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COURTESY PHOTO

Bob Behrens in a triumphant moment atop Mount Katahdin on the Appalachian Trail in 1998.

10/17/2008

### Hiker suffers setback, still fulfills lifelong dream

By RAECHEL MANLEY/Great Bend Tribune

He started as he finished. Twenty years after his completion of the Continental Divide, and 10 years after his Appalachian hike, Bob Behrens took the final trek in the Triple Crown of the hiking world, hiking the last stretch on a broken leg and injured ankle.

Back in 1987, Behrens started on an adventure that would span the course of two decades, only to be stopped short three days into a 2,928-mile hike of the Continental Divide. His severely sprained ankle would cause him to have to try again another year. Try he did, completing the the hike in 1988.

Then in 1998, Behrens and fellow hiker Frank Burley trekked the Appalachian Trail comprising 2,198 miles of townships and wilderness. The pair did not start out together, but found a common stride along the journey, finishing among only 10 percent of hikers who began the trail that year. Through snow and rain, they reached the summit of Mount Katahdin, the northernmost point of the trail, and their finish line.

In April of this year, Behrens's wife, Ruth, drove him to meet his hiking partner, Jolene Koby-Burley, at their starting point, the Mexican border near Campo, Calif. From there the duo hiked through the rugged terrain of California, Oregon and Washington. Behrens, known by his trail name "Rascal," and partner "JoJo Smiley" hiked upwards of 30 miles per day. They took in amazing sights of nature's beauty and built strong trail friendships with fellow hikers. Koby-Burley is the wife of Frank Burley, with whom Behrens hiked the Appalachian Trail in 1998. Frank had intended to hike the trip as well, but was diagnosed with cancer and was unable to do so.

Koby-Burley started out slowly, building her endurance on the 2,663-mile hike, while Behrens started strong. "But that's the importance of having a good trail buddy, to support you when you need it," Behrens said. Which he found out the hard way towards the end of their five-month hike.

Most people aren't motivated to hike seven miles, let alone more than 7,000, but Behrens isn't most people. This unassuming, 57-year-old Great Bend native laughs and jokes about the effort and sheer will it took to make it the final eight days and 130 miles of his latest hike.

Hiking for months and only days away from completing a lifelong goal/dream, the unexpected happened. Behrens, while traversing a downhill path, stepped on a rock that had been used just moments before by his hiking partner. The rock gave way, causing Behrens to fall backward while his foot stayed rooted in the path.

He fell off the edge of the path, sliding down the hill, grabbing at whatever vegetation was within reach. Pain shot up his leg as he heard what sounded like a gunshot, and he realized something was very wrong.

After shouting out to Koby-Burley, the two were able to get him back on the path and assess the damage. No bones were sticking out, but Behrens's ankle had already begun to balloon. Being in a remote location, several days away from any road, Behrens had a choice to make. He could stay where he was and wait for his partner to hike out and send help, or he could call upon every ounce of determination in his body and hike the last 100-plus miles to finish what he had started decades before. To the disbelief of doctors and several staff reporters, Behrens continued the hike to finish on Sept. 16, 2008.

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Once home, he confirmed with X-rays what he had suspected out on the trail, the noise he had heard was his fibula breaking in two places. In addition to the broken leg, tests found that he also tore the ligament in his ankle which holds the fibula and tibia bones together on top of the ankle joint.

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Now home and recovering from surgery, Behrens sits with a cast on his left leg, happy to show photos of his past trips and make plans for the next adventure - exploring Alaska next summer for two or three months with his wife. With more than 15,000 hiking miles under his belt, perhaps he'll continue the family hiking tradition which started with his children, Jason, 35, and Jennifer, 32, when they were younger, hoping to do a three-generation hike of the Appalachian Trail in the future.

According to the American Long Distance Hiking Association, Behrens is among fewer than 100 people in the world who have completed all three of the long-distance hikes that comprise The Triple Crown.

To see photos and read journal entries of their Pacific Crest hike, visit [www.trailjournals.com](http://www.trailjournals.com), enter JoJo Smiley (Koby-Burley's trail name) in the search window, then explore the 2008 Pacific Crest Trail information.

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**Nimblewill N** 10/27/2008 12:17pm

This is an amazing story, well written. Specifically, it's about the incredible grit of one Robert "Rascal" Behrens (my dear friend). More specifically, it's a story about the human spirit, the desire, drive, and fortitude--how man is capable of enduring, against all odds, unbelievable hardship and pain. This story should have been picked up by the AP. But alas, that didn't happen because it's positive and upbeat.

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**Sean & Raechel M** 11/11/2008 10:58am

As I was speaking with Bob and his wife Ruth, I kept thinking "Could I do it? If I had no other choice, could I find that kind of determination to continue on?". I admire his ability to see a long term goal (20 + years) and complete it. His is an amazing story, and he is a great man.

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