

The Ultimate Trail Ride: Man Makes Historic Journey Across the Country

by Sharon Doddroe

Worn jeans, Stetson hat, Durango boots, needs a shave, rides a horse, carries a Colt 45 . . . sounds like a cowboy . . . until you mention the cell phone. But take away modern-day technology (he has a GPS unit, too) and you really can see the Wyatt Earpish resemblance. However, 24-year-old Matt Parker isn't in search of horse rustlers or bank robbers, he's seeking something much more philosophical as he rides his horse across the United States. A little fame may also come with the territory, as Matt could become the first person to complete the American Discovery Trail (ADT) on horseback.

Not a small feat, the ADT can be grueling. Matt will travel 5,000 miles in his coast-to-coast quest crossing barren deserts, almost impassable mountain ridges and rocky plateaus. He'll forge through thick forests and traverse deep water, mud, and snow. Stretching from California to Delaware, the trail crosses 15 states and is the only trail of its kind in the country. Meant for hikers, cyclists and equestrians, no motor vehicles are allowed. The series of trails also runs through cities and connects national, historic and recreational trails passing more than 10,000 culturally significant sites. Matt began near Sacramento, California, and plans to end near Lewes, Delaware, by the end of this year. This is the second year of his journey. He rode 1,500 miles from California to Utah from May to September last year before returning to Michigan to rest for the winter. Last month, he resumed his

"I wanted to test myself to the absolute breaking point."

trip and is confident he will become the first person to cross the ADT on horseback.

Right now he's in Colorado. He's straddling the saddle of his five-year-old Missouri Fox Trotter, cooking a meal over the fire, or catching some shut-eye in his sleeping bag. He could even be battling a mountain lion—he's done that. But what he is probably not



Matt Parker and Danny Boy in Utah before leaving on the ADT this May. Matt rode 1,500 miles on the trail last year.

described city kid into cowboyhood.

In the brutal Nevada desert, he would then battle record-breaking temperatures. "Everything melted, including my willpower," he said. Riding about 20 to 30 miles per day, he was more aware of *Smokey's* physical limitations than his own. Sleeping for only five to six hours a night, he set up camp and contemplated the trail, his horse, his challenge and his life. Physically, he was exhausted, but the mental stress was worse. He worried about *Smokey* and as he traveled through the Nevada desert his maps were no help. The roads were unlabeled and he was traveling through areas that hadn't been crossed in a century. "I relied on luck, intuition and a lot of prayer," he said.

He also had the comfort of knowing that somewhere out there across the miles of sand that there would be an oasis of hay and water. Matt's dad, Bill, has logged 10,000 miles in his truck, dropping hay and water in areas where provisions were scarce. Both have cell phones (insisted upon by Matt's mom) and the exact positions of the drops were located using global positioning units. Even if Matt's dad wasn't present at a drop, it was an emotional reunion, "I could see his tire tracks. Just knowing that he had been

stretch of rock and desert leading to Moab would no doubt be a challenging trail. By the time they left in late August, Lindgren had arranged to loan Matt a mule to ease *Smokey's* load and a dog to ease Matt's loneliness. *Danny Boy*, the mule, loaded with 150 pounds of supplies would become crucial to the trip. *Boo*, an Australian shepherd/Border collie mix put the spark back into Matt's brown eyes.

Back on the trail he had high hopes about making it across the Rockies before snow, but he was forced to cut the trip short near Monticello when *Danny Boy* needed a two-week rest to heal an infected ankle. Realizing that his time frame to cross the Rocky Mountains had been diminished, he made the strategic decision to stop. In late September, Matt and *Boo* went home to Michigan to celebrate the holidays with family while *Smokey* and *Danny Boy* rested at Matt's old friend's, Ole Lindgren.

The Winter

Matt retired his cowboy boots for hiking gear over the winter working in Bivouac's, a sporting goods store in Ann Arbor. It was important to spend the holidays with his family. "I'll probably spend Christmas with my family for the rest of my life," he said. When he wasn't working, he wrote and "just sat around." In the back of his mind was the thought that by Christmas next year, he would be trotting onto the Delaware shore, the first person to cross the ADT on horseback. "What I am most proud about is that I am doing what I said I was going to do. A lot of people just talk about what they are going to do. I'm doing it." When May rolled around he was refreshed as he headed to Ole's place in Utah to retrieve *Smokey* and *Danny Boy*. Outfitters Surplus had donated a Trailmax packsaddle for *Danny* and Matt had been given a new riding saddle as a gift. It didn't take long, however, until his determination would be tested again, before he even started on the trail.

First, he had to make the difficult choice to

and *Danny Boy* left picking up where they had left the trail-near Monticello, Utah.

The Next 3,500 Miles

For the first nine miles Matt walked *Little Face* and *Danny Boy* because the horse had never led. As they headed through Geyser Pass, severe thunder and lightning welcomed them causing another delay. And physically, well, his fastback saddle hasn't turned out to be conducive for distance. But Matt was emotionally strong and more confident now carrying the experience of the first thousand miles.

During this interview, he had just crossed the Colorado border. Chatting on the pay phone in Gateway, population 50, he was at the Trading Post café, relaxed, yet excited

THE MISSOURI FOX TROTTER

The Missouri Fox Trotting Horse was used by 19th century Ozark Mountain settlers who favored the horse for its easy riding, sure-footedness, and durable mount. The horse's distinctive fox trot stride, a rhythmic, diagonal gait where the horse walks with its front legs and trots using its hind legs, creates a sliding motion which allows for a more comfortable ride. The horse, able to travel five to eight miles per hour, was a favorite among country doctors and lawmen of the past who valued the horse's endurance and ability to travel tough terrain. Today, the breed is used by forest rangers and cattlemen and is considered an outstanding trailriding and endurance horse. There are approximately 50,000 Missouri Fox Trotting Horses in the United States.

Height: 14 to 16 Hands

Colors: Bay, black, roan, brown, buckskin, chesnut, grey, palomino, sorrel, tobiano, overo, white, cremello, perlino, champagne



and anxious about what the Rocky Mountains would bring. He was more concerned about the weather and terrain than the very real chance that he could have another run-in with a bear or a mountain lion. "It will be beautiful, but high altitudes are always dangerous. And then there's the