linoleum on the floor, yet their living room overflowed with a collection of more than 900 videos.

One night in Indiana, after having run more than 30 miles, he had just plucked more than 100 ticks from his body when a Miata pulled over and the driver told him people were