

GIANT STEPS

ON THE ROAD WITH GEORGE MARTIN ON HIS JOURNEY FOR 9/11



THE LONGEST YARDS: Former Giants defensive end George Martin makes his way down a wet, rural highway on his 3,223-mile Journey for 9/11, which he hopes will raise \$10 million for the hero first responders at Ground Zero and their families.



November 18, 2007 -- MORRISTOWN , Tenn. - The rising sun over the Smoky Mountains casts a heavenly glow on an old, red barn.

George Martin played 14 years with the Giants and owns a Super Bowl ring, but he knows this golden moment is one of the more special times in his life of success.

Gallery Of George's Journey

"Look at that sunrise," Martin, an art major at the University of Oregon , says as we walk along the shoulder of state road 11E. "I'm a country boy from Greenville , South Carolina , and I love these old dwellings. You look at them and they tell a story. I like to photograph them because they are going to be fading away from our American history."

The 6-5, 260-pound former defensive end is walking across America with purposeful strides that reveal his athletic prowess every Giant step of the way. He calls it A Journey for 9/11 and Martin will be on the road for nearly six months, but this is really all about coming home.

In some ways as a country, we have lost our way, and that is one of the biggest reasons 54-year-old Martin wanted to reconnect with America in such a personal fashion. This son of a sharecropper who went on to make it in the biggest of cities does not live in his athletic past. Every day is a new challenge.

"This is a journey of destiny," he says. "An absolute blessing."

It's one thing to fly over the country or drive through it. When you walk across America, you begin to understand what this nation and its people are all about.

"There really is purple mountains majesty," Martin says with a smile. "You look at the country differently because every portion has its own character. The thing I love best is that I always had that curiosity as a child: What's around the bend? What's off the beaten path?"

"There's a Bucket List. Before you kick the bucket, there are things you want to do. I want to do this. This is has been a life-affirming event."

The goal is to raise \$10 million for the heroes of 9/11. Don't dare call George Martin a hero. He only rushed quarterbacks. He is here to honor those who rushed into terrible danger at Ground Zero.

"We use the term 'hero' inappropriately," he says. "I've always said I don't consider myself a hero for playing a kid's game at a professional level. Then when you see how some of these so-called professionals defame the industry, it makes a mockery of the term 'hero.'"

"I want to raise awareness about the plight of what I call true heroes, the first responders and the rescue and recovery workers who worked unselfishly to help save people and to find the remains of others," Martin says, his voice rising with passion. "They didn't think twice about helping us. Now they need our help."

"We need to raise money to help with their medical benefits. Whether it's one person we can help or thousands of people, to me, that is worth the journey."

Martin started the journey by walking across the George Washington Bridge on Sept. 16. He plans to cross the Golden Gate Bridge sometime in late February or early March. You can follow his trek every step of the way at www.ajourneyfor911.info.

When his wife Dianne, his high school sweetheart, first heard of the plan, she recalls, "I thought it was crazy, but he always gets these ideas, and I thought if anybody could do it, George could do it."

She was so moved by the project that she left her job running a day-care center for 200 children in Newark to join her husband of 35 years on the road to work as the travel and event coordinator.

George Martin has been averaging about 23 miles per day, but this is a journey that cannot be measured by mile markers and dollar signs. This is a journey of the heart.

Consider these postcards from the first 800 miles of the 3,223-mile, 14-state trip. There was the charter school in Washington, D.C., that welcomed Martin by having its dance group perform "Ease On Down the Road." The children then presented Martin with 911 Susan B. Anthony coins.

"The best part about this journey is that it has destroyed some stereotypes that I had, some misconceptions," says

Martin, always looking to grow as a person. "Growing up in the segregated south, the impression that I had is that there wouldn't be a welcome wagon out here for a black man, but there has been nothing negative in that context, not one single thing."

Support has come from everywhere.

There was the sweet couple in rural Rogersville, Tenn., Richard and Marty Beets, owners of the Pig-N-Chick Restaurant. The traveling party is a team of five. The group was invited to dinner. The owners refused Martin's money. They invited the group back for breakfast the next day, again picked up the check, and arranged for Martin to speak at the grade school and be presented with a key to the city. One of the members of the group suffered a dental emergency. An appointment was made, medicine was purchased and bills were paid by the Beets.

"They literally laid out the red carpet for us and on top of that gave us a cash donation," Martin says of the small-town love given to the group. "I never would have experienced anything like that in a million years if not for this journey."

There have been police escorts and visits to fire stations. Martin says the experience "pumps you up so you just want to walk forever."

Nearly \$1.5 million has been raised. The largest contribution came from Carol and Joseph Reich, \$911,000. The NFL has pledged \$50,000. Grassroots contributions grow by the day as word of the journey spreads.

Every penny helps. To that end, Martin stops and picks up any loose change he spots on the side of the road. On this day, he will log 30 miles, a personal best, and find 89 cents. He keeps the coins in a jar to use as a symbol of the journey.

Inspiration comes in many ways. Several days ago, Martin's cell phone rang. It was Bill Parcells. His old coach taught him so much about being a man and a champion and was still pushing. Parcells bellowed: "Is this Martin? Where are you? You got to get the heck out of Tennessee before it starts snowing."

The coach was right. Later in the week, Martin got hammered by a snow and sleet storm in the mountains.

Parcells ended the conversation this way: "Don't forget, I want you to introduce me when I'm inducted into the Hall of Fame."

Phil Simms and Harry Carson, Martin's Giants fellow co-captains, are on the journey's board of directors. Many ex-teammates have been in touch, including Lawrence Taylor. The 1986 Super Bowl team remains close, which, Martin says, is a tribute to Parcells.

"He taught us not just to be good ballplayers, but be good men," he says. He never talked to you about football terms. He talked to you about life terms."

Consider the grandmother who pulled over in her van and introduced three of her grandsons to Martin.

"She wanted them to see what commitment was, what dedication, and it almost brought me to tears," Martin explains. "I have three sons myself. For a grandmother to take that kind of care, it spoke volumes. I signed autographs, gave them a hug, and you know what happened then, the lady turned around and gave us a few bucks out of her purse

and apologized for not being able to give more."

Martin pauses, gathers himself and adds, "I was speechless."

Other random acts of kindness include the Maryland magician who pulled over and started entertaining Martin and the team. Then there was Sylvia in Virginia, who would find Martin every day over a two-week span, jump out of her van like the A-Team and offer bottled water and words of encouragement.

On this glorious autumn day, Martin rips off 17 miles by lunch. I hang in there for the first 12 miles and add three miles later in the day. My feet are on fire while Martin simply continues to glide along. Drivers pull over and offer cash donations and hugs.

Efficiency is the rule for Martin. He says the journey is similar to his NFL days, with one major exception: "No one has hit me yet." Crossing the finish line, he adds, will be "the greatest individual accomplishment in my life." On Thanksgiving Day, Martin will walk and then the Journey Team will work at a soup kitchen in Nashville .

A home hotel base is established for several days at a time, using a 100-mile radius. Martin is up at 4:45 each morning. He begins the day with a 20-minute hot shower. Staff meetings are held and a detailed breakdown of that day's journey is printed, thanks in large part to the team behind the scenes that includes assistant Jennifer Skor back in Connecticut .

Martin is quick to credit his employer, AXA-Equitable, and company officials Andrew McMahon and Nick Lane , for allowing him to make the trek.

"When I brought this to these guys, they couldn't have been more supportive," says Martin, who has lost 22 pounds.

Martin walks every day but Sunday. He has been through 14 pairs of shoes. General manager and chief technical adviser Lee Reeves, who often walks alongside Martin, says his MBT walking shoes have been a godsend to aid his poor feet.

Though Martin and Reeves, 48, sometimes fight like brothers, Martin says of his longtime friend, "Without Lee's help, I don't think I could have gotten out of New York ... but don't tell him that."

There have been a few bumps along the road. The biggest is that the journey is desperately seeking a hotel sponsor to offset the cost of rooms. One prominent chain just this week declined.

Martin has an RV sponsored by GM, which is used on those occasions when no lodging is available and to move the group and its gear. There is a rotating security officer supplied by security expert Bo Dietl. EMT George Diaz, the youngest of the group at 24, can do a mean imitation of Martin. He is the driver of the specially painted SUV that follows Martin every inch of the way. Each mile traveled, Diaz taps the horn once.

On the Web site, there is GPS tracking of Martin. Schools across the country are having their own walkathons to help raise money and are using the Web site as a teaching tool.

There are two breaks in Martin's schedule. On Dec. 1, his son George is getting married in Mexico . Nine days later, Martin comes back to New York , where he will be presented with the Heisman Humanitarian Award.

Martin should win Sportsman of the Year honors, as well, but he is not looking for glory.

"My dad always said make sure you leave this world a little better than you found it, and I always tried to display that in my actions," he says.

At the end of this perfect day, the road is straight and true. Traffic thins and a peacefulness settles over the highway. The day that began with a brilliant mountain sunrise is ending in even more spectacular fashion, a fiery orange and pink sunset.

"There it is again," Martin says with a smile as we pound along. "This is God's television and there are no reruns. I can't tell you how many times I've seen the sunset and I never get tired of it."

A short while later, Martin crosses the 30-mile marker for the day. Diaz taps the horn one last time. Martin raises his arms in triumph, taking a moment to enjoy the journey.

This is another day well lived.

http://www.nypost.com/seven/11182007/sports/giants/giant_steps_407600.htm?page=0