

Scaling new heights

Baker City native Jason Hardrath turned a severe injury into motivation

By LISA BRITTON
Baker City Herald



Jason Hardrath/Contributed Photo
Jason Hardrath's adventure to log 100 fastest known times (FKTs) is documented in the film "Journey to 100."



Jason Hardrath/Contributed Photo
After a car accident derailed his running career, Baker City native Jason Hardrath turned his attention first to rehabilitation, then mountain climbing.



Contributed Photo
"Journey to 100" was produced by WZRD Media and Athletic Brewing Co.

BAKER CITY — Jason Hardrath is no stranger to challenges, especially those that push him to his physical limits.

Hardrath, 33, grew up in Baker City. He started running in middle school, ran competitively for Corban University in Salem, and celebrated his college graduation by bicycling from the Pacific Ocean to the Atlantic Ocean in 50 days.

Then he started running marathons, progressing to triathlons, which include swimming, running and bicycling segments.

But then came 2015 and a car accident. He tore up a knee, broke his shoulder, broke ribs, collapsed one lung and damaged internal organs.

His doctor told Hardrath he'd probably never run again. "He said, 'Yeah, you're probably going to let that part of your life go.'"

Hardrath was 25. "I remember my spirit sinking at first," he said.

Then came the spark, and his determination, and this thought:

"You don't know me. You just wait and watch."

From physical therapy to mountain peaks

His recovery wasn't easy — he had physical therapy, and worked on his own to improve his range of motion.

"Finding every which way to keep moving forward," he said.

Running didn't work, but he could walk. And then he started hiking.

"I can't run, but what can I do? I guess I'm a hiker now," he said.

Part of Hardrath's story is about having ADHD — attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.

"I still don't sit still well," he said.

He said his mom, Kathy, researched as much as she could about ADHD when he was a child.

"Her support was huge to my resilience," he said. "She hunted to find every bit she could learn to understand this crazy little kid she had."

With ADHD, Hardrath said he can experience extremes: ranging from being completely unfocused (when he has to fill out paperwork, for instance), or hyper focused on a task.

It was that latter approach that surfaced when he started hiking.

"Hills led to small mountains. Small mountains led to big mountains," he said.

Next came technical climbs, so he joined a climbing gym to learn this new skill.

He struggled at first.

"It was a lesson in being brave enough to suck at something new," he said with a laugh. "11-year-olds were better than me."

But he persisted to learn rope skills and climbing movements, and gain upper body strength.

"That was a long, hard process," he said.

Eventually he returned to running, but he moved at a slower pace than during his triathlon days.

But as he ran trails, and hiked mountains and scaled peaks, he started thinking bigger.

"Let's see if I can climb one or two in a day," he said.

Then Hardrath discovered something called FKTs — fastest known times.

Essentially, these are a log of routes and the person who recorded the fastest known time to reach a peak.

Suddenly he had a new challenge.

The way he orients his life, he said, is "by pursuing challenges, growth, the next big goal."

Chasing FKTs, he said, helped him "reclaim personal power and independence."

"Physical pursuits is how I expressed myself," Hardrath said.

that much time — he only had 70 days at the most, during his summer vacation.

"No one had ever done it in a single season," he said.

He wanted to do it in 50 days.

"They're big, but also remote," he said. "It was a wild logistical challenge, as well as a physical challenge."

A connection

As he logged FKTs, Hardrath was invited to participate in several podcasts. One of those episodes caught the notice of the founder of Athletic Brewing Co.

They exchanged messages, and Hardrath learned that the company wanted to support his journey.

Soon Hardrath had help with gas money.

"That really helps, on a teacher's salary, to make these adventures happen," he said.

He shared detailed trip logs, and soon the idea emerged to document his journey to logging 100 FKTs.

That footage, gathered leading up to his 100th FKT, resulted in the film "Journey to 100," a 30-minute documentary released this spring by Athletic Brewing Co. and WZRD Media.

Hardrath often talks about his adventures with his P.E. students, who range from kindergartners to sixth-graders.

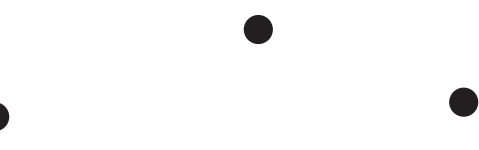
He hopes to instill the belief that anything is possible.

"I've been doing this, in part, to inspire students," he said. "To mentor and encourage the next generation — I went and did this thing that was supposedly impossible."

And he keeps moving forward — his next idea, for the summer of 2023, is to complete the Rockies Grand Slam of 120 peaks.

He'd be joined by Nathan Longhurst, who accompanied him on some Bulger List hikes and is now working on the Sierra Peaks Section List of bagging 247 peaks.

"To see an athlete fall in love with what I love — I want to support that," Hardrath said.



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THE NATURAL WORLD

Return of the night eel

It is a breezy day in late May and I am knee deep in the Umatilla River. Flows dropped enough following a recent surge of snowmelt and rainfall to allow for safe wading. Cliff swallows carve a graceful path through the air as they pick moth-like caddisflies from the water's surface. The honey-sweet odor of wispy cottonwood bloom floods the air. Water cascading from upstream rapids masks the sound of nearby freeway traffic.

I stand still as a post where a patch of loose gravel has collected atop ancient lava flow and watch a pair of Pacific lamprey wriggle in gentle current. Named the "night eel" because of their nocturnal behavior and serpentine shape, lamprey lack the backbone of true eels that spawn in the Sargasso Sea. Without paired fins to maneuver and an air bladder to stay buoyant, they are more challenged than a '49 Ford on a Los Angeles freeway. What lamprey do possess, though, is the ability to navigate rock-faced falls using their sucking mouth to grab hold and flexible tail to corkscrew up and over.

Adult lampreys migrate from the Pacific Ocean from May to September and "hold over" in mainstem reservoirs of the Columbia and Snake Rivers before spawning the following year. Their appearance in Blue Mountain streams coincides with the spring migration of chinook salmon, welcome bloom of arrowleaf balsamroot and the joyful song of meadowlark.

Both sexes of Pacific lamprey build a nest in sandy gravel via body vibrations and by moving small rocks with their mouth. After eggs hatch, the larvae or ammocoete burrow into the river bottom to feed on microscopic algae for 5 to 7 years. During this time, the juvenile form has an oral hood, lack teeth and eyes are underdeveloped.

Lampreys the size of a small garter snake emerge from their burrow and begin a lengthy, danger-fraught journey to the Pacific Ocean under the cover of spring freshets. Only after they transform to the young adult stage do they attach to other fish and suck body fluid and blood for nourishment.

Adult Pacific lamprey have no value to sport anglers (except for use as sturgeon bait). However, they are part of the food web for sea lion, white sturgeon and fish-eating birds. Similar to Pacific salmon, the spent carcasses of sea-going lamprey contribute ocean-derived nutrients to tributary streams.

Coincident with hydroelectric dam development in the Columbia River, numbers of adult lampreys migrating over Bonneville Dam declined from 350,000 in the 1960s to 22,000 in 1997. A similar pattern of decline was observed in the Snake River after completion of the Hells Canyon complex and the four lower Snake River dams in the 1960s. Loss of critical tributary habitat from poor irrigation

practices, deforestation, grazing and treatment with rotenone to poison "trash fish" added to the toll. That juvenile lamprey are poor swimmers and have a bottom-dwelling lifestyle make them particularly vulnerable to introduced bass, walleye and channel catfish.

Regional Indian tribes and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service lead conservation efforts to restore runs of Pacific lamprey populations. Lampreys dried in the sun or roasted over wood coals are considered a delicacy by tribal elders. Translocation, or placing adult lamprey in Columbia Basin streams where populations were formerly present, has produced promising results in several streams, including the Umatilla, Yakima, Methow, Wenatchee and Clearwater rivers. In some cases, numbers of returning fish have been large enough to support a modest subsistence fishery for tribal members.

The anthropologist Eugene Hunn wrote how Sahaptin-speaking peoples from the mid-Columbia intercepted a spawning run of "eels" during a 19th century spring root-gathering excursion up the John Day River. At large falls such as Celilo and Kettle, migrating lampreys were collected off rocks where they attached to rest. A tradition of tribal harvest continues today at Oregon's Willamette Falls.

The Wanapum Tribe tells of an important fishery near Pasco, Washington, a location referred to as Kosith or "at the point of land." Adult lamprey congregated there, perhaps confused by flow from three adjacent rivers, and were caught at night from canoes by Indian fishers who used dip nets made of hemp. The flooded backwater of McNary Dam put a stop to that practice.

The Snake River near Asotin, Washington, was another traditional harvest location for Indian fishers. An 1892 report of the United States Fish Commission described the occurrence of this revered "three-toothed" lamprey as far upriver as Lower Salmon Falls. Nez Perce elders still share stories of catching "eels" as young children in the Clearwater River.

Dark clouds loom overhead. Behind me, on a shoreline lined with brush willow, a redwing blackbird struggles to balance on a branch that sways with each gust of wind. A thunderstorm is in the works. Three lamprey as long as my arm swim into the shallow riffle at my feet and join the party. One male grasps a female with his sucking mouth. Their bodies twist and intertwine. Eggs and milt mix their life energy with the river.

The ancient night eel has survived against all odds for thousands of years. Bearing witness to their return assures the circle of life is not broken.

Dennis Dauble is a retired fishery scientist, outdoor writer, presenter and educator who lives in Richland, Washington. For more stories about fish and fishing in area waters, see DennisDaubleBooks.com.



Dennis Dauble



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