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Local man realizes greatest achievement.

Sept. 3, 2016. Kettering resident, Andy “Captain Blue” Niekamp, completed the 2,189.1 mile-long Appalachian Trail (AT) for the fourth time with a summit of the AT’s northern terminus, Katahdin. He is one of a dozen people worldwide who has reported completing the entire Appalachian Trail four or more times. Since 1989, Niekamp has logged over 9,000 miles on this Georgia to Maine trail.

Niekamp is a section-hiker, hiking the trail several hundred miles a stretch. His previous hikes were completed in 1998, 2004, and 2010. Niekamp, founder of Dayton Hikers, the largest and most active outdoor recreation group in the Dayton area, savors the challenge of long-distance hiking the AT.

The Appalachian Trail is unique in that it is the longest pedestrian footpath in the world, traversing 14 states along the Appalachian Mountain range. The AT, a unit of the National Park system, is also one of the oldest trails. It was completed in 1937. The Appalachian Trail Conservancy (ATC) reports that 2-3 million people hike some part of the trail every year. Of the 2,500-3,000 hikers who attempt to “thru-hike” the trail, only about 25% succeed.

The 2015 release of the movie, *A Walk in the Woods*, has done much to romanticize the AT. What many people don’t realize is that the AT, especially in New Hampshire and Maine, can be brutal and unforgiving. Geraldine “Inchworm” Largay perished while hiking the AT in Maine three years ago. Her body was only recently found. Niekamp himself experienced some of the trail’s hardship when he was struck by lightning in 2015 while hiking the trail on Black Mountain in New York. He was lucky to have survived. He knows its challenges and yet keeps returning. Niekamp views the AT as an old friend—enduring and predictable.

According to Niekamp, “The physical challenge draws you to the trail; winning the mental game keeps you there.” Sleeping outdoors, drinking water from streams, walking 12-18 miles a day, eating pre-packaged, freeze-dried or dehydrated food, and basically living outside in wilderness conditions for weeks on end can wear a hiker down mentally. Niekamp says that the trick is to know yourself as a hiker. Understanding your limits and your strengths--how many miles you can do in a day, how much food to pack, how much sleep you need a night, when to give yourself a break from the trail to recharge make the difference.

Niekamp has witnessed changes over the years as the trail has become increasingly popular. Technology has revolutionized hiking as a sport. Advances in the design of day/backpacks, clothing, maps, poles, shoes, and smart phones have made hiking safer and more efficient. The Appalachian Trail Conservancy (ATC) has also worked hard to make the trail more accessible to and safer for hikers while preserving the natural beauty and fighting to protect the surrounding environment.

Niekamp's miles on the AT has made him an expert. He's a popular presenter, and he volunteers his time with several hiking organizations including the ATC, the Buckeye Trail Association, and Five Rivers Metro parks. Will Niekamp take on the challenge of a fifth hike? Right now, Niekamp's "what's next" is to continue to inspire others to "get out and hike."

