

Athlete Profile: Erik Schlimmer

By Shannon Brescher

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Erik Schlimmer relishes being different. Unlike some people, who express their uniqueness through their clothes, hair or reading material, he chooses to do so by solo hiking the mountains of New York above 3,500 feet in winter, mountain biking the United States-Mexico border, and developing the Western States Mountain Bike Route, America's newest and longest mountain bike pathway.

However, Erik was not always obsessed with outdoor adventure. He spent a large part of his childhood in Poughkeepsie, where he worked and played like any other suburban child. In 1986, his family moved to the small Adirondack town of Chestertown, opening up an entirely new world to him. "After moving to Chestertown, I realized that my entire urban infrastructure was gone," he said. "Instead of going to all of these urban entertainment centers, kids hung out in the woods... they fished, they hiked." He quickly became one of those "outdoorsy" people, spending his free time in the nearby forests.

After high school, Erik entered the Army as a paratrooper. There, he began mountain bike racing and progressed to the National Off-Road Bicycle Association's expert level. However, a serious parachuting accident in 1995 that fractured his T-1 vertebrae ended his professional racing career before it barely started. Along with shattering his hopes for a professional biking career, Erik's experience in the military also inspired his ultralight backpacking philosophy. The tremendous weight he had to carry on his back in the Army dampened his love of hiking for a time. "When I got out of the Army, I didn't hike for years because I was so sick of carrying things," he said.

However, once he discovered how to drastically reduce his load, his enthusiasm for the sport increased again. "I found the lighter and lighter my pack got, the more fun I had." Now he evangelizes the gospel of simplistic packing. After rediscovering his love for backpacking, he has hiked the Northeast's 770 peaks over 3,000 feet, the 131 mountains of New York above 3,500 feet in winter, and more than 3,000 miles worth of trails. Drawing on these experiences, last year he authored *Thru Hiker's Guide to*

America: 25 Incredible Trails You Can Hike in One to Eight Weeks, published by McGraw Hill.

Following his return to hiking, Erik resumed mountain biking in the late 1990s and combined his love for long-distance trips and biking in 2002. Since then, he has been the first person to solo bike the 790-mile Arizona Trail Corridor, the length of the United States-Mexico border, and the 2,640-mile Western States Mountain Bike Route from Canada to Mexico.

Although his choice of routes surprises some, Erik says that they are a natural outgrowth of his personality. He enjoys taking paths that others have not and adventuring in ways that no one has imagined. “The primary reason for picking these routes is just to do things that are unique. I never enjoyed being part of a crowd,” he said. “Some people can work nine to five and retire and do that whole lifestyle that a lot of other people do. But for some reason, I’ve just never been able to be happy there.”

Instead, he has devoted his career to the outdoors, a place he finds himself at home in, despite some of the environmental conditions. “I’m usually comfortable in situations that most people would find uncomfortable,” he said. “I’ll have a tougher time spending a day at the mall than snowshoeing up a mountain in a blinding snowstorm.”

One of Erik’s hiking partners, Christy Blanchard of Asheville, North Carolina, says that his positive attitude makes him an excellent hiking partner. “Every time we hike together, we laugh,” she said. “Bushwhacking is serious and every hike is an adventure.”

Although Erik’s adventuring has brought him to locales all over the country, his hometown of Chestertown remains his favorite place to hike. “I like it because it’s going back to my roots,” he said. “None of the trips I’ve taken have ever been better than just taking a naïve, simple hike through a patch of woods near my hometown.”

Besides a fondness for Chestertown, he loves the Adirondacks for their tremendous size and wildness. Unlike the West, the Adirondacks are relatively untouched by the logging industry. “I’m the type of guy that the wilder, the better,” he said. “I enjoy areas people don’t hike in. I enjoy areas without trails, for example.”

However, of all of his adventures, Erik said the most challenging was his foray from Canada to Mexico on the Western States Mountain Bike Route. Besides the ecological shifts from mountains to deserts, Erik faced his most frightening outdoor

experience on that trip. As he was biking across Montana's Kootenai National Forest, thunderstorms began developing. Despite the weather, he continued on, attempting to get in as many miles as possible for the day. While he was biking across a large, open meadow, a bolt of lightning ripped across the sky and struck a tree right in Erik's path. A huge explosion and bright blue flash left Erik mentally stunned. He sprinted across the meadow and into a forest where he crashed his bike and ran away from it as quickly as possible. "It was very overwhelming, the sound and the light, that I almost began to cry," he said. "That was one of the dumbest things I've ever done."

Luckily for audiences, Erik has learned many lessons and is very willing to share them. Through slideshows and speeches, he describes his adventures, and then explains how to apply the skills he learned from them to everyday life. In particular, he makes an effort to balance the descriptions of both the thrilling, adrenaline-rush adventures and the beauty of the land and its citizens. "At least for me, half is the adventure. The other half for me is the nature of the trip; the topography, the ecology," he said. "But when I write articles and do public speaking, it's more about the journey and the life skills."

Even though most people may not be able to replicate his experiences, Erik inspires them to find their own brand of adventure, according to Ed Gardner, a longtime friend and co-owner of Wooden Ski and Wheel in Plattsburgh, New York. "He inspires the adventurer to come out of our 'do not disturb' room and take hold," he said. "Erik walks to a different drummer, but it's not just about himself. He's proclaiming it to everyone. But, he's doing it first; kind of like a civilized Sir Edmund Hillary."

Like that famed adventurer, Erik hopes to continue his unique journeys for a long time, inspiring and teaching audiences as he bikes and hikes his way across America. More information is available on his website, www.erikschlimmer.com.