

# Dynamic Duo: Trevor and Tennille

Making history together



*In Their Debt*

by Jen Reeder



On the Tahoe Rim Trail.

Long distance hiker Trevor Thomas and his guide dog Tennille, a black Lab, have worked together to survive countless harrowing adventures. Take the time they were backpacking in Vermont and discovered a recent landslide had washed away the trail – which now ended abruptly at the edge of a cliff with a 50-foot drop. At the time, Trevor had no way of knowing that trail maintainers had strapped aluminum painting ladders to the side of the cliff to keep hikers from being stranded.

“I get to the side of the cliff and I’m baffled. I’m like, ‘How the heck do we get down this thing?’” Trevor recalls. “Tennille walks over and puts her nose on the ladder. She found me

the way down – but it was straight down. So I climbed down – it was a long way. I climbed back up and said, ‘That’s the only thing we can do.’ So I strapped her to my chest and she

instantly went limp. And we climbed down the side of a cliff.”

It’s all in a day’s work for a team that has hiked more than 10,000 miles together since 2013. As the world’s only blind professional long-distance hiker, Trevor had already gained fame in 2008 as the first blind person in history to complete a solo, unassisted “thru-hike” (end-to-end) of the Appalachian Trail (AT), which spans 2,175 miles from Georgia to Maine.

This was particularly noteworthy because he wasn’t an avid hiker prior to losing his sight to a rare eye disease in 2005, preferring “adrenaline” sports like snowboarding, mountain biking, skydiving, and racing cars. Now



he feels long-distance hiking is as extreme as it gets.

"Nature doesn't care that I'm blind. It treats me exactly the same as anyone else," he says. "That's what makes it the ultimate high-adrenaline sport – there are no timeouts."

With his team FarSight, he went on to become the first blind person to hike the Pacific Crest Trail, John Muir Trail, Tahoe Rim Trail, and to the summit of Mount Whitney, the tallest mountain in the continental U.S.

"I learned to use my other senses to perceive what other people see," he explains. "So through my hearing, through my smell, through my touch, I learned to basically interpret the world and have a primitive idea of where I was. Between my trekking poles, my newfound skills, and a lot of instinct, that's how I navigated it."

In 2011, he was ready for the biggest challenge yet: a solo hike of the Colorado Trail, nearly 500 miles through the Rocky Mountains.

"I wanted to break away from my team and prove that, once again, I could go alone," he says. "That I could go to the most rugged, most demanding, most difficult trail in the United States and repeat what I did on the AT."

After completing five segments out of 28, Trevor realized he wouldn't be able to finish, and that he needed to train with a guide dog. His sponsors granted his request for time off, and at the end of 2012, California-based nonprofit Guide Dogs for the Blind found his perfect match: Tennille.

For six months, Trevor used positive training methods to prepare the high-energy, whip-smart black Lab for adventures in the backcountry. When it was time, they set out together to hike the Mountains-to-Sea Trail, a 1,175-mile hike from North Carolina's Great Smoky Mountains to the Outer Banks. The dog proved adept at

navigation, locating sign posts and other landmarks.

"The best thing she learned is she knows how tall I am, so after I got her, no longer did I have to worry about knocking myself out by getting clubbed in the head with tree limbs," he says.

When they successfully completed the hike – becoming the first blind person and first dog ever to do so – he rewarded Tennille with a filet mignon and French green beans, which is now their tradition after major hikes. The next year they completed Vermont's Long Trail and Tahoe Rim Trail together – the first solo thru-hikes of the trails by a blind person and the first for a guide dog.

In 2015, Trevor achieved his dream when he and Tennille completed a thru-hike of the Colorado Trail. It was another groundbreaking achievement as the first self-navigated trek of the trail by a blind person, and the first thru-hike of the trail by a guide dog. The mutual trust the two share is incredibly strong.

On the Colorado Trail.





On the Mountains to Sea Trail on the Outer Banks, North Carolina.



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"We've been walking on knife-edge cliffs with 4,000 feet on one side and 4,000 feet on the other side, and the trail's as wide as a picnic table – and she's got no fear," he says. "She's pretty much a holy grail dog as far as her athletic ability, her problem-solving ability, and her sheer intellect."

Tennille knows about 600 words. The two are a hit in grocery stores because she can find specific products for him, like "Colgate Whitening Toothpaste."

"We usually end up being like the Pied Piper with a whole slew of shoppers following us," he says with a laugh. "I hear people in the background saying, 'Did that dog really just find Coke for him? How does the dog know what Listerine is?' So that's always been a lot of fun. She's just brilliant."

The Lab also can identify the cars of his friends and family members, so when they head to the parking lot, Trevor can say, "Find so-and-so's car," and she'll lead him to their ride.

California resident Tasha Laubly, who volunteered with her family to puppy raise Tennille for Guide Dogs for the Blind, says the Lab displayed intelligence and a desire to work with people from the get-go.


"When I learned that Trevor hiked and backpacked, it seemed perfect," she says. "What a great way to channel Tennille's energy and give her something fun to do."

Chris Benninger, CEO and president of Guide Dogs for the Blind, says she's very inspired and proud of what Trevor and Tennille have done together. "Trevor's



accomplishments are extraordinary on all levels, and Tennille has given Trevor the independence and ability to do the things he wants to do in his life. That is exactly what we want for each of our clients: that with the help of their guide dog, they can live the life they want and not hold back!"

Because Tennille will be retiring from long-distance hiking soon, Guide Dogs for the Blind is working to identify a new guide dog for Trevor. He hopes Tennille will enjoy her new role as a therapy dog for children with cancer, and help train the new dog to be just as skilled. He plans to document the learning process in hopes of helping other blind athletes.

"Is it a fluke that Tennille can do what she does? Maybe. But if I can do it a second time, then I will know that it's not a fluke; and she's definitely going to be integral in making that happen," he says. "I think of all the different things that she's done, and it shows me that we've only just begun to realize and tap into what these dogs are capable of. The sky's the limit with what they can do." 

For more information about Trevor Thomas, visit: [www.blindhikertrevorthomas.com](http://www.blindhikertrevorthomas.com) or [www.farsightfoundation.org](http://www.farsightfoundation.org). For more information about Guide Dogs for the Blind, visit: [www.guidedogs.com](http://www.guidedogs.com).



Award-winning journalist Jen Reeder is former president of the Dog Writers Association of America. She became a self-proclaimed "crazy dog lady" after she and her husband adopted a lovable Lab mix named Rio. Visit her online at [www.JenReeder.com](http://www.JenReeder.com).

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