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Still hilltoppin': WKU grads complete hiking 'triple crown'

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Former Western Kentucky University students Savannah and Garrett Anderson celebrate atop Maine's Mt. Katahdin after completing the 2,194-mile Appalachian Trail in 2019. They followed that trek with "thru-hikes" of the Pacific Crest Trail and the Continental Divide Trail to complete the three major U.S. trails that make up the Triple Crown of U.S. long-distance hiking.

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Those Western Kentucky University students who complain about having to hike uphill to get to class could get a dose of humility from a pair of WKU graduates: Garrett and Savannah Anderson.

The Andersons, who met as undergraduates at WKU and married shortly before Garrett graduated in December of 2018, finished in October the 3,028-mile Continental Divide Trail to complete what the American Long Distance Hiking Association recognizes as the "Triple Crown" of hiking.

Trekking together, the couple covered a total of some 7,800 miles on their trips across the Appalachian Trail (2019), the Pacific Crest Trail (2022) and the CDT to earn their spots among only about 600 people recognized since 1994 by the ALDHA for completing the Triple Crown.

Not bad for a couple that jumped on the Georgia-to-Maine Appalachian Trail in 2019 with little previous long-distance hiking experience.

"We were kinda looking for an adventure to go on after we graduated," said Savannah, who graduated from WKU in 2016 and had been working in the human resources field while Garrett finished his degree in recreation administration. "We thought the Appalachian Trail would be a good adventure to go on."

An unlikely adventure for a couple that had done little more than recreational hiking when they started their AT journey in Georgia in March of 2019.

"The longest hikes we had done prior to starting on the Appalachian Trail were probably eight to 10 miles," Garrett recalled.

"We did not know what we were getting into," Savannah said.

As a result, Garrett said, the 2,194-mile hike was "really, really challenging."

"The trail was full of roots and rocks that were hard on your feet," he said.

"We joked that we pushed through

out of pure stubbornness."

And the terrain wasn't the only challenge faced by the Andersons.

Savannah earned the trail nickname "Snake Eyes" for her ability to spot snakes on the trail, and Garrett said they saw "at least a dozen" black bears on their journey.

It took the couple 200 days to complete the AT, an exhausting experience that left Savannah in no mood to tackle another long-distance hike.

"It wasn't our original goal to do the other trails," she said. "After we finished the Appalachian Trail, I didn't want to do another hike."

But the couple's love of the outdoors and sense of adventure won out in the end, leading them to tackle the other two Triple Crown trails.

"We like challenging ourselves," Savannah said. "We saw other people (on the AT) with better gear and in better shape. We wanted to see if we could get better at it."

So the Andersons started saving money and preparing for their 2022 trek on the 2,653-mile Pacific Crest Trail that traverses Washington, Oregon and California.

They completed the trail in just over five months, reaching a personal-record hike of 40.5 miles on one 16-hour day.

"We spent two years training and doing research into nutrition and gear," said Garrett, now 28. "We had an absolute blast, but it was still hard."

Not so hard that the couple was deterred from trying the final leg of the Triple Crown: the Continental Divide Trail that traverses the Rocky Mountain states of Montana, Idaho, Wyoming, Colorado and New Mexico.

Despite challenging weather that saw the Andersons encounter snow and large hail, they completed the CDT in just over four months.

Hiking through the CDT and the other trails was made easier, Garrett said, by fellow hikers and other people

they met along the way.

"So many complete strangers showed us such kindness," he recalled. "A couple in Colorado invited us into their home. Other people gave us food and water and asked if we needed anything.

"It restores your faith in humanity."

It also restored the couple's desire to continue hitting the trail. They are now living in Lexington and studying nursing at the University of Kentucky, but their medical vocations may have to take a back seat to their newfound avocation.

"We've become hooked," said Savannah, 29 and a Lexington native.

"We're trying to work our lives around hiking.

"There are so many trails out there that we haven't done yet. We just have to find the time and the money. It's really a healing experience to get out in nature."

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