

## Day 2: 20,000 Steps or The Joy of Measuring

I really like measuring things. Estimating is cool and all, but knowing something exactly brings me inordinate pleasure. That is one reason I was immediately hooked when I jumped on the Fitbit bandwagon back in February 2019. The first day I wore my Fitbit, we had a field trip at United Skates of America. During the school day, that most sedentary of times, I was rollerblading. My heart rate was up, and I was accumulating steps at a dizzying rate. By the end of that first day, I had more than 18k steps, and I was in love.

The other Fitbit feature that so excited me was the ability to track and measure sleep. I recently listened to Matthew Walker who said, on the [Tim Ferris podcast](#), among other things, that sleep was the “single best legal performance-enhancing drug.” I began to see how seriously the uber productive took their sleep, and I wanted to follow suit. My bedtime had crept earlier—in bed by 9:45 p.m. at the latest—much to the amusement of my night-owl family. But my tracking was haphazard and imprecise. I could make a rough estimate of the quantity of my sleep but had no idea of its quality. Enter Fitbit. I was in awe of its ability to track deep sleep, REM sleep, mid-sleep restlessness and then spit out exact numbers that could be graphed or spreadsheet-ized.

Tracking steps and sleep became an important part of my day until the pandemic hit, when it graduated into an obsession. Lockdown, as we know all too well, eliminated countless time-sucking variables from our lives. The “down time” between my classes that was once filled with lunch duty and supervising study hall was replaced by huge swathes of “me” time. But there was really nothing to do. Except walk.

I wasn't much of a walker before the pandemic. Walks were synonymous with hikes for me, and hikes required planning and beautiful trails. As Covid pushed most inside, it pushed me out, and soon the bike path paralleling my house became my happy place. “Doing an airport” a 3-mile back-and-forth walk to the [Mansfield Municipal Airport](#), became a sometimes twice daily thing. One of my best investments was downloading an app called [AllTrails](#). I suddenly discovered countless paths through the woods around my home. Soon, I was walking everywhere. School didn't begin until 9, so I was able to get 8-10k steps in before my first class.

I don't really know the origin story of the 20,000 step challenge, but on April 23, during our spring break, I stumbled into a habit that would define the early days of the pandemic for me. For three months straight (until July 27 to be exact)—come rain, heat, or exhaustion—I would not sleep until I had completed 20k steps. I discovered that Fitbit allowed me to add friends whose progress I could track, and suddenly another obsession was activated: competition. I started to set weekly goals of 150 or even 200k steps. Fitbit's practice of awarding “boots” for every 5k steps pushed me to routinely exceed 25 or 30k. On one memorable day, after a student had foolishly challenged me to a weekend step challenge, I hit the absurd total of 45,759 steps—close to a marathon.

While my goal was delightfully simple to measure, its impact on my wellbeing was incalculable. I discovered [Libby](#) and was soon listening to audiobooks on my walks. I churned through the *The Nix*, *Goldfinch*, *Children of Blood and Bone*, *Little Fires Everywhere*, *Where the Crawdads Sing*, *The Silent Patient*, *Americanah*, *I'll be Gone in the Dark*, *The Secret History*, *Open*, *The Institute*, *Atomic Habits*, *Greenlights*, *The Guest List*, *A Time to Kill*, *The 4-Hour Workweek*, *The Magic of Thinking Big*, and even, much to my wife's delight, *Middlemarch*.

While I could go on and on, I am already a few words over my 650 word college essay limit, and it's time to get those steps in...

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