**"Moving north, alone but more determined"**

*(The following story ran in the Daily Item on Aug. 16, 1998)*

KITTATINNY MOUNTAIN, N.J. -- The Appalachian Trail claimed yet another would-be thru-hiker last week, but this time it really struck close to home.

Thru-hiker hopefuls drop off the trail all the time; only 10 to 15 percent ultimately succeed. This, though, was different. This wasn't just any thru-hiker. This was my good friend and hiking partner, Jo Bourque, who called off her thru-hike after 1,100 miles.

Four years ago, Jo and I had hiked to the top of Maine's Mount Katahdin -- the northern terminus of the Appalachian Trail. We sat at the summit that day and spoke of returning to that spot, this time via Georgia. Then three months ago, we set off to make that happen. So I was sad to see her dream end.

At the same time, though, I became even more driven to succeed, to finish what Jo and I had started in May.

"This trail may have won this battle," I said, "but I'll be damned if it will win the war."

Before Jo left, we recounted some of the special moments and priceless memories we had collected along 1,100 miles from Georgia to Pennsylvania. We spoke of friends we had made and lessons we had learned. We recalled the laughter as well as the struggle.

Even as we spoke, though, I could tell something was missing. The excitement that I sensed in Jo as we planned the trip last winter was gone. The optimism that had flowed when she took her first steps north from Springer Mountain had vanished.

Mile after mile and day after day, the trail had gradually, mercilessly beaten down Jo's will.

"It just isn't fun anymore," she had said.

Well, I though, no one ever said hiking the entire Appalachian Trail would always be fun. Maybe Jo had been a little too naive, or too optimistic, about that.

I thought back to days when the heat nearly dropped me to my knees, to the days when my feet ached so badly I didn't want to take another step. I thought of the bee stings, sore knees and twisted ankles.

No, this isn't always fun. Yet the difficulties are inherent in the challenge, and the challenge is what drives me, inspires me, motivates me.

For Jo, the challenge was only one part of what motivated her. She also looked elsewhere for motivation, but ultimately, that couldn't offset the physical and mental strain the trail imposes on a daily basis.

Whatever Jo's reasons for stopping -- and they were numerous and complex -- I know that it was a gut-wrenching decision for her.

As I hiked north from the Delaware Water Gap and into New Jersey after bidding her farewell, I felt suprisingly emotional. Was it over the sense of loss with her gone? Well, she had already been off the trail for a week as she contemplated her decision, so I had grown accustomed to hiking alone. I knew it had to be something more.

And then it hit me: Seeing Jo's hike end made me, for the first time since leaving Georgia, begin to confront the end of my own journey. This has been one of the most emotional, fulfilling and rewarding things I've ever done, and the thought of it ending tore at my heart.

So Jo's departure also inspired me to savor every day I'm out here, because I realize those days are numbered. In seven weeks, I should reach Mount Katahdin and it will all be over.

On my first night out of Delaware Water Gap, the day after Jo had left the trail for good, I camped at a windswept spot high on Kittatinny Ridge with a marvelous view to the east. I sat on a rock on the edge of the ridge and watched the sunset paint the sky vivid shades of red and purple. Then I watched a spectacular rise of the full moon, huge and orange on the horizon.

I remember hearing someone explain how, over the course of his thru-hike, the Appalachian Trail slowly seeped into his soul and never left. Sitting on that ledge at that moment, I knew exactly what he meant. I wish Jo had been there.

Perhaps one day she will be. Jo still vows to complete the entire trail, and I have no doubt she will. Maybe she'll hike the final 1,000 miles next summer. Maybe she'll hike it in bits and pieces over several years.

When she summits Katahdin, though, I hope to be there to see it happen.

Because I know whether it takes her two years or 22, I know how much the trail means to her and I know how much triumph there will be in that achievement.