

A Virgin's View of the Barkley

I first decided I wanted to give the barkley a try a few years back. Lots of my early training runs involved long self-supported runs, or getting off the beaten path to follow a cool game trail up a hollow to see where it went, so barkley seemed like a natural progression. A couple of friends (spyder and Drew) had been to frozen head and talked about how great the experience was. I eventually put my name in the hat for the 2008 race and ended up on the wait list. I had planned from the beginning that year to head up to frozen head regardless of whether or not I got in just to get a feel for what this was about. I didn't get in that year (I think I was eventually 3rd on the wait list behind Allen and Marcia) but apparently being on that wait list was my short straw for this year. A few days after the midnight email frenzy I got the dreaded reply. I was in. It sort of dawned on me that maybe it's not so good to get what you had wished for. I had nightmares that night. About exactly what I don't know, but it was based around this amorphous concept of the barkley and involved many different things like showing up to the starting line naked and with an empty water bottle, the barkley being a roller coaster and my restraint didn't work, etc.

When I set my mind on trying to get in the barkley, I had made a decision to not see any of the course until my virgin race and after it is all over, I am very happy with that decision. Maybe I could have finished the loop a little quicker, or prepped a little better, but I think it would have taken away from the overall experience.

Since everyone knows about the chicken, the legends around the race, etc. I'll leave that out. The conch shell blew at 9:53, many of us had been up since 6 or 7 milling around talking about how tough a late start would be due to the expected heat, and Laz apparently took that whining as a wish and granted it. For some reason, I didn't feel the nervousness I usually do before starting an ultra, I was definitely anxious, but it was somehow different. The starting cigarette was lit and we slowly started the long walk up bird mtn. I knew from the reports that the first climb would be long, but not too tough and that turned out to be the case. It was a really nice warm up and almost got too hot, but as soon as we crested the hill and began our descent to book 1, I cooled off nicely. Our group of about 7 or so reached book 1 with no problem and then began to climb again. This climb was a little tougher, and a little hotter. Here I started remembering what Laz had said the night before "when you get to bald knob remember that you've just finished the easy part of the course." I was feeling sluggish and hot so I slowed down a bit and kept reminding myself to be patient, the climbs will be long, but I will eventually get to the top. The rest of the "candy ass" trail to the west side of Bald Knob was uneventful, but harder than I had expected. When we reached the end of the candy ass trail I was very happy to find out that Danger Dave was in our group, and he had put out book 2 and 3, so we dutifully followed him around the knob and right to the book. There was a group of 3 or 4 who had missed a turn somewhere and ended up a good ways above us here, but were able to get down to the book. Unfortunately for us, just about everyone's pages were missing, so we started pulling pages from the back of the book, luckily this didn't cause any problems later.

The next section was a lot of fun and I couldn't wait to see SOB for the first time. During this section all the old guys kept going on and on about how "this is what the whole NBT used to be like back in my day,

you don't know how easy you've got it." I wanted to mock them for being old, but since I was having to work to keep up with the old goats, I figured I should leave well enough alone.

We moved well through this section by the coal ponds and up to garden spot for book #3. During a couple of the short ups I would pull out my directions and read them so that I could make sure I knew where we were, it was at this time that I learned that words don't necessarily mean the same to Laz as they might to the rest of us.

The first water stop provided a nice break, and then we headed up on stallion mountain. The clear skies made for very nice views from up there. We found book 4 no problem and worked our way to Fyke's peak and off the back side. Here we had a group of 4 or 5 moving well through our first real taste of off trail "running". This section took longer than I expected, but it was uneventful and soon we reached the highway where there were several folks (including Horton) dutifully mocking us as we crossed. I knew that the first of the "big three" was just around the corner after book five, and as we turned the corner, there it was, testicle spectacle. So up we go, I climbed all of this with John DeWalt and while it was steep and there were multiple false summits, it wasn't as bad as I had expected. We topped out and headed down meth lab hill and the neo-butt slide and broke into the woods and easily found book 6 at raw dog falls. A couple of quick inclines brought us back to the highway and the pigs head and the short but ominous ascent to the next big one, Rat Jaw. The old prison mine trail was very scenic and provided a short but much needed easy section where I could take a couple of deep breaths and get ready for what was to come.

I turned right and looked up, yep, that's pretty steep. I could see three or four folks ahead of me in various stages of climbing, crawling, molting and panting. I took another deep breath and headed up. Several steep sections led to the cliff band which I had heard through the grapevine contained Book # 7, contrary to what the directions said. I looked around in vain, but luckily John was right behind me and was able to find it in the same place it had been in a previous year (and also to provide me some much needed water since I had run out at the bottom of Rat Jaw, he didn't tell me it was untreated creek water until after I had downed about 1/3 of the bottle). We then continued on up to the tower and got some much needed water, I ate and changed shirts and said hi to my wife Angela and friends Andrew and Peter. Limacher was also there, I guess to scout locations for his new luxury hotel. I was alone for the next two hours or so, and luckily I had plenty of daylight left for the zip line descent.

The road from the firetower allowed for some nice easy jogging which let me stretch out my feet and legs. I found book 8 on top of the hump and worked my way over to Indian knob and book 9. While I doubted myself and my compass a couple of times, I hit the steep part of the zip line right on the money and ended up on the old trail leading to the book. I saw DeWalt coming in from the left (he had gone down one draw over to the left) and he confirmed that we were indeed in the correct place. I was feeling really good at this point and started running ahead looking for the trail crossing the creek that was in just front of the creek intersection that marked book 10. My only problem was that I had convinced myself that the trail would be crossing from left to right and not right to left. I ran right past the confluence, the bluff and the tree (saying to myself, that looks like what he describes, but the trail hasn't crossed from left to right yet, so it must be further down). Luckily I only got about ¼ mile or so

downstream when I started having doubts. I crossed the creek and saw the trail on the other side and thought, well I must be right, so I crossed back over and kept going downstream until I reached an impassable cliff and realized I must have screwed up. I finally thought it would be wise to actually read the directions again and saw that I had read the directions wrong. So I headed back up to the confluence and to the book at the same time that Dave, Rob, and Kevin got there and we headed up the third and final climb, Big Hell. It got dark about halfway up Hell and we had to pull out the headlamps. The climb seemed like it went on forever and it got steeper the further you went. We finally reached the top, book 11, and a great nighttime view of Wartburg. Leonard, Allen and Joel came up while we were getting our pages and a big group of us headed down Chimney Top for the last hour or so back to camp.

I had decided early on not to attempt a second lap, I wanted to focus on having a solid lap with no major malfunctions and pulled that off. I learned that a lot of patience is required at the Barkley and you also have to pay constant attention. If you let your mind wander too much or you try to rush something you can easily get lost or hurt. This was quite possibly the most fun I have ever had on a run and I fully plan on throwing my name in the hat again.

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1 lap 11:33