

## Winner in a walk

### Ex-Giant George Martin is raising money while gaining a broad appreciation of this country's varied terrain and citizens

Sunday, February 03, 2008

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EUFULA, Oklahoma -- Out on U.S. Highway 271, somewhere between Oblivion and Forgotten, where you'd have to drive five miles toward town to hunt, Oklahoma State Troopers are escorting George Martin on a two-lane road that roller-coasters through a dusty brown patch of the world. Scorched by sun, dried by winds and barely touched by man, this place looks more like moon than Earth.

Martin wonders what town he's in.

"You're not in any town," trooper Mike Stafford tells him. He ain't kidding. Martin, the 54-year-old former Giants defensive end, is 1,600 miles into his seven-month walk across the country to raise money for the medical needs of 9/11 responders. He is 15 miles from Eufaula, the nearest mole on Rand McNally's face, and 948 miles from Glendale, Ariz., where Super Bowl XLII will be played tonight between the Giants and New England Patriots. The son of a Greenville, N.C., sharecropper, Martin played 14 years in the NFL and earned a Super Bowl ring by starring in some of the biggest cities in the world. These days, he is walking through towns without stoplights. On Thursday, The Star-Ledger Road Trip to the Super Bowl found him -- and it wasn't easy, even with GPS -- two hours east of Oklahoma City.

Here's how Martin knows he is in Downtown Nowhere on this day: As he walks past, the horses gawk, and the cattle wander closer to the angry side of the barbed wire to get a better look at this tall man in black tights, baseball cap and Giants jacket, a knapsack on his back.

"They're wondering, 'Who's this idiot out here?'" Martin says. "They probably haven't seen a human being in a long time."

"A Journey For 9/11," Martin's trek between the George Washington Bridge and the Golden Gate Bridge, has raised nearly \$2 million. With participating New York and New Jersey hospitals pledging to double the amount he raises, Martin has nearly \$4 million in the bank.

He is slightly disappointed with the amount -- he still has a lofty goal of \$10 million -- and, as he steps over road kill and dodges inattentive truck drivers with last-second squealing, smoking brakes, he is mulling other ways to raise funds -- like auctioning off 18 pairs of his bald-treaded sneakers.

## **A SPECTRUM OF SOCIETY**

On his walk through New York and New Jersey, Martin saw the rich in their McMansions. On his trek through Virginia and Tennessee, he saw rural, impoverished America -- people living in shacks sometimes built without the optional plumbing upgrade. Now, in Oklahoma, he sees ... well, barely anything. And he loves it all.

"This is God's work of art," he says. "I'm seeing this land the way most people will never see it. It's breathtaking, even when there's nothing out there. Do you know what a sunset looks like out here?"

"I have an iPod with 4,000 songs on it, but I haven't turned it on once. I'm taking it all in. I don't want to be distracted." Truth be told, there are signs of life, just from another era: Oil wells that once bobbed like chicken heads are now rusted; nature has poked skylights into the roofs of decaying barns; and "No Trespassing" signs, attached to miles and miles of fencing, flap in the gusts, which today reach 40 mph.

Suddenly, out of a pickup truck parked on a hidden path, a woman runs toward Martin. She wants a photo and a hug and an autograph. Where the heck did she come from? Tammy Horton, 43-year-old grandmother from Seminole, Okla., is crying as she wraps her arms around Martin. She has been waiting for him to walk past.

"My sister got her picture taken with him a couple of days ago," she says. "I was sick and couldn't do it. I was heartbroken. I thought he was long gone, but I drove past and saw him. What he's doing is awesome. He's a hero." Martin appreciates the sentiment but won't accept the compliment.

"I don't consider myself a hero," he says. "I played football, a game. The first responders and the rescue workers, they're the real heroes. They didn't think twice about the dangers they faced when we needed their help. They rushed right in. Now, they need our help.

"Whether we were going to raise enough money for one person or a thousand, it's worth the journey."

The pep talk from Horton is like a Vitamin B shot for Martin, who says goodbye and climbs a long hill with renewed energy. He has dozens of stories like this:

## **IT ALL ADDS UP**

Deaf Tommy Rogers waited for Martin by the side of the road and handed him a bag of change. The kid had saved and collected \$3.78. Martin hugged him and thanked him, and hung out with him for a while. The next day, a truck driver stopped and gave Martin 20 bucks. "Thanks for being so nice to my son," he said.

A school in Washington, D.C., presented him with 911 Susan B. Anthony dollars. Other schools have collected money and staged walkathons and invited him to talk. Townspeople in the poorest areas have slipped him a few bucks. Someone anonymously left \$400 at the front desk of his hotel. "It all adds up," he says.

Heck, Martin even has picked up change lying in the gutter. On this day, he finds a dime. Those coins by the wayside have added up to about \$60.

Professors at Fairleigh Dickinson University plotted his route -- 3,200 miles through 14 states, mostly through the south in order to avoid the winter -- and Martin has hit a dead end only once. At the end of each day, when he quits,

his group, which includes an escort SUV, marks the spot using GPS and returns to that spot the next day. Every foot of travel is documented.

He has burned through 60 pairs of socks and walked through three blisters. Averaging 22 miles per day, he has lost 32 pounds. (He looks trim enough to line up against the Patriots tonight.) There have been seven near-misses with vehicles.

Martin's wife Diane thought he was "crazy," when he first thought of the idea. But she knows the guy has wanderlust: He has driven cross-country three times for pleasure. She left her job as a Newark daycare coordinator to walk with her husband when the journey started on Sept. 16, and she'll be beside him when the journey ends, probably in March. "She'll be back when we get close to a mall again," Martin jokes.

## **CLOSE CALL**

He is escorted by Lee Reeves, an old friend and business colleague who plans that day's journey, handles the media, and walks behind him to protect him from traffic. Occasionally, they squabble, but they love and tease each other like brothers. He is escorted by Lee Reeves, an old friend and business colleague who plans that day's journey, handles the media, and walks behind him to protect him from traffic. Occasionally, they squabble, but they love and tease each other like brothers.

Here's one of those times: A woman stopped her car on the shoulder on the other side of the road in Virginia, and Martin told Reeves to help others retrieve her donation. He refused. Martin insisted. He refused again. Martin insisted again. Finally, Reeves walked across the street. Martin followed.

When they reached her car, they heard the wheels screeching and smelled the rubber burning.

"A tractor trailer slid off the road right where we (had been) standing," Reeves said. "If we hadn't moved, we would have been killed. It was the one time I was glad that I had listened to George."

The walk has been a life-changing experience for Reeves, too. Under false pretenses, he coaxed fiancée Flora DeJesus to "a courthouse no bigger than a phone booth" in a tiny Virginia town, flew in both families and surprised her with a marriage proposal on one knee. She cried. He cried. Martin cried. Now they're thinking of having the wedding in San Francisco when the walk ends.

But Martin still has about 1,500 miles to go, and you can follow his progress and make a donation on the Web site, [www.ajourneyfor911.com](http://www.ajourneyfor911.com). He is hoping his Giants buddies, including Lawrence Taylor, will walk with him. Phil Simms and Harry Carson check in regularly, he says. The Giants' run to the Super Bowl -- a stroke of luck -- has helped generate publicity.

The NFL, which has donated \$50,000, is also pledging to kick in some of the fine money from last season, so Martin has jokingly teased Joe Morris, the former Giants running back and a member of the NFL uniform police, "to fine players like crazy."

Martin remembered a call he received in the beginning of the trip: "Martin!" the voice crackled through the cell phone, "you'd better get your fat butt out of Tennessee before it starts snowing!" "Thanks for calling, Bill," Martin said with a laugh.

Reeves grabbed the phone and starting talking with Parcells, who cut him off when Reeves started bragging about his friend. "Fella," Parcells said, "I don't know who you are or who you think you're talking to, but I know all about George Martin. He played for me or years. We won a Super Bowl together. I know what the guy is made of."

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