

How I'm training to hike Mount Katahdin, from climbing stairs to swimming [column]

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I have been spending a lot of time this summer in a stairwell.

The stairs in the Lancaster city parking garage I frequent are hot, a little smelly and only offer concrete walls as a view. That's not a big deal if you are only parking your car. But for a workout, it's not the most glamorous. The one plus is the breeze that occasionally comes through the barred windows. And I am thankful for that.

If you're just joining me, this is the second column in a series about hiking Mount Katahdin in Maine with my sister, who has multiple sclerosis. It will be the first time we've completed a fitness goal together since 2015.

The advice I got for hiking Mount Katahdin in Maine was to be in shape — both obvious and vague. My sister, Krystyna, did give me slightly more helpful advice, which was to be ready to walk for a few hours at an incline. Hence the stairs.

I'll do the hike the last week of August with my sister and brother-in-law, Jim. The mountain's peak is 5,269 feet. We will be taking the Hunt Trail, a day hike that has an elevation gain of 4,188 feet.

Heading into the climb, I feel prepared. But if you asked me a few months ago, I would have had a different answer.

An evolving routine

My freshman year of college, I was hired at Temple University's Campus Recreation Department. Soon after, I got certifications to be a personal trainer and teach fitness classes. Around that time, I also had to stop school. Being a journalist was still the goal, but

college is expensive. For a while, I balanced multiple part-time jobs at different gyms. Then, Campus Recreation hired me full time. That is how I finished my degree.

During that time, fitness was a natural part of my day-to-day life. I didn't get paid to work out, but I was in an environment where fitness was emphasized.

In May 2022, I moved to Lancaster. I joined a gym after moving and cycled through periods where I would go to the gym and some that I wouldn't. I struggled to find the consistency that was once easy for me.

This past December, when my sister asked if I wanted to hike Mount Katahdin, I had no fitness routine.

I like a challenge with fitness. There is an end date, and you either do the work or you don't. It has motivated me for races so I thought it would be the same for a climb.

I signed up for a 10-mile race in May with my sister and friend. But for the first time, I struggled to stick to my training plan. Neither of them ran the race, so I had an out.

I also had health problems for a few months that left me exhausted. In June, when I felt better, it was time to get moving. And my first run — really, a walk — showed me I had a lot of work to do.

Training separately, hiking together

For races, I've always had a structured plan that builds mileage over time. But I haven't used a structured workout plan while preparing for the hike.

I don't know what my sister is up to day-to-day in her workouts. I know she walks the hill near her in Pittsburgh, runs and takes fitness classes. We text off and on to say what we did or what we

are going to do. But we never had plans to do a hike or any workouts together.

We both have Apple Watches, which allow you to share fitness data with other Apple Watch users. I occasionally see that she completed a workout, which for a competitive person is great motivation. I am not about to be outworked.

Really, though, I just trust she will be ready. My sister and I have done two marathons together and a 10-mile race under the same unsaid agreement: the other person will come prepared.

June through mid-July, I was mainly doing the stair workouts, runs, walks and yoga. I am not sure if I would say I had a structured routine, but I was developing one.

The last week of July, I switched to swimming everyday while at a lake in the Poconos with my family. I was the only one in the lake every morning. For a swimmer and someone who has always found water relaxing, the swims ended up being the reset I needed.

Since coming home from the lake, I occasionally swim in a community pool. I am still running, walking and doing yoga. I also went on a hike in Mount Gretna with a friend.

And, yes, I'm still hitting the stairs. I built my endurance slowly. Some days I made the workout longer, and other days I set a time and aimed to cover more distance than previously. My longest stair workout was about 4 hours, but most average somewhere around an hour and a half. The stairwell is seven flights, and I carry 20 pounds in my bookbag because I want to know that I can carry more weight than I will need to.

I know stairs are not apples-to-apples to climbing a mountain, but it's easily accessible to me. So I made it work.

I also have been wearing hiking boots on some walks to get used to them.

My sister and her husband have both done the hike, so I trust them to handle any logistics. I just have to show up. We will leave Scranton on Aug. 28. The climb will happen Aug. 29 or 30, weather permitting.

Maybe someday, my sister and I will climb a larger mountain. Maybe this will be the start of our mountaineering journey together. Or maybe this will be the only mountain we climb together. I just hope I did enough so I can enjoy the moment with her.

I do feel ready. But I guess I will find out soon.