
FOR 82-YEAR-OLD, 3,500 MILES A YEAR IS JUST... A WALK IN THE PARK: [Broward Metro Edition]

Nick Sortal Staff Writer. South Florida Sun - Sentinel. Fort Lauderdale, Fla.: Dec 30, 2003. pg. 1.E

Full Text (1102 words)

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DONALD ROLAND MILLER

The sun isn't up yet, but Donald Miller locks his second-story apartment and eases down the stairs to the ground floor. It takes a few seconds to get the morning creaks out.

He's an 82-year-old man going on a 10-mile walk.

"Gonna be a nice one today," he says, but you get the feeling that's his line every day before going around and through Plantation Central Park.

Because he's consistent.

He has walked every day this year, he says, and in each of the past 17 years he has at least walked the equivalent of Maine to San Diego, Calif.

Just for the fun of it.

About 6 a.m., Miller heads toward Cleary Boulevard. It'll be about 2 miles to Nob Hill Road. The traffic is just awakening and the RPMs are the lowest they'll be for the next three hours.

He wears the same blue-gray pants, Kmart T-shirt and white visor. When they deteriorate, he replaces them with the most economical replicas.

He likes it simple.

His walking record was 5,300 miles when he was 72. But even this year, admittedly slowing down and going easier on weekends, he'll stroll more than 3,500. The 17-year grand journey: about 74,000 miles.

He's not a slave to his route. He's not beholden to time. He does not have a family to report to. He even is free enough to step on the sidewalk cracks.

On this day, to get in another mile, Miller doubles back three times along Nob Hill Road. Jack Fisher, a crossing guard for nearby Central Park Elementary School, starts his shift at 7 a.m. and the pair often discuss the Dolphins, the Marlins, the Heat -- and the heat.

Fisher has stood at this corner for five years, watching Miller walk through the rain, usually without a jacket, and the humidity, still in his long pants.

"I think the walking keeps him going," says Fisher, also 82. "He's here every single day. Unbelievable."

By 8 a.m. Miller has taken a shady route past a dozen developments, catching Broward Boulevard and heading east. He pulls on his visor as the maintenance crews fire up their mowers and the rush-hour crowd accelerates through yellow lights. His story unfolds with each step.

The details: Mr. Miller was born in South Dakota, grew up in San Antonio, Texas, and played baseball, football

and basketball, but wasn't anything that special, he says. In 1942 he joined the military and left it 12 years later to care for a mother who had a stroke and a father with arthritis. He just never got around to dating, let alone marriage.

He spent about two decades as a USDA poultry inspector. He retired at 52, then moved to South Florida three years later, in 1976, after his parents died. He lives off his pension, savings and investment interest.

And he walks.

He always liked to walk, but only began keeping track of mileage in 1985 at age 65. At his peak, he hoofed it for six hours a day.

"I just found myself with a lot of time and not much to do," he says.

He enters Central Park (Mile No. 6) from the south, and acquaintances' waves and greetings invigorate him.

He circles the soccer and baseball fields and meets regulars Vi and Jack Miessau. They're up to eight miles a day.

"I think he's a shining example for all of us," says Vi, 65. "I got my husband walking by telling him that if Donald can do it, so can he."

Leonard "Pete" Peters catches up for a half-hour and confirms the story: Miller is out here every single day, even in the rain.

"He's kind of hard-headed that way," Peters says. "But he's just a polite, Southern gentleman who likes walking. I've never even heard him curse."

(For the record: Miller says he missed one day last year and he had a six-week spell off, probably in 1997, because his right foot was stressed.)

"But I've been very lucky. I've been healthy," he says. The exercise has melted him down from 180-plus to 160 pounds now, thin for a 6-footer.

Miller takes a quick bathroom break, then makes his final meander through Central Park, back to Broward Boulevard. His shoes still look new; he's good about rotating them. Whenever Kmart or Wal-Mart has a sale, he'll buy two or three pairs.

"I'd pay \$30, \$35 for shoes, but never \$60 or \$70," he says. "But I look for shoes with a good heel." He changes them every 500 or 600 miles.

By 9 a.m., starting Mile No. 10, he heads for home. The traffic thins and his pace slows.

"I used to be able to walk 15, 16 miles a day and not even think about it," he says. "Now after about 10, I need to get in a little rest."

He walks through the parking lot past his car, a 5-year-old Ford Escort that just crossed 15,000 miles. On foot, he has logged about 19,000 miles since he bought that car.

"That's astonishing, by any measure," says Mark Fenton, host of the PBS-TV show America's Walking, and a former Olympic-caliber race walker. He says elite competitive race walkers in their prime rarely hit that accumulated mileage for a year. Fenton himself aimed for 3,000, although at a faster pace.

But Miller says it's not all that special.

"You see, that's all I do, and I go home to an apartment," he says. "I don't mow grass or have any chores. I probably don't work out any more than anybody else."

And even Donald Miller has his limits. At 9:21 a.m. he heads toward the stairs and his apartment. But they don't look very appealing.

He takes the elevator.

He'll enjoy a quick rest, a hot shower and breakfast. Then one aspirin, a multivitamin and a smidge of Bengay to his sore right calf. Later in the day, he'll likely drive to a local bowling center, to watch acquaintances, socialize and just kill a couple of hours.

"I don't like staying around much in my apartment," he says. "I like to get out and see what the rest of the world is doing."

Which is why the next day, before sunrise, he'll be up and ready, eager to do it all over again.

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[Illustration]

PHOTO; Caption: IN STEP: Don Miller of Plantation walks every day, rain or shine, around the Central Park area of Plantation. For 17 years, he's been keeping track of his miles, for a total of about 74,000 miles. Staff photo/Lou Toman

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People: Miller, Donald, Fisher, Jack

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