

# ADVENTURES

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# Completing the Circle

## Twice Around Mt. St. Helens

Story by Rick Dubrow

Photo by  
Brett Baunton

**Y**es, it took two tries. Our first attempt, in 2012, to circumambulate Mt. St. Helens ended with a helicopter rescue. A year later my stalwart hiking buddy Mitch Greenberg and I successfully completed the 34-mile Loowit Trail around the 'great hole'. My nickname, anyway.

I've climbed St. Helens at least 18 times since it erupted. Never before it blew. Smart, huh? Although I had reached the top of many northwest volcanoes, I had yet to bag pre-1980 St. Helens. The May 18, 1980 eruption meant that I never would. As soon as the great hole was open to climbers, I wanted to stand on the rim. I've returned nearly every year since then, usually dragging along a posse of Bellingham locals, many of whom have become addicted regulars to this annual journey.

Why return so often to the same

damn place? What's the addiction, er ... attraction?

34 years ago this great earth relieved itself of a whole hell of a lot of pressure, creating the largest landslide in recorded history. The rim, the dome, and the breach continue to breathe and morph and heave. Whether it's summing the rim or experiencing Loowit Falls, the very spillway from the crater, there's change afoot. And afoot is how I want to experience such change, year after year. I want to touch and feel a 34-year old ecosystem born of relief, powerful beyond measure, resting, for now, in our own backyard.

So I return almost every year.

Two summers ago, though, it was time to tackle my first circumambulation; I hadn't walked completely around a mountain before, and it was fitting to try the Loowit Trail, given how attached I'd become to this special place since it blew.

### Day One

Our first try around the great hole started from the climbers bivouac, base camp for most summer climbers heading for the rim. With me were Mitch Greenberg (first cousin, paramedic/firefighter), Josh Geller (best friend from college days at MIT), and Anna Knutson (Josh's girlfriend). My research had suggested a clockwise path, using the climbers bivouac as the insertion point, offering the least rugged leg of the Loowit to get underway.

Day One proved otherwise. Rugged boulder hopping - very challenging for Anna. S-L-O-W moving; easy place to twist an ankle or do a face plant on very rough, large volcanic boulders. At about mile six of a planned eight-mile first day, hoping to camp at a difficult-to-find pond just past Sheep Canyon Creek, Mitch began complaining about his left knee. Never before had he experienced a

knee problem, but we took it seriously as it continued to deteriorate.

Rest, nibble, sip. Didn't help. Continuous deterioration. We checked the map and brainstormed alternatives. Anticipating the upcoming trail guide-described water source, we drank the last of what we had.

Reaching the expected site of the pond, we were now concerned about losing daylight. We could go off-trail to search for the pond but we'd lose vital light, and if we couldn't find this water it would be critical to walk the two additional miles to the South Fork of the Toutle River. We chose to go for the dependable Toutle... *without* water and *with* Mitch's painful knee.

Those two miles proved tortuous for Mitch. And as his left knee worsened, his right knee also became painful and progressively worsened. We took weight out of his pack and slowed down as best we could, sacrificing precious light. About

a mile from the Toutle, Mitch reported a ten-out-of-ten pain reading on his left side, this from a guy very much aware of his body and sports medicine.

Something positive grew out of what was now affecting *both* knees: the realization that in all probability he was experiencing something systemic, since injuring both knees simultaneously was improbable. At a gut level Mitch voiced his theory that his ailment resulted from too little resting, nibbling and sipping. Although I couldn't quite buy into his theory, given the great amount of pain he voiced, I hoped that he was correct.

Here's the rub: Since he's a paramedic, we defaulted to his suggestion to continue walking to the Toutle. In retrospect, since he was the *victim*, we shouldn't have relied upon his decision-making. Looking back on it, we should have stopped walking, even if it meant sleeping in our bags right on the trail. Two of us could have hiked for water and returned by headlamp.

As the last light faded, we reached the South Fork. Well, almost. We were on a small, level bench perhaps 50 vertical feet above the river. Mitch, pain free when not walking, set up camp with Anna, while Josh and I went on ahead and filled up all of our water bottles.

Over dinner Mitch shared his belief that his knees were shot; that days of rest, right here, would not facilitate his ability to walk out. So we decided to sleep on it; to decide our next steps come sunrise.

### Day 2

Mitch awoke certain that he needed to be carried out; he feared that he had blown out both knees and such an injury could threaten his career and any future working out or hiking. Given the terrain, we knew that being carried out on a stretcher was impossible. A chopper was the only way.

911 was the ticket out of this predicament - if either of our two cell phones



worked. But the connection was poor and sporadic, and it was unclear how much the dispatcher heard. Try as we might, we couldn't communicate additional information.

Over the next hour or so, two hikers passed going in opposite directions. One of them would be back to their car in about three or four hours; the other about seven or eight. So we sent out the relevant information with both hikers knowing that eventually a chopper would

be aloft.

We prepared the site for a chopper extraction, something Mitch was trained to do - but not as a *victim*! Once the site was ready, I climbed 1,200 vertical feet to a spot along the trail, hoping for a cell signal with the David Johnston Observatory.

It worked - I got a clear signal to 911. Moments later I was talking with the chopper dispatcher, just as I started to hear the low-frequency, base-drumming of the far-off chopper, clearly heading in the wrong direction.

Finally the chopper pilot reacted to my input to the dispatcher and started heading back towards our campsite, eventually landing on some very tenuous ground so that Mitch wouldn't have to endure a

litter extraction.

As you might imagine, Josh, Anna and I walked out - the same way we came in - the very next day.

### Twelve Months Later

This time it was just Mitch and I, back on the mountain for another attempt at circumambulation. One attempt was enough for Josh and Anna. Mitch had recovered. He had seen physicians, did PT, trained and trained; no recurrence *anywhere* near as bad. A few times he reported what might be a one on a one-to-ten pain scale. Done; kaput. Must have been too little rest, nibble and sip.

Mitch and I were determined to circle the great hole. Sure, he was anxious about his knee, but round two was flawless. Further research had led to our insertion onto the Loowit at the Windy Pass trailhead instead, again clockwise. Indeed, start there if you take on the Loowit. The first day is far, far easier than inserting at the climbers bivouac.

Although most folks do the 34-mile journey in three days, we were prepared for six, allowing for plenty of time to smell the roses. Yeah, right... roses amidst the desolate Loowit?

Well, sort of. Amidst miles and miles of moonscape we came upon several places where springs found their way to the surface, empowering explosions of outrageous wildflowers. Each oasis compelled us to rest, relax and, indeed, smell the roses.

While much of the route walks through scenes obliterated on May 18, 34 years ago, other sections were seemingly untouched. These areas range from traditional forests to mud flows, worm flows and debris fields from prior eruptions, some ancient.

The trail's final third is the 'restricted zone' - the blast area - a 10-mile wide stretch in which no camping is permitted due to its fragility and sensitivity. It's here, if you're lucky, that you'll run into herds of Roosevelt Elk like we did.



A Sparkling 'Oasis'  
Photo by Rick Dubrow

In places, the terrain looks like it was torn apart just yesterday. Not a landscape that's been slowly eroded by a babbling brook but one torn, blasted, and ripped

apart by forces that get inside of you as you touch its aftermath. The breach. The restricted zone. Loowit Falls: draining one of the world's increasingly rare, growing glaciers, a bagel-shaped mass of ice that now surrounds the dome inside the crater.

You owe it to yourself to know this place. It is a place seductive enough to bring Mitch back to try a second time around.

Circumambulate. Feel the nourishment of walking completely around a place so raw, so near, so violent... yet at the same time, so peaceful. Desolation and oasis. Volcanic dust and rocks. A living, heaving planet.

And we're not talking about a lot of elevation gain. Six thousand feet of vertical gain over 34 miles, walking in a band around the great hole that ranges in elevation from 3,500 to 4,700 vertical feet. Up 'n down some, sure. High and outside, no doubt. Around?

One hopes.

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