

Hello fellow mad folk,

This is the official trip report for my 2021 FKT of the River to River Trail.

I decided to take on this challenge back in August of 2020 during the COVID lockdowns. Needless to say, isolation can lead to a whole lot of self-reflection, which is how this idea came to be. I was feeling very anxious, I was missing my home, and more than anything, I was sick of being inside.

I also had a big birthday coming up this year and knew I wanted to do something special to celebrate. I'm not a milestone birthday kind of guy, but it felt like this was the perfect opportunity for me to manifest positivity and excitement about the years ahead. I also felt like I needed to test myself after such a trying year. I was fortunate enough to remain employed and healthy throughout the pandemic, but the whole experience had definitely taken its toll on me. I didn't quite feel like myself and I was not a fan.

So, I decided to take a hike! A long, recorded breaking hike, but a hike nonetheless; and I could think of no better place to do it than in the beautiful Shawnee National Forrest. The woods that raised me.



Day 1

After arriving at the E-Town trail head at about 5:30am, taking a quick pre-hike picture, and getting my last pre-hike hugs, I was off at 5:32am. I headed west on Locust St. until the bend, then up and out of town. I was on my way.

Each step took me a little further away from the still waters of the Ohio river, and a little further away from the doubts and fears that seemed to chase me. Once off the road and on the trail, I was hit with an old yet still familiar smell of damp Shawnee limestone.

Early miles seemed to fly by despite some of the sloppiest conditions I've ever seen. The thick mud was like quicksand and deep craters stomped out by horses, donkeys, and mules soon became unavoidable. More unavoidable were the many caravans of equestrian enthusiast that shared the trail. I was less enthused, although they were all very friendly and smiled as they passed. I took my lunch in the Garden.

All sorts of wildlife were out and about: opossums, lots for whitetail, LOTS of squirrels, one very skittish turkey, and countless others.

As the day went on, I was logging miles and feeling great. Darkness fell, but I felt good enough to catch a few more miles and decided to continue. That worked just fine for a while...then came the Mistake.

Around mile 42 I came across a creek that was wider and deeper than any I had seen during the day. After walking up and down the bank looking for a way across, I was left with two options: ford the river in sandals and set up camp on the other bank; or carefully cross a very tricky rock path that was just under the water's surface, then continue on to my marked camp at mile 45. I decided to cross.

Unfortunately, due to the miles, the darkness, or just plain clumsiness, my back foot slipped halfway across and dunked itself under the water. No biggie. I'd just wade over to the bank, set up camp, let my shoes dry out overnight, then get back at it in the morning. A solid plan had it not been for the early morning rain. My shoes were under the fly so they didn't get any wetter from the rain, but they sure couldn't dry themselves out.

Milage 42.74



Day 2

It was still sprinkling by the time I had planned on leaving, so I was delayed by about an hour. At approximately 6:00am, with **WET** shoes, and damp socks, I packed up camp and headed out. I made it to Eddyville without any issue, but my feet were definitely not happy. I knew this was going to be an issue down the line. No time to think about bum feet though, I had guests to entertain!

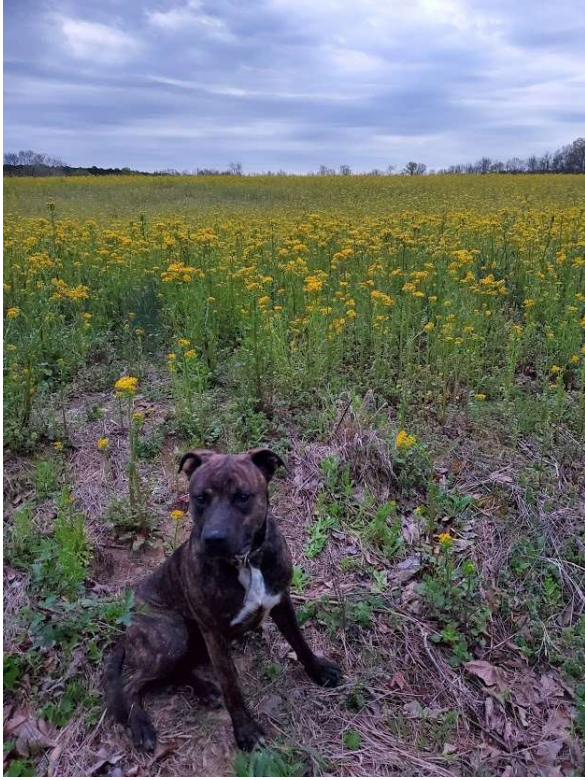
On my way out of town, heading west on Washington street, two four legged friends ran up to say hello. I had my headphones in and was listening to music at a relatively high volume, so I have to admit I was a little startled when I realized they were near. That faded quickly when I realized these pups were of the friendly sort. I chatted with them for a time as I kept marching, but eventually returned to my music and fell back into the zone. About 2 miles later, now deep in the woods, what do I see but a flash of brown zip past – they had followed me!

At this point I wasn't sure what to do. They had followed me quite a way and I couldn't turn back without giving up on my FKT goal. Even if I did, I wouldn't know how to get them home since they had no collars or other identification. They did seem to know the trail though, so I assumed they'd done this before and would eventually break off and head home. 8 miles or so later and they are both still trotting along right behind me.

After climbing the first hill before the Tin Whistle, travelling through the whistle, and then climbing the second hill, I realized my pups were missing. I sat at the top of the hill to wait and eventually the male (Buck) made his way up the hill to my feet, but the female (Bri) wasn't with him. I continued to wait until another hiker appeared to tell me that she had taken off down the creek at the bottom of the first hill. I was pretty worried at this point – she was so far from home – so, I decided to double back and look for her. A quarter of the way down the second hill, Bri came through the whistle, stopped at the bottom, and starred up at me. I called to her but, as I'm sure Bri wasn't her actual name, she didn't come and instead decided to turn tail and book it back down the hills. I followed but by the time I reached the bottom, she was no where in sight. I called and called, but she never came back. It was a very sad experience.

Buck and I continued on without Bri and eventually found we were faced with another creek crossing in the dark. I knew I couldn't make the same mistake as last night, but due to low miles I also wanted to keep going. After searching for a way across without much success, I began to get frustrated. I was just about to call it and change into my sandals when, Buck began guiding me back into the woods. I followed and eventually we popped out a few yards down stream and to my delight, he had led me to an easy crossing! Not only that, but the crossing led to an ACTUAL campsite (with fire rings and everything!). Not wanting to pass up such a cozy opportunity, I decided to give up on bagging more miles and made camp instead. Plus, Buck worked so hard that day and he was really tuckered out, so it seemed like the right choice. We shared some beef stroganoff and then cuddled up for bed – me in the tent, and Buck outside under the fly.

Milage 79



Day 3

Woke up to rain once again, and once again hit the trail an hour behind schedule. At this point my feet were not happy and it was a struggle to get them into my shoes. When able, I forced myself to move at a pretty quick pace in order to numb them off, which seemed to work well enough. Back on trail at about 6:10am.

It was a road heavy day and I was optimistic about picking up some miles. Unfortunately, the roads were just as hilly and the concrete really wasn't doing my feet any favors. I passed Goddard Crossing at around 7:30am with 85mi showing on Strava. This was a little disheartening because I thought I was nearly 7 miles past midway, and with my feet in such bad shape the sign definitely hit me hard. Nevertheless, Buck and I kept pushing and eventually got a lift in spirits when we came across a spigot in the Ferne Cliffe backpacking campground. We stopped and enjoyed an early lunch.

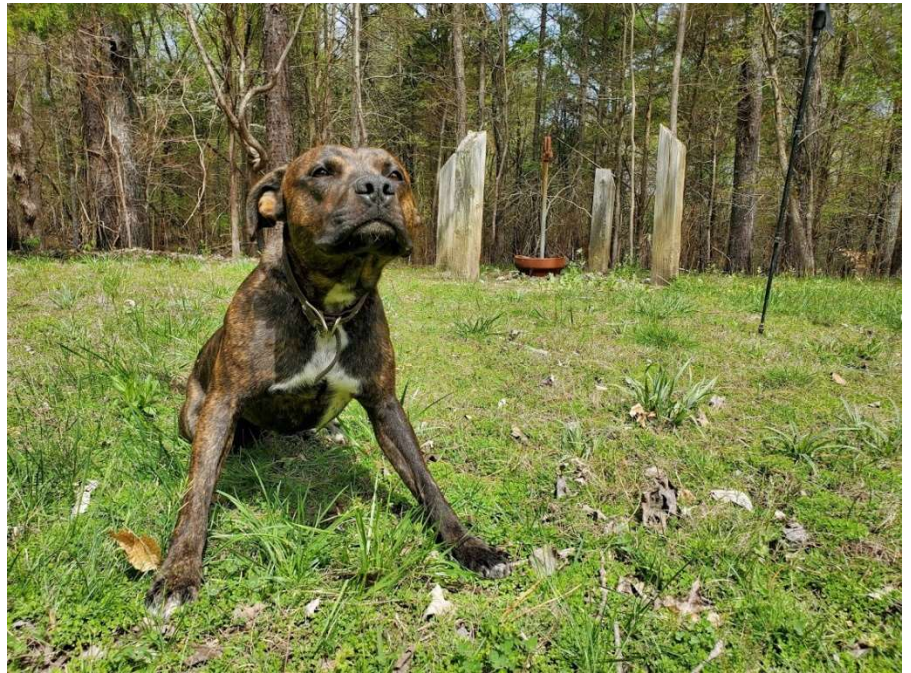
I took my shoes off and could see the damage that had been done to my feet. Big blisters and a very angry big toenail were bulging under my socks – I chose to keep them on to try and hide how bad it was. Getting my shoes on after our break was extremely difficult and getting moving was like the slow start of a locomotive. I filled up one last water bottle and chugged along, full steam ahead and moving slow.

We somehow managed to put some decent miles between us and that water spigot, but by the time we were exiting the Panthers Den, I wasn't sure I could keep going. Seeing how far behind I was, I decided to push it in an attempt to get to Giant City before calling it a night. With about 2 miles still left to go before the GC boundary, I began worrying that I wouldn't make it and started looking for places to setup camp. Either fortunately or unfortunately, I had zero luck, so I had to keep going. I almost considered sleeping in the Antioch cemetery that night, and had it not been for lack of water, I might have done it. I made it to Camp Desperation at approximately 10:15pm, skipped dinner due to exhaustion, struggled out of my shoes, and texted my Dad to tell him I was done.

Shortly after, I received texts from my Mom and fiancé consoling me and expressing admiration. It was nice, but it also burned me up inside. I felt like I was letting them down, and so close to the finish line! But I knew there was no way to continue with my feet in the shape they were in, so I tried to burry the bad thoughts and get some sleep. Not a single Z was caught.

I don't know if it was the rock that was underneath me, the pain in my feet, or the torment in my head, but I COULD NOT fall asleep. At 3:00am, lying there miserable, with nothing to do, I decided I might as well eat something. I shuffled around to find my food and stove, set it up just outside the tent and started to boil my water. As I waited, I was hit with an antonymous urge and realized I hadn't "relieved" myself since Sunday. Out into the cold I went. A few yards away from my tent, I stood there squatting for several minutes as I expelled 3 days of Larabars and Gu packs. After a while, tired of looking down at a literal pile of s***, I decided to look up for a better view. Now, I don't know if it was the lack of sleep, the lack of nutrients, or just the twisted logic of a man that desperately wanting to finish what he started, but after seeing those stars, forever suspended in the night sky, I knew I had to keep going. The dichotomy of that situation – a sky full of stars and a pile of s*** – it was exactly how I felt. The pain, the doubt: it was all s***. Eventually, it would be gone, but the sense of accomplishment I'd have for completing what I set out to do? That would last forever.

Milage 122.59



Day 4

I knew if I were going to continue, I'd need to do something about my feet. I'll spare everyone the gnarly details, but needless to say several hours of surgery were needed to clear my toes, heels, and pads of blisters. Once that was taken care of, I bandaged my feet, packed my gear, and retracted the white flag. I was back on the trail around 6:45am.

It was a very slow start. The locomotive from the day before was damn near out of steam, but I pressed on. It was a chilly start and it would remain relatively cool the rest of the day. I also continued to have stomach distress which would later add a number of detours to my journey. I had plenty of supplies left, but given the way I felt, if I could find a public trail side restroom, I planned on using it.

Even though I was in pain, once I entered Giant City I was overcome with happiness. This is what I consider my "home" tract. These were the woods I grew up playing in. These were the woods where I'd hike with friends, or sneak off to with girls. These were MY woods. In full disclosure, I did get lost in MY woods for a brief time and was quite peeved; but the bad blood soon dissipated and on my way out of their boundaries, I gave them a tear and token of appreciation for all the memories.

Next stop was Makanda for a bathroom emergency, and then back on road duty. Like Day 3, this was a road heavy day which was the last thing my feet or my head needed. Every stretch felt sooooooong. In preparation for the final push, Buck and I stopped for a big lunch and pack adjustment. After the Cedar Lake section, just before heading down into Alto Pass, we found a little patch of grass with some shade and a trash can. We made our lunch and shed as much weight as possible before taking off one last time. A fellow hiker caught up to us on the road and asked how far we planned on going. He seemed surprised (and unconvinced) when I told him "all the way to the Mississippi". He broke off in Alto and appeared to check into a B and B. I was jealous.

The trek through Bald Knob/Clear Springs was uneventful and lonely, but coming out at Inspiration Point sunset might have been the highlight of the trip - it was unbelievably beautiful. Big Muddy Levee turned into Levee, and I felt like I was walking in the twilight zone. A never ending road... When the sun fully set, my old friends returned, and the last few miles were spent looking up.

It was a struggle, but at approximately 10:16pm on Thursday, April 15th, I reached the Grand Tower trail head and hit "stop" on my Strava app. Mission accomplished. Time for food.

Milage 164.22

(turns out I needed to throw on a few extra for good measure)



Disclaimer: I was unable to find any published rules that stated using public restrooms would result in an FKT being classified as supported. I checked for a restroom in Giant City (without success) as well as Makanda.

Update: We were able to locate Bucks owners and get him returned. Even better, Bri had made her way back the night she ditched us and came with the family to pick up Buck. It was a very happy ending.

