

Last Man Standing

Dear Mason,

It was a punch in the gut. I felt abandoned.

The injury to your Achilles hadn't healed sufficiently. You ignored our maps spread on my coffee table. You weren't coming with me!

One by one our original party of 6 had atrophied to one—me. I was the last man standing.

At 68, my days were numbered and time waits for no one. The Great Divide Trail (GDT) would still be there next year, but would I? I had two weeks to think about it.

But how could I walk away from a year of planning and training? I didn't wait two weeks. I decided right then to do the trip on my own. Immediately an intense fear gripped my chest that surpassed the terror I had felt once before—on the knife-edge of Lady MacDonald.

My husband, Dale looked up from his phone and said, 'I just ordered you a Garmin inReach.'

I wouldn't say I've always been training for the day I could hike the GDT. Self-propelled travel is just how I roll. Not extreme stuff mind you: unless you count the years I spent speed rollerskating 8 times a week; unless you count year-round cycling to work; unless you count the all-day Wednesday Walks With Yuki, my son's dog, for the past 6 years.

And every couple of weeks, rain or shine, summer or winter, me, Dale; you and your wife Renée; and maybe her brother, Greg would go on a hike or backpack.

Last year you got your eye on the GDT Barnaby Ridge Alternate (Red Rock to Southforks). Knees and jobs were issues with the others so it had ended up just me and you on the ridge that August in 2020.

So stunning was our Barnaby trip that we vowed to get our spouses out in 2021. We'd scale it back a bit. We'd hit the standard route of Section A. Vacation days were locked down. We ramped up our hiking.

Then Dale's number came up for a new knee. Dale was out. Renée got too busy to get away.

A traverse from Lake of the Horns and over to Carnarvon Lake proved too intense for Greg. The heat hit him hard and his legs seized up. We all realized that lengthy days on the GDT were impossible for Greg and Amanda.

It was down to me and you—again Mason.

During our 6-year friendship, it became apparent that we have compatible ways of dealing with the outdoors. We rise about the same time. We manage similar levels of difficulty. We don't stop to snack or rest very often. We don't indulge negativity.

But unlike me, you are 20 years younger and a foot taller. Plus you are an outstanding photographer. You started creating video stories of our hikes. Also during this time, I designed and manufactured the Unightie, a sleeping garment for backpacking. Your visuals

became the core of my Unightie website and advertisements. And now our biggest adventure so far would be lamely captured on my iPhone—if I remembered to take it out at all!

As you got ready to return home that night, you made a point of telling me something that meant the world to me. You said is that you had total confidence in me to complete Section A of the GDT solo.

I wasn't concerned about my strength and ability: Although I am only 5 feet tall and 98 pounds, I had backpacked up to 9 days, climbed peaks, and forded rivers.

I wasn't worried about gear: I'd been finetuning gear for decades. If I couldn't find exactly what I needed, I modified it. Or, in the case of the Unightie, built it from scratch. Also I am a gear tester with Backpacker magazine and fortunately, the day before I was to leave on the GDT, I received a Thermarest Parsec OC sleeping bag for me to test; 22g lighter than my Zpacks -12C and I was counting every gram.

I was also prepared for the intense scrutiny required to analyze quantities, calories, and longevity of food. I was confident with my Katadyn .6L filter and two 600ml Smart bottles.

What did freak me out was wayfinding: Wayfinding on my own! No one to discuss options with. No one to boost morale or put on the brakes. No one to rotate the map when I held it upside down.

Aug 3 Waterton to monument and back

Dear Mason,

Dale emailed our friends that the launch went off without a hitch. Got on the shoreline trail about 0915 and hiked the 7km down to tag the boundary marker. Met my new trail family. Although of the Edmontonians, Ken was peeling off at Castle, and Ian planned to take the Barnaby Alternate.

Back at the town campground, I survived my first night with running engines, lights, banging, thumping, and crying babies.

The highlight of that Day 1 leg-stretcher was the conveyor toilet and the multi-colour pebble beach at Boundary Bay.

Aug 4 Waterton to Akamina Creek

Dear Mason,

On his 6-week old titanium knee, Dale hiked in with me as far as Alderson Lake at an average speed of 4.2kph. The trail was very bushy so I got in the habit of bear-calling often. I practice 'bear avoidance' and call in threes so the bear has a chance to triangulate my position: the bear hears the first, he listens to determine my general location, and then homes in on my third call.

It felt pretty weird to walk away from Dale at Alderson Lake. I stopped to gather water at the brilliant flower-rimmed, gabion-walled Carthew Lakes. My nose started to bleed. I got that under control and climbed the presiding summit. I didn't see another soul until a couple of dozen started trickling down from Cameron Lake where they had been dropped by a shuttle. Several wondered why I was grunting UP hill, others could not believe the compact size of my pack, and one thought I was joking when I

said my destination was Coleman. Then I was alone again.

Near the bottom of the endless switchbacks into Cameron Lake, a tall softish dude, totally sun-protected, with the biggest Hyperlite pack I had ever seen, alerted me to a deer in the bush. I glanced over; I never did see the deer; I was on a mission.

It was a cooker, and because of the 2017 fire, very exposed. I put on my kids' Tilley knock-off. Up ahead I recognized the Hyperlite dude and we plodded up to the campground together. His name was Scott.

Using InReach I sent a preset message to Dale at 4:17pm to say I'd arrived at Akamina Creek. It had been an 8-hour day.

You, Dale, and I had been to this campsite before in 2016 but back then it had been heavily wooded. Now there were only charred and silver trunks. The winding tent site access paths were a fine clay-coloured powder; it got into everything! Due to the fire plus the dryness and intense heat of this day, the campground looked totally apocalyptic.

Nevertheless, when Ian and Ken strode into camp with their smiles, stories, and photo of a Pine Marten, my gravel tent pad near the spanky concrete-based toilet started to feel like home. I regarded the 4" tall long-needle pines and thought, 'It'll be an extraordinary campground when it grows up!'

There was a fire ban in effect so I nestled my little Pocket Rocket inside the fire ring to cut the breeze and save fuel. Under flashes of dry lighting and non-productive thunder, all we talked about was gear! I

started to notice some tender areas on my feet.

Aug 5 Akamina to Twin Lakes campground

Dear Mason,

I had this brilliant Instagram idea and used my tea bag to scrub my tiny frying pan. Then I remembered I had designated tea bags 'double-use' to save weight. I needed it for this breakfast! I gave it a swish in the creek and used it for tea anyway.

I began to leave the top part of my boots undone to relieve the pressure on an abrasion above the tongue. I had also developed a swelling behind my left ankle; I wasn't sure if it was an irritated bug bite or tendonitis but it hurt like a mofo. Both heels had blisters.

To play it safe I had vowed to stick to the Standard Route but those darn Edmonton boys convinced me to do the Rowe Alternate which climbs steeply and directly up a cutline to the west end of Rowe Mountain and then follows the ridgeline.

Scott and I peeled off to the left on to the ridge, while the boys popped over to the summit of Rowe. From the gusty open ridge, I watched their tiny silhouettes playing around at the top.

As I was ascending one of the many 'bumps' on the ridge, Ken and Ian started shrieking from behind. I turned to see a blondish black bear with a tiny black cub at her heels. She had stood up to analyze Ken and Ian's scents and was 'chuffing' in agitation.

Because I practice bear avoidance, I saw few animals on the GDT. However that doesn't mean they were far away.

A few years ago I watched a couple of dads and their boys hike in along the narrow lakeshore of Jasper's Geraldine while a grizzly walked out on the same path! The boys were whistling and chatting and never encountered the bear at all. Animals will avoid you if they know where you are.

This bear held back from the crest until the boys had scampered by and then went back to grazing. Textbook!

As Mount Festubert's three rock bands came into view, I recalled my mountain-scrambling brother Ted saying, 'You don't know what the rock is like until your nose is against it.' Up close I found many sturdy cracks that a hand could slip into but equally as many rocks that came free as I stared dumbly at them in my hand. Three points of contact. I'm ok. Every tiny ledge was dusted with scree that had to be swept off with my toe before my boot tread was secure. I upclimbed a little too far to the left and had to down climb to get on a better track. It was every man for himself.

The boys were humbled by the Rowe Alternate. Ian even changed his mind about taking the Barnaby Alternate. I had seen a horse trail egress on my map. We decided to call it a day 4k shy of the ridge end and bailed at South Kootenay Pass taking the 1.7k switchbacks down to the main trail. I hobbled the 2k into Twin Lakes. The four newly edged and mulched pads were occupied so I set up in a clearing on the way to the toilet. I just had time to jot down a map note that said 'filter, hydrate, poo,

wash, eat, and message' before the warm darkness closed in. It was a 12-hour day!

Aug 6 Twin Lakes to Jutland

Dear Mason,

I took advantage of the scorcher of a day and did some laundry before breakfast. Scott lamented that he was slower than the rest of us because, 'I have ultralight gear but my problem is that I bring ALL of it!' A couple of us were very grateful that he brought a whole roll of Leukotape and felt it was our duty to relieve him of a few inches to help our blisters.

Scott headed up to Sage Pass into the Castle Wildlands early. The other boys slept in.

From here the trail was familiar to me because of our Barnaby trip but this year was hotter and drier. The wildflowers were sparse and dull. Gone were the long-antennae white-spotted sawyer pine beetles. No blue Azures flitted in the black coals to keep warm. Whole sections of bush looked like it had been sprayed with Wipe-out. And the stately Tamaracks were not as lush. Consequently, navigation was practically a cake walk due to less foliage plus the increase in hikers trudging through as the GDT gained popularity.

There is a meadow below Peak 2434 where the trail strangely disappears. I recognized it at once, and I heard your voice in my head, 'Just walk straight through.' I did and picked up a well-worn trail on the right. The 'curious crest-top canyon' held old, grungy snow as opposed to the pristine basins we had delighted in.

The now obvious route passed down and around the toe of the 'boulder field' taking me into Font Creek

Some things were the same as last year! When Jutland wasn't windy, it was buggy. Thank goodness I thought to presoak my fake Tilley in bug dope.

In due course all my 'trail family' showed up. Knowing we had to summit La Coulotte the next morning, Ken announced that the five of them were going to take off around 5am. I said I would hang back. I believe I am more efficient in the daylight and I have a routine that works well for me: My body starts to stir shortly before 6am. In my Unightie, I gather my trowel, toilet paper, soap, hankie, and towel, and head out for my morning refresh. The Unightie makes it easy to wash my hair and my underparts. In the evening, I cleanse my face, pits, arms and legs, slip into my Unightie, and go to bed pretty clean.

Aug 7 Jutland to A28

Dear Mason,

My routine with which you are so familiar Mason did not let me down. As I made my way over for my morning bath, I waved to the others as they were about to leave.

The only modification I made to my routine this particular morning was that I did not fry anything. I had my usual Nuuns tablet dissolved in hot water, a couple of dry-cured pepperoni sticks, my tea, and a tai chi bar that my friend Paula makes for me.

Although I was last man standing, I felt like there were several that were helping me along the way. Paula and my friend Donna

have no multi-day backpacking experience, but both are thoughtful and caring individuals who tend to do the exact right thing at the exact right time. When faced with an arduous summit, I indulged in one of Paula's sweet, nutritious, ooey gooey tai chi bars.

So too on a dry uphill, low on water, I'd unwrap a Werthers that Donna had pressed into my hand before my trip.

I made use of my brother Ted's practical witticisms like, 'if you are not cold for the first 15 minutes, you are dressed too warm!'

The only one I ignored was you Mason, saying 'take a picture, take a picture!' It was always on my mind. But there was work to do!

And the last thing you had texted me eased my mind whenever I came to a tough spot or decision—'I am sure you are fully prepared. Easy peasy!'

I left camp a half hour after the boys to gain La Coulotte Ridge, climb and descend two peaks, stagger through some dense krummholz, summit La Coulotte, ascend and descend a couple more peaks before leaving the ridge to meet Dale at waypoint A28 for resupply

Another was helping me on my journey. Crossing over from Jutland to Scarpe, the ridge gets a little confusing. The trail is indistinct, and I was truly grateful to see a marker planted up ahead by the GDT Association. As I walked by, I blew it a kiss.

As you know Mason, what makes this part harder is that water is nonexistent on this

segment. I filled my two Smartbottles and my filter reservoir for a total of 1800ml – that’s 4lb! At elevation, plodding along at 1kph, all I wanted to do was dump the water and make a break for it. Logic prevails. I didn’t want to die on that hill.

Once in a while, far ahead, I would spot the foursome or the little white dot that was Scott. It’s not a race though. I kept a comfortable pace and paused to set up short videos. From the ridge, I could clearly see my sweeping descent path into the valley.

When my relentless traverse descended sharply to the exit saddle, I stopped to take a decent break. Took off my pack. Messaged Dale. Ate some dried fruit. And downed the last of my water.

From here it is an incredibly steep, old, rocky Off Highway Vehicle road. I explored where the track had once gone right over the saddle into BC.

Down in the valley, the path closed in with dense vegetation. After a ‘Hey Bear’ I thought I heard something. I called ‘Yo Bear’ and was answered with a ‘Yuki Come!’ It was Dale responding with our usual call pattern!

Along with his sleeping bag and mattress Dale had brought in some treats: I got to wash my hair with baby shampoo and have real milk in my tea. He brought in Sambuca and fresh vegetables to enhance our freeze-dried meal! As we nestled into my once-lonely Stratospire Li Tarp Tent, we heard a familiar tick, tick, tick. Soon it was a downpour but we were giggling because we were dry and cozy.

All night the rain never let up.

Aug 8 A28 to Lynx Creek

Dear Mason,

We got a short break in the rain, packed up, and walked into Castle Mountain ski Resort.

Dale had a special lunch in the car— Shawarma wraps and baklava from Jimmy’s A&A. I was in heaven.

After lunch, I switched back into mission mode, zipped up my rain envelope and headed into the bush. The trails became quite complex. Decisions are tough when you are solo because you have no new input. No one to bounce ideas off. No one taller to see over that bush! You only have what you know and the materials you studied and took (maps, GPS, weather report, self-analysis).

I studied my maps and GPS for several minutes. Then headed straight up another mountain ridge—in the rain.

I arrived at my pre-chosen random area to camp about 3:30pm. It was too early to turn in. I walked on. I was neither hungry nor tired. I changed my mind a half dozen times about where to camp. I continued to walk. I saw no one. It was pouring rain. Everything of mine was soaked except my sleeping bag, my Unightie, my food, and a base layer.

As I leaned over a tiny stream to gather water, a big drop of blood splashed on the rocks. I had another nosebleed. Animals smelling blood crossed my mind. I got it stopped and rinsed my hankie thoroughly. As the rain poured down my face, I would constantly taste blood!

That settled it. I would press on to an actual campground, Lynx Creek about 8k further. It would have flat sites, toilets, and hopefully bear protection.

I'd hiked almost 30k. Lynx Creek was clearly designed for campers and tent trailers. There was a rig complete with canopy and lounge chairs but I never saw a soul. There were no bear lockers or bear hangs that I could find. The whole area appeared to be fenced but I didn't want to take any chances. I got out my bear hang kit and steadied myself for the toss. I felt you Mason, an ex-baseball pro watching me. Then I performed my sweetest bear hang ever!

As I hauled up my food bag, my mind kept saying 'take a photo of the perfect bear hang' but my rain-soaked body just kept performing the tasks necessary to achieve a comfortable rest for the night. I listed. I prioritized. I executed.

1. Hang food
2. Visit the toilet
3. Pitch tent fly and stash everything under it
4. Lay out cooking gear protecting stove from moisture
5. Retrieve food, rehydrate in my RePack, eat, and have tea
6. Rehang food
7. Install mesh tent body and lay out wet mattress
8. Go for last pee
9. Carefully remove and wring out wet outer pants, jacket, gloves, boots and socks
10. Blow up mattress and lay out sleeping bag on the dry part

11. Change to Unightie and stuff pillow with damp puffy
12. Remove blister bandages and dry feet
13. Review maps and write notes
14. Night night

Aug 9 Lynx Creek to Coleman

Dear Mason,

I carefully reapplied fresh bandages to my feet, laced up my sodden boots, and left Lynx Creek. I watched a beautiful herd of free-range Black Angus in a verdant pasture. The grass was brilliant from the rain. Should have taken a picture!

A young bull, two cows, and a calf came toward me on the gravel road. It seemed like a stand-off. They squished themselves off to the other side as far as they could go. I realized they were dreadfully afraid of me. Suddenly the young bull wheeled around and led the others into the bush. I let out my breath.

The rain eased some but my sodden pack felt very heavy. I plodded up the beautiful Willoughby Ridge, paralleling the true Great Divide. The peaks were topped with rain clouds, their skirts surrounded by mist. I took a lame video for you.

Would I succumb to exhaustion and random camp, keeping my schedule? Or would I push on to Coleman, arrive a day early, and hopefully get an extra night at the inn. I looked down at my feet. They kept moving. I carried hiking poles to construct my tent and deal with creek fords. But I'd never hiked with poles. I figured there must be something to it. So I learned on the fly. I adjusted the length to accommodate the

dominant angle of the terrain. I double-poled up short hills, working them in tandem, my palms pressing down on top of the grips to lurch me forward. On flatter sections, I asymmetrically planted every second stride; I was travelling so fast. My nephew Mike came to mind. He told me to 'step out Auntie Jackie'. I lengthened my stride. I was flying down the trail.

I entered my second planned random camping zone. The 'road' had a lot of debris on the sides, very wet, and never flat. There were a couple of spots down by Haven Bridge but it was even wetter with dew. I flew by. It was too early to stop.

I really don't know how I kept walking. I staggered right into the Coleman motel office. Yes, the room was available. Yes, it had a bath tub. I got my poles stuck in the doorway. I practically fell over the threshold. I lurched up the catwalk to the second floor. Still I did not stop. I turned on the bath. I started laying out my gear. Forest debris was everywhere. I'd have to apologize. I got in the bath. That's when I hit the wall. The soles of my aching feet were on fire. My heels were smarting. My legs could hardly hold me up. I ran the bath hotter. I fired up my Pocket Rocket. I reconstituted my last meal, fried up some meat chips, and went to bed. The open wound on the top of my foot stuck painfully to the sheets. It would take over a week to scab over.

Next day, Dale brought my brother Ted and his wife Brenda to pick me up! I was totally ready to enjoy some company.

Total 145k