

REDEFINING FAILURE

How an injury on the Colorado Trail forced me to change how I view success

Design by David Shuppert
Photos courtesy of Sam Norton

It was beautiful.

I awoke to reds, oranges and pinks streaking across the alpine sky, interrupted only by cascading temples of rock on the horizon. That morning, I gained 2,000 feet of elevation, trekking 7 miles through pine forest and prairie. Jagged peaks with snow pockets and boulder fields surrounded me, so close I felt I could reach out and touch them. Five days ago, I left Breckenridge, Colorado, and was 175 miles into the 486-mile Colorado Trail.

At midday, I reached a high mountain pass, where more peaks enveloped a small, glossy alpine lake that stood in a field of yellow wildflowers. The pine trees whispered in the breeze as I slowed, the crunch of my soles against the dirt echoing in the meadow. As grasses and flowers gave way to trunks and canopies, I stopped at a trickling stream to refill my water bottle, eyeing the dark clouds forming in the distance.

A middle-aged man crossed the bridge next to me. Sporting graying hair, a kind, wrinkled face and a wide-brimmed hat, he cheerily called out to me.

“Hello there! Which way you headed?”

“I’m heading southbound, hoping to resupply at Twin Lakes.”

“Ah,” he said, his smile softening. “I’m heading north. Well, happy trails!”

He was the third person I’d talked to over the past four days.

I hadn’t seen many long-distance hikers like myself during that time, and I hadn’t shared a campsite with anyone. I fought loneliness the first few days after leaving my family at Breckenridge, where I had met up with them to rest from the trail. Yet, on this fourth morning, I began to feel better about my newfound autonomy; I was settling back into a routine, and the views were once again making the rigorous hiking worthwhile.

I considered my mental state as I moved on from the stream. My tired feet sidestepped rocks and roots as I

hiked away from the pass. My hiking poles stayed by my side while my mind drifted, mulling over the past few days rather than the rugged section of trail.

Suddenly, I heard a pop that jerked me back to reality.

My ankle collapsed beneath me.

I crashed to the ground, my bag toppling over and my hiking poles flailing helplessly in my hands. The pain was sharp, and I immediately grabbed my foot, my heart pounding against my chest.

“Shit, shit, shit, shit, shit.”

I rocked back and forth on the dirt, breathless and briefly stunned about what had just happened. My left ankle, the same one I had surgery on four years ago, betrayed me once again. I could see the rock that twisted my ankle lying awkwardly in the middle of the trail.

I have to keep going. I have to finish the trail, I thought to myself.

But what if I couldn’t?

The thought hit me hard. My mind was racing, and panic started to knot in the pit of my stomach. As I struggled to get up, it became clear that hiking may not be an option — my ankle was already swelling. An inkling of fear rose inside me as I wondered whether I could finish. But at the moment, none of that mattered.

I was 3 miles from the nearest trailhead, with over a thousand vertical feet to descend. The closest town to the trailhead was 20 minutes away by car. I had no plans to get there and no way of knowing where I would sleep that night.

And I was completely on my own.



Over winter break last year, I confronted a dilemma that was both professional and personal. My next summer would be my last “summer break” before graduating, after which my summers would become another season to go along with my full-time job. I could get an internship; that was probably the smartest thing



to do to prepare myself for a career. But I already had internship experience from the previous summer and was itching for something else.

I considered many options, scouring the internet for jobs in national parks or summer camps. I wanted to spend my summers under the open sky, wandering new places and embracing the thrill of exploration. I even applied to a few jobs and had an interview scheduled for a busboy position at a Grand Canyon lodge. Yet, something didn't feel right – I didn't want another job. I wanted an adventure.

That's when it came to me. I was going to do a thru-hike.

A thru-hike is an extended backpacking trip that goes hundreds, if not thousands, of miles. They take weeks to months to complete, requiring the hiker to stop in towns and resupply food and gear. Thru-hikes require an incredible amount of planning and time commitment – it is a completely different way of living.

It checked all of my boxes. A thru-hike would take up my summer and force me to embrace the unknown, a true outdoor adventure. After more research, I settled on the Colorado Trail, a nearly 500-mile continuous path stretching from Denver to Durango, winding through the southern Rockies at elevations above 10,000 feet. I could complete it before classes started, and I had always wanted to visit Colorado.

From January to June, I fervently planned every detail of my trip. Behind my editing duties at The Student, it was the first thing on my mind (classes became an afterthought). I talked about the thru-hike

to anyone who would listen; I wrote an opinion column about it and spent hundreds of dollars on flights and gear. Friends from Miami and from home told me they couldn't wait to hear about my adventures out West, and my grandma was convinced I'd write a book about my travels. During those six months leading up to my departure, the Colorado Trail became my personality.

I devoted countless hours to training, hitting the gym and doing intense cardio – —a rigid routine I hadn't held myself to since high school soccer. I scrutinized my gear setup, hoping to cut out any "useless" items and only pack what I needed to survive in the wilderness. I practiced setting up and taking down my tent in my yard and went on multiple short camping trips in June to prepare. At the end of it all, I was ready.

As July came around, it was time to go. For 48 hours, my life was in constant motion as I traveled from Columbus to Denver, with airplanes, buses, dysfunctional Lime scooters and mediocre pizza filling my time. On the morning of July 9, another hiker and I were picked up outside our hostel by a fellow thru-hiker I'd met on Facebook. At 9 a.m., I posed beside the giant "Colorado Trail" sign at the trailhead. I was off!

I spent the next five days in the company of guys I had traveled to the trail with, along with other hikers moving at a similar pace. Elevation gain was slow and campsites were crowded, but I had better cell service than I expected. Hiking the Colorado Trail was a different way of living; I was surviving off of dehydrated food, water filtration systems, 15 miles of hiking daily and (sometimes) flat campsites.

On my sixth day, I met my brother and dad, who had flown with my mom to Colorado and spent three days on the trail with me. I finally traversed deep into the Rockies, sleeping at 12,000 feet of altitude. The burning desire to explore the mountains continued to consume my being, all while sharing these experiences with people I love.

After eight days on the trail without a shower, we met my mom in Breckenridge, where I spent two days relaxing and eating every piece of greasy food I could find. I felt grateful to have a supportive and fun family, but I knew leaving them and getting back on the trail wouldn't be easy.

Nonetheless, on my third morning in Breckenridge, I was dropped back off at the same trailhead I left three days earlier. I was 100 miles in with almost 400 to go, and my journey was still getting started. I spent that afternoon hiking above Breckenridge, looking down on the place where I left my family and forcing myself to keep moving forward.

For the next three days, I spent my time split between complete awe of the world around me and sporadic bouts of intense loneliness. I was deep in the wilderness, and for the first time on my trip, I realized how isolating it could be. Yet, at the same time, I was deep in the wilderness, and when the evening sun cast a stunning light on distant mountains rising above a tranquil pine meadow, I was at peace with my life.



It was on my fifth day after Breckenridge that I sprained my ankle, catapulting me from Heaven on Earth to an unforgiving reality. I gingerly hiked one mile down the mountain before pulling off for lunch. I sandwiched myself between a tree trunk and a boulder and slowly

ate the rest of my summer sausage and protein cookie while brooding over my situation. If I had walked a mile, albeit a painful one, then maybe I just needed a day off. I decided to continue, but as I pressed my foot against the boulder, my ankle exploded in pain.

I'm not going to finish the Colorado Trail, I thought as I fought back tears.

I stumbled down the rest of the trail, hitchhiked into the small town of Leadville and found another hostel.

I spent two nights there, and in between calling my parents, talking with my girlfriend and a somewhat successful walk on the flat pavement, I convinced myself to give it another go on a short section of the trail.

I walked six miles of trail much less treacherous than the trail that had forsaken my ankle, but still found myself stepping cautiously. I still found myself worrying about the extremely remote section of the trail awaiting me beyond the next town. I still found myself terrified of getting hurt even more.

But I also found myself terrified of quitting. I found myself terrified of failing.

66 *I had set a goal for myself: to complete the Colorado Trail. And Sam Norton achieves his goals.* 99





Before I left, my mind ran rampant with fantasies and aspirations about my hike. It would be my ultimate adventure. It would change my life forever. I would impress my friends back home and prove to myself that I'm a tough outdoorsman who can thrive in the wilderness. I had set a goal for myself: to complete the Colorado Trail. And Sam Norton achieves his goals.

Yet here I was, thinking about quitting when I wasn't even halfway done.

For the past two days, as I was anxiously laying around the hostel in Leadville, I couldn't bear to face these thoughts. Now, as I hobbled into the even smaller town of Twin Lakes, my ankle throbbing from 6 miles of slow hiking, I couldn't bear the decision I knew I had to make.

Laughter filled my ears as I sauntered past tourists shopping at a fruit stand. The midday sun shone brilliantly on log cabins and red barns while green mountains draped the surroundings in magnificence that would have held me captive in awe not so long ago. This cheery little town was pressing against my dark thoughts, and I felt like a ghost looking around at the living as they unwittingly moved around, oblivious to the storm raging inside me.

I spotted a lone tree and bench a little ways off the main road. I called my dad as tears swelled in the corner of my eyes when I told him I was bailing on the hike.

I was scared out of my mind. Scared to accept that my journey was over, but even more scared to continue with a mind and body that were not 100%. The isolation and physical exertion of the past week weighed heavily, and the logical part of my brain was winning out over my romantic aspirations.

Failure sat on my shoulders like an overbearing presence. Yet, as I gazed across the tall grass prairie in front of me and the wall of snow-capped granite cathedrals that had become a constant companion of mine the past two weeks, my burdens started lifting. How could I be a failure when I had traveled on foot to a place as mesmerizing as this? How could I be a failure with the memories I had already made?

Suddenly, sitting under this tree in a town a thousand miles from Ohio, I remembered home. My mom called me, telling me how proud she was, reminding me that hiking nearly 200 miles is more than most people could ever do. My girlfriend texted, reminding me I would get to see her sooner than I thought. My brother told me he

was glad I could help him move into college now, and one of my best friends from home was happy he could see me more before we went back to our schools.

For two hours, I sat on that bench, while the love others had for me, and the love I have for this world, slowly seeped into the hole that the thought of failure had left. That beast gnawing at my pride was no longer a threat, but a reminder. A reminder that failure isn't a means to an end, but a means to a new journey. Perhaps failure isn't always failure, but rather that essential moment in life where we are forced to learn new lessons.

And wow, did I learn some lessons. I learned I get lonely quicker than I thought. I learned that experiencing wonderful moments is sometimes better in the company of others. I learned that I'm capable of pushing myself into new situations. I learned that I know when to listen to my body. I learned that I love adventure, and that sometimes adventure comes in the ways I least expect it.



I trudged down a steep river embankment and across a rickety wooden bridge. The trail snaked past a lake overgrown with shrubs and reedy plants, and the lean-to I had been staying at for the past two nights was just up ahead. After shedding my day pack and wolfing down a protein bar, I left the open-air wooden structure and continued along the lake-side trail until I found the clearing I was looking for.

Three weeks had passed since I left Colorado. My ankle was healed, and I now found myself amid the rugged nature of the Adirondack Wilderness in Upstate New York. If I had stuck to my original plan, I would have finished the Colorado Trail that day.

To encourage myself in the wake of a tumultuous but enlightening end to my time out West, I decided to go on one more big camping trip before the summer was over. The Adirondacks were a familiar destination and not too far from home, so during the second week of August I once again took off from Ohio with my hiking gear in tow.

Still a little weary about thru-hiking and with a fresh perspective on outdoor adventure, I opted for a different kind of trip this time. I set up camp in one place and took a lighter load out with me for the day, before returning to the same camp I embarked from. My days were lighter and ended earlier than in Colorado, and I was content to spend the afternoon reading a book rather than pushing another five miles.

This method of hiking felt like a breath of fresh air, as I sat against a tree and opened "The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo." A charming lake stretched out before me, surrounded by dense woods and draped with luscious green mountainsides and granite cliffs on all sides. I would be going home the next day, and I couldn't wait for the home-cooked meal that would be waiting for me after being gone for less than a week.

My summer didn't go as planned. I didn't have the grand tales I expected to recount to my friends at Miami. Colorado didn't change my life the way I thought it would. My mind had been forced into a tormented whirlwind, but I came out better than before, full of new thoughts and lessons. But as I sat on the ground soaking up the last moments of my summer travels and relishing the vista before me, there was only one thought on my mind:

It was beautiful.

