



Inside Dale "Greybeard" Sanders's Quest to Thru-Hike the Appalachian Trail at Age 90

An AT legend hopes to become the first person to thru-hike the trail in their tenth decade—and the man whose record he’s trying to break is along for the ride.



Greybeard takes a minute to pose on the trail. (Photo: Courtesy Dale "Greybeard" Sanders)



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In 2021, after a thru-hike that lasted 262 days, 83-year-old [M.J. "Nimblewill Nomad" Eberhart](#) became the oldest person to complete the Appalachian Trail in a season when he strode into Dalton, Massachusetts. There to congratulate him was his friend and the former recordholder Dale "Greybeard" Sanders, who handed Eberhart a custom-made walking stick at the finish line. Now, Sanders himself is a quarter of the way to reclaiming his record at the age of 90, and Eberhart is cheering him on at every step of the journey.

To date, just a handful of hikers have dared to attempt a thru-hike of the AT in their ninth decade. Most recently, [Betty “Legend” Kellenberger set the women’s record](#) when she completed the trail at age 80 last month. On the men’s side, Eberhart and Sanders have been duking it out for about a decade, each attempting to one-up the other to reclaim their hard-earned title.

Sanders began his latest AT thru-hike by walking south from Harpers Ferry on September 6, “trying to follow the warmth, the sun, and the colors south.” His plan, he told *Backpacker*, is to make it to Springer Mountain before taking the holidays off to be with his family, then heading north. If all goes according to plan, he’ll hit Katahdin around July after 10 months on the trail.

Although Sanders trained for six months before stepping foot on the Appalachian Trail this fall, he admitted that he’s feeling the passage of years since his last record-breaking hike.

“The hills and the mountains are a lot harder to climb now than they were when I was 82,” he said.



If all goes well, Greybeard will reach Katahdin around next July, roughly 10 months after he left. (Photo: Courtesy Dale “Greybeard” Sanders)

A Hike Fueled by Determination

Sanders took 10 months to complete the trail in 2017, but he spent two and a half of those months off-trail because of injuries. In one incident, internal bleeding landed him in the emergency room in Maine. The doctors wanted to admit him to the hospital, but Sanders took matters into his own hands: “I got out of my gown and put my clothes on, and went out and got in my car and drove home to [my wife]” There, he discovered the source of his bleeding: a bad hemorrhoid. After cauterizing it, he was back on trail in just a few days.

Sanders traces his unwillingness to give up to his childhood.

“Ever since high school, I’ve had this competitive spirit,” he said. “I got that as a result of being bullied.” As a teenager, Sanders took up acrobatics, and the bullying lessened as his strength and agility improved.

Since then, he’s added dozens of athletic accomplishments to his resume. At age 30, the International Underwater Spearfishing Association named him their athlete of the year, awarding him a gold medal that he still keeps in a frame at his house. At 80 and 87, he set age records for canoeing the Mississippi River. And at 87, he set a Guinness World Record as the oldest person to hike Rim-to-Rim-to-Rim in the Grand Canyon.

What it Takes to Set an Age Record on the Appalachian Trail

If Eberhart and Sanders are rivals, they’re supremely friendly ones. The pair have been cheering each other on for more than a decade; two months into Sanders’s journey, Eberhart hiked part of the way with him and has provided logistical support on the trail.

“Can you believe that?” Sanders said. “The guy that broke my achy age record is with me, helping me break his record.”

One reason for the duo’s mutual respect: their rare perspective.

“Perhaps there’s one other person in the world that understands what Greybeard is going through,” Eberhart explained. While Eberhart is three years younger than Sanders, the duo shares a bond because of their shared dance with the impossible. In the same way Sanders understood the depth of Eberhart’s record-setting hike in 2021, Eberhart recognizes how much it will take for Sanders to become successful in 2026.

“A couple of months into this, it kind of dawned on me that [there’s a reason why 83-year-olds don’t do this](#),” Eberhart told *Backpacker* after breaking the record four years ago. In 2021, Eberhart didn’t go more than three days without taking a fall. But despite regular scrapes, “I was able to get up and keep going,” he said.

Relative to his age, Eberhart says that Sanders’ reflexes and balance are in great shape.

“I’ve watched him real closely because I’ve been supporting him,” he said. “At the end of the day you’d think he’d be totally wiped out. He still has a bounce in his steps,” said Eberhart.



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Future Age Record Attempts on the Appalachian Trail

Sanders and Eberhart have traded the title for the oldest person to thru-hike the Appalachian Trail more than once. But even as he enters his tenth decade, Sanders said, he doesn’t expect this hike to be the end of their competition.

In three years, Eberhart will be a few months older than Sanders is now. If Sanders manages to take Eberhart’s record in 2026, it’ll just be a matter of time before Eberhart returns to the trail to reclaim it.

“He says he’s going to go back and take my record away from me, “ said Sanders.

Eberhart admitted he can’t know for sure where he’ll be in three years, but that didn’t stop him from joking about it. On one occasion, Eberhart asked if Sanders still had mobility in his neck, telling him he will need it when Eberhart comes up behind him to claim his new record.

In the meantime, the pair is focused on the task at hand—and optimistic that, as in 2021, there will be a baton to pass at the end of this hike.

“[There’s a] pretty good chance somebody will have a hiking stick made,” Eberhart laughed.

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