

Mission Completed
- A Novice Long Distance Hiker's
Training Towards Gin's 26 miles



By James Wang
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“James, please do not bring any more soda or cheese burg when you hike with us next time, such food is ‘unprofessional’ and will damage your body during intensive exercises.” I still remembered the words which Su gave me a year ago during my first hiking trip with CMCNY. Back then I was an average boy who was cautious of outdoor activities but did not know how to start. I found CMCNY accidentally by some online search of local hiking communities. Looking back, it is a complicated and strange feeling that a year later, such an inexperienced hiker actually trained and completed Gin’s 26 miles challenge—CMCNY’s most difficult annual hike in memory of Gin Goon, the co-founder of CMCNY.

After I registered for the AT hiking challenge back in last September and expressed my interest to join the next Gin’s 26 miles hiking challenge, George and Mr. Chen agreed to give me an early start of the training (3 months before the official training) if I am able get up early enough to catch George’s car pool at 6:15AM on Saturday morning. I thought about it and agreed. First, I wanted to lose some weight. Second, I thought the regular Lev B and Lev C hikes are too unchallenging for me and I want to do something which can truly improve my hiking skills.

The training with George and Mr. Chen turned out to be tougher than I thought. I ran out of energy almost every afternoon and had to drag feet for the last few hours back to the parking lot. “James, this is an 8 hours and 18 miles loop. Yet it current takes you more than 10 hours to finish it. You must improve your pace and take fewer breaks, or you will not make the actual 26 miles before the sunset”. I heard this so many times from George as he drove me back to the city after each workout. Despite being ridiculously slow and two times I even had to turn on my headlight because I wasn’t able to make it back to the parking lot before the sky turned dark, Mr. Chen and George stayed with me on the trail and taught me some hiking basics which I failed to learn when I was with hiking with the Big Lev B and Lev C groups. Some of them may seem common sense to people such as looking out for trails when you are hiking and don’t wonder off everywhere. Three months of unofficial bi-weekly training with Mr. Chen and George passed quickly. My 18 mile pace had improved from 10.5 hours to around 9 hours. It is still not a great time, but at least assumes if I can keep the extra 8 miles at 2 miles/hour, I will be able to finish Gin’s Annual Hike at around 7:00PM, which is one hour before the sunset. Other than the pace, most importantly I was finally able to independently hike on my own with my map. This is critical because Mr. Chen and George will not be able to stay with me when the official training starts, and I will be expected to hike on my own pace and return to the parking lot at the expected time.



Training with Mr. Chen and George right before the Thunderstorm.

The official training started at the end of January. There are twelve training sessions which will lead to the Gin's 26 miles hiking on April 21, 2012. I was excited about the training and wished to test out my improved pace. The first few weeks of the training went fine as I was going faster and faster on the downhill. A couple times I even outran Mr. Chen and Chung when going down on the Carr Pond Mountain in the afternoon. Unfortunately little did I know the consequence of doing so until much later. Two months into the training, I experienced increasing pain near my knee cap especially when I ran. During one of my weekday workout in the gym, I almost fell on the treadmill because of such pain. The feeling was similar to the "runner's knee symptom" which I suffered back in my high schools' cross country races. Perhaps as a beginner long distance hiker, I really should not push too hard during the first few training sessions, as doing so may wear down my body for future trainings. As the official training progresses to the very end, I also realize the number of people who show up to the training had started to decrease. Maybe week after week of intensity hiking had started to tire out a lot of people.



26 miles training session 1.

One month before the Gin's 26 miles event, the team increased its training to about 23-26 miles every weekend. During some of these weekends, Mr. Chen would even push himself further to finish the Gin's 26 miles loop. As for me, I stayed with my own pace in the back and take necessary convenience cuts along the course to avoid hills that have too steep descents. In the end, I did two 23 miles and one 25 miles in three weeks. Although I was the last one to finish the training during these final weeks, I was OK with that. After all, the fast hikers are attempting to finish their 26 miles within 11 hours. Such time is not and will not be my goal until many years to come. All I wanted to accomplish at this point is to make it to the finishing line on April 21 before the sunset. That gives me a total of 14 hours.

The weekend before the Gin's 26 miles challenge, I decided to take the Saturday off from training and joined a 12 miles hike with the regular Lev C group to relax my muscle and give my body a chance to recover after 70+ miles hiking in the past three weekends. Overall, I hiked about 200 miles in 12 weeks. Below are the brief notes I took from each hike.

Week	Mileage	Notes
1	18	8 hours and 35 minutes, Johnstontown to Fingerboard Mountain loop
2	20	9 hours and 32 minutes, Johnstontown to Water Tower loop
3	15	Snow Hike, Johnstontown to Valley of Boulders loop
4	17	Johnstontown to Island River Loop
5	19	8 hours 20 minutes. Snow Hike, Tuxedo Park to Big Hill loop.
6	8	Hike cancelled on Saturday due to heavy rain. Did 8 miles backpacking with Nature You Club on Sunday
7	N/A	Ski Trip

8	18	8 hours and 15 minutes, Lake Askoti to Pingypt Mountain to Time Square Loop.
9	23	10 hours and 45 minutes. Tuxedo Park to Blue Beech Trail to Big Hill Shelter Loop. Missed the trail so many times and had to go back to find it.
10	23	10 hours and 30 minutes rain hike. Tuxedo Park to Blue Beech Trail to Big Hill Shelter Loop
11	25	11 hours and 15 minutes, Tuxedo park to Palisades Parkway to Johnstown loop.
12	12	6 miles backpacking hike and 6 miles regular hike.
Total	198	

The few days before the 26 miles hike turned out to be very tough for me. I used to have spring allergies every year, but this year was really bad. It hadn't been raining for almost three weeks. Therefore the tree pollens were accumulating each day. I had running noses for the entire night and shortness in breath in the early morning. I suffered from either insomnia or very poor sleep for the entire week lead to the 26 miles hiking. I also emailed Chung on Wednesday that if I don't feel well during the day of 26 miles, then I may take some shortcut or ask for pick up before the finishing line.

This year's 26 miles turned out to be another one of the CMCNY's record. There are 18 people who participated the hike, which 6 of them are first time 26 miles hikers. Since everyone's pace was different, it is expected that the not all 18 people would hike together. It turned out Helen, Chi, Sandy, H.Y, Tony and Seita were in the first wave, they left before my driver had arrived at Tuxedo Park Station. Ivy, Kevin, George and Martin were the second wave. Leo, Chung, Masa, and I were the third wave and everyone else is in the back. Chung and Annie are faster hikers who could join the first wave, but they decide to relax a little bit today and hike at a slower pace. Feng started his hike late, but due to his turbo speed, he eventually caught up with the first group in the afternoon.

The first six miles went fast despite we have to climb over Blackash, Park Cabin, Tom Jones and Blackrock Mountain. We caught up with Tony and H.Y right before Time Square and took a short break for group pictures. So far I did not walk the Victory Blue shortcut which I planned to use and still felt all right with my knees. "James, your got to believe in yourself and don't get too stressed out over challenges. " I thought about the email which Chung, PaoPao and Ellen replied me on Wednesday. Maybe they are right; I have already become a better hiker than what I was six months ago and there is no need for me to take any shortcut on the Gin's 26 miles event.



Our team at Time Square, 6.5 miles check point.

The 5 miles Red Cross trail was the easiest part of the 26 miles hike. Other than a few up and downs in the beginning, the trail remained relatively flat. However, there are a lot of service roads which intersects with the trail. One has to be careful to look for the trail blazer and stick with the trail, or it would be very easy to hike the wrong way. In fact, I believe some trail maintenance is necessary for this trail. Some of the blazers were totally worn out and there are some sections which missed blazers for important turns. Fortunately I had Leo, Chung and Tony to lead this section while Masa and I just followed them to ensure that we are always on the right track. We made to the Palisades Parkway at 11:00am and decide it's time for a snack break. Although the flat red trail had helped me to recover from the up and downs on the R&D trail in the early morning, I knew such break is very important because the most difficult part of today's hike is approaching in just a few minutes.

The Suffern-Bear Mountain (SBM) Trail is one of the most challenge trails in the Harriman State Park. I still remembered Thomas told me the other day that I should try a through hike of the SBM trail when I become stronger someday. The 26 miles hiking today only consisted of 7 miles of the SBM trail. But I think I started to understand the difficulty of the trail. It was almost noon and the temperature started to rise quickly because the sun had come out. The long slopes of the Pines and the Pingypt Mountain proved to be the most challenge uphill slope that I ever walked today. On my way up to the Pingypt Mountain, I had to use the "resting step" that I learned from the book which Ben lent me the other day to prevent taking any breaks. By the time I reached the top of the Pingypt Mountain, I had a minor headache due to the heat from the sun. I took two pills of Aspirin and started to drink a lot of water to hydrate myself because I knew my mind must be clear to go down the steep cliff of the ScuttMemorial. "James and Masa, if you cannot go down the cliff using your legs, just sit down and slide, that is much safer." Leo advised us. Well, that is exactly what Masa and I did for the next 20 minutes on such cliff.

As I am sliding myself slowly down the cliff, I also thank god that it did not rain today, otherwise such spot would be very dangerous.



I hate this cliff! Please do not ask me to hike this place all by myself.

After cross Lake Welch Drive, we caught up with the people from the second wave as they were taking their lunch break near a running water stream. They were finishing up and ready to leave. However, they changed their mind and stayed with us for an extra 10 minutes until our group finishes our lunch. That is a total 30 minutes lunch break for the people in the second wave. Such long break is very rare even during any training sessions, let alone the actual Gin's 26 miles hike. So far we have hiked 15 miles in total, and I almost depleted the 4 liters of water supply that I carried in my backpack. To ensure that I can stay hydrated for the next two miles, I refilled half liter of water from the water stream while eating my sandwich. The cold water from the stream was extremely refreshing and I also used it to wash my face.

Two miles up to the Irish Potato was not steep but long. The half liters of cold water that I filled during the lunch break did not last long as I consumed all before even reaching Irish Potato. My group reached the water station at Route 106 parking lot (foot of Jackie Jones Mountain) around 1:30PM and we are relieved that the most difficult part of the 26 miles hike is finished. A few days before the hike, I called PaoPao, one of the leaders of today's Lev B supporting team, to bring me a can of red bull energy drink and place it near her car. I am so glad when I found she did that. While consuming the energy drink and refill my water supply, I decide to leave my backpack in the parking lot and only carry what I really needed for the remaining 9 miles. Those include 1.5 liters of water (in three bottles), 1 banana, 1 pear and a couple snack bars. I stuff

them in the small waist bag which Ben gave me the other day, tied the bag and my jacket around my waist and moved on with the group. I am not worried about my backpack since I already told PaoPao the other day to put it in her car when she finishes her hiking and I will pick it up from her some days later.



Water Station, my Red Bull Energy Drink awaits me there

The power from the energy drink and hiking without my backpack actually helped me to regain my strength back (thanks again, PaoPao). The next two miles over the Jackie Jones Mountain and Fire Tower was relatively easy for me. I walked fast in the front and eventually met the hikers of our Lev B supporting team. They are finishing their 6 miles hiking today and heading back to the parking lot. When we reached the Big Hill Shelter at 2:30PM, we noticed that our 19 miles supporting team was still there for their snack break. Some of them were shocked that the 26 miles team hiked so fast this year.

“James, you need to re-fold and re-tie your jacket; it looks really sloppy on you.” Nancy said it to me as I was about to leave the shelter. During normal level B and C hiking trips, I would stop and fix my clothes before moving on. But somehow I didn’t feel like doing it today. The tree pollens were getting heavier in the afternoon. As much as I love to hike slowly with the 19 miles group to the finishing line, I need to make it back to the parking lot quick and sit in the car to avoid further breathing problems.

The 4.5 miles from Big Hill Shelter to Lake Sebago was mostly downhill. Although I had minor knee pain since morning, the condition stayed stable because I controlled my pace throughout the course and did not run at all on the downhills. Also, I like to thank the tea which Wendy shared me at the Big Hill Shelter. After 20+ miles hiking, such taste is delicious and also

provided me some temporary energy boost. Leo, Masa and I reached Lake Sebago at 4:30PM and we took our last snack break near the lake.



Grateful that PaoPao allowed me to leave my backpack with her, now I am really light.

"The last three miles will be a test of our determination, the path will remain up and down to the very end, but we can do it." I said it to Leo and Masa before we stand up. Perhaps I overestimated the last three miles, or perhaps my leg muscles were already use to the up and downs for the last 11 hours, the hills for the last three miles did not give me any problems at all. We caught up with Chung near Claudius Smith Den and he congratulated us that we did an excellent job today. Leo, Masa and I arrived at the Tuxedo Station Parking lot at 6:03PM and the 26 mile hikers from the first and the second wave were already sitting there and waiting for us. The fast hikers such as Helen and Chi finished their hike before 5PM.



Finished, can't believe I really did it, thanks to everyone who supported me.

I smiled as I never thought I could complete 26 miles within 12 hours (11 hours and 59 minutes was the official time for Leo, Masa and I), especially considering I suffered knee pain for weeks and unable to sleep well the week before the hike. Besides completing the hike, I also discovered the hiking style that is currently suitable for me. Considering the fact that I lack proper body coordination, it is best for me to hike slow but steady. In other words, try to keep the pace even throughout the entire course without any sudden increase or decrease in speed.

Well, this is one 26 miles and there will be many more to come in the future. I sincerely hope everyone who trained with me will be back again next year and we certainly welcome new trainees to join us. "Remember, Gin's 26 miles hike is more than just a one day long hike, it's a life time commitment towards healthier life style." Mr. Chen's words start to remind me again as I am writing this article, and I think I am starting to understand them now.