



# LECTURE NOTES

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## HISTORY OF CAIRN STONE TEST HIKES

by Coach Ron Gunn

In 1995 SMC (Southwestern Michigan College) terminated the intercollegiate athletic program. I stayed with the college as Dean of Sports Education and my first assignment was to help develop a new fitness center. This project worked out very well with a sparkling new facility but the college still lacked a little *pizazz* so I started to develop an *Extreme Sports* program to add excitement. The program gave graduation credit for each activity. My first activity was whitewater rafting in West Virginia on the world class New and Gauley Rivers. It was a huge success! Then I added rock climbing and wilderness hiking in both West Virginia and Devil's Lake, Wisconsin. These additions were also very popular and also added much enrichment and memories for students. Then I came up with the idea to offer what I called *SMC's toughest class for 2 credits* – The Grand Canyon Rim to Rim Day Hike.

The Grand Canyon hiking class required two semesters and met every two weeks on a Saturday. I initially spoke with my brother Jack, an avid hiker who was an MD living in Flagstaff and knew the Canyon well. Jack trained the Grand Canyon rangers in wilderness medicine and rescue. He said that it was definitely possible but not to alert the Grand Canyon rangers. The rangers are used to what they call *Tourons* (tourist and moron). So in 2004 I set up a rigorous progressive overload training program, taking in mind the unique challenge of a Rim to Rim Day Hike that included severe elevation changes and reverse mountaineering.

The actual distance for our North Rim to South Rim hike was 24.3 miles but was much tougher than an ordinary hike. So my program included a gradual progression of challenging hikes starting at 6.0 miles and ranging to 27.8 miles. I felt that it was important for my students to learn the importance of Hours On Feet (HOF). We needed to have our hikers progressively build up their HOF to 12 hours, a realistic time to finish the Rim to Rim hike. This is far more realistic than stressing miles.

In order to monitor progress I established two *Test Hikes* during the course. The first one was about half way through the training program and the second was two to three weeks before the big hike at the Canyon. These two *Test Hikes* were very instrumental in bringing the reality of the challenge to our hikers, especially the first *Test Hike*. Both Test Hikes are required for permission to start the big hike at destination.



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The first *Test Hike* cannot be skipped. It is required to advance to the second and final *Test Hike*. The first *Test Hike* has been very successful in alerting hikers to the challenges and often serves as a *wake up call* or the decision to opt for other less challenging hikes on the trip. Hikers who do not perform both *Test Hikes* successfully, either by performance or attendance, are not allowed to do the designated Super Hike (West Rim Trail for Utah 2021). In my first class I had an outstanding student who had the ability to early finish the *Test Hike*, but I had to disqualify him because he skipped the *Test Hike* to visit his girlfriend at CMU. He understood the high standards of the program and maintaining integrity and did an above rim hike instead.

I was very fortunate that our initial training program worked out very well, especially with a few tweaks. I know of no other program like it in the country. Our wonderful team of dedicated and coach-able *athletes* have brought into the program and have made for some outstanding memories and close friendships. The unique training program, tons of HOF and the *Test Hike* have generated special accomplishments leading up to the intrinsic rewards of successful completion of a chosen elite backcountry hike.