

# Backpacker is driven to conquer the Appalachian Trail

BY MATT GLEASON

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Brad Johnson has an arthritic left hip — one that's rubbing bone on bone. Last week, that hip required a cortisone shot. But surgery will have to wait until the 56-year-old Tulsan either gives in to, or conquers, the Appalachian Trail.

On Friday, Johnson began his four-month trek along the AT, a 2,175-mile public footpath stretching through 14 states from Georgia's Springer Mountain to Maine's Mount Katahdin. That's about 300 miles shy of hiking from Tulsa to New York City ... twice.

And he's trying to do it in less time than the typical hiker already on the trail, because the father of three wanted to see his youngest son, Luke Johnson, graduate from Holland Hall, which set him back two months.

To reach the finish line in four months means Johnson will have to hike 18 to 19 miles a day on a trail where the average elevation gain and loss is about 3,500 feet.



**Brad Johnson is readying to take on a four-month hike of the Appalachian Trail. The hike is sponsored and will benefit several Tulsa charities.** Courtesy

Of the 2,000 to 3,000 hikers who attempt the feat each year, about 15 percent actually make it to the end, Johnson said. So if he tacks on his bad hip and late start, plus the chance of injury or sickness, among other challenges, Johnson figures he has a 10

percent chance of success.

"But I'm going to make it," assured the owner of Tulsa's Lawn America. "I'm a realist. I realize that things can happen, but the main reason people don't make it is they aren't prepared, they run out of money, they're not in shape, they have unrealistic expectations as far as what the trail is about, some people start and they've never even backpacked before.

"I know the drill," he said. "I've prepared and I'm very motivated. I've told thousands of people about this. If I fail, I'll be a bozo."

Beyond his own dream of finishing, Johnson is pushing himself to Maine for charity. During his "compassionate journey," as he calls it, Johnson aims to raise \$100,000 for several Tulsa charities: The Little Light House, which helps children with special needs; the Salvation Army; Tulsa Habitat for Humanity; and Young Life Tulsa, which introduces "adolescents to Jesus Christ," according to its website.

Johnson is also rais-

ing money for the Folds of Honor Foundation, which provides post-secondary educational scholarships to the spouses and children of service members disabled or killed in action. Johnson's eldest son, Jake Johnson, is a U.S. Marine serving in Afghanistan.

Before Johnson even set foot on the trail, he had raised more than \$26,000, which was matched by Lawn America to push the total to about \$53,000.

"I'd be disappointed if we don't exceed \$100,000 by the time I finish," Johnson said.

Ever since Johnson was a 14-year-old making his way through the Weminuche Wilderness Area in southwest Colorado, he's had a passion for backpacking. But it wasn't until last July, when a party inquired about purchasing Johnson's Lawn America, that his Appalachian trek came into focus.

Although he wasn't interested in selling his company, which employs 38 people, the inquiry made Johnson think about what he would do if he

no longer had to work.

"Immediately, I wanted to hike the AT," he said.

About two months later, Johnson decided he shouldn't wait 10 or 15 years to attempt the trek. Rather, he should do it while his body could withstand the challenges.

As for his Lawn America responsibilities, Johnson said it's "usually kind of cruise control" during the summer months. His wife, Becky Johnson, will sign the checks while he's gone.

To prepare for the trek, Johnson has increased his workouts at the gym, while taking several hikes on Turkey Mountain, among other trails, including those in Arkansas and Missouri.

Out on the trail, Johnson planned to carry a backpack lightly loaded with about 35 pounds of clothes, gear and food. A solar-powered battery charger and a sleeping bag weighing about two pounds; a hammock weighs about 1 1/2 pounds. One of his more important items is his trusty iPhone, which he'll use as a phone, GPS, digital

map and weather forecaster, among other things, including blogging at [tulsaworld.com/at2010tulsa](http://tulsaworld.com/at2010tulsa).

Every four days, Johnson will receive a resupply package from his wife, who'll mail it to hostels, motels and post office boxes along the Appalachian Trail.

Each day on the trail, Johnson will burn about 5,000 calories, so he'll eat granola bars, mainly freeze-dried meals and jerky from Siegi's Sausage. Johnson is 6 feet tall and weighed about 185 pounds when he left Tulsa. By the end of the trail, Johnson expects to lose 20 pounds, but he'll gain so much else in return.

"To me, personally, it was just a God-inspired passion: 'This is what you're supposed to do now, but not just for you,'" he explained. "I'll have a ball, and it'll be a great challenge for me physically, and every other way, but we're going to do some good with it, too."

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