

## Barkley 2009

First, congratulations to Andrew Thompson...simply amazing. Barkley now has the Elite Eight. I have had the pleasure of attending Barkley numerous times. Those trips were rewarding, frustrating, mind numbing, and addictive. I am not what I consider an elite ultrarunner... I know my place and am content. I have had small successes in limited areas, but Barkley continued to squash me like a bug...and I surprisingly enjoyed it.

I used to watch my grandfather (who raised me) as we worked other people's fields in our small farming community. I would drag myself home behind him and throw myself on the front porch totally exhausted. He would continue past the porch and start working our small garden behind our house. It seemed, to me, he never tired...he was slow and steady and could work non-stop...a lesson in endurance.

This year I came into Barkley with a different laid back attitude (much like I witnessed with my grandfather). That is, I did what was necessary to move forward, but I did not get "rattled" when lost or mistakes were made. I will be honest, during each loop I quit several times, but I think that was just to keep me motivated or feeling sorry for myself (I like to do that sometimes)...deep down I kept the spark of continuing.

During loop 1 Andrew, Mark Williams, and I ended up together in the clear-cut heading toward book 2...we thought we were on the correct bench, but ended up well above the actual path. After 10-15 minutes of backtracking and bushwhacking we ended up at book 2 (basically following the voices of a large group who chose the correct bench). We quickly made our way down to SOBD and the climb to the Garden Spot for book 3. I am unsure of the rules for the water drop...that is, I am not sure of the intention, but being the sheep I am quite often, I dropped down to the water stop and carried two jugs back to the road. I knew those behind would most likely use them, but it seemed convenient for subsequent loops (should I make it that far). If that was wrong, then I suppose I should be DQed from my Fun Run. At this point I hooked up with Mike Dobies, Pat Costigan, and Jim Harris. As most know, Mike and Pat are incredible at route finding and directions. As they sped over Stallion to book 4 at the bluff, I tried hard to pay close attention to the route. I rely on visual clues more than the compass (although I did use the compass often on the reverse loop!). Mike and Pat were hilarious, poking fun at each other, and keeping Jim in-line with his questions of "why they chose a certain route". "Barkley intuition..." they would reply. I found this to actually be helpful...sometimes it just doesn't feel right... trust your Barkley intuition...that is when it works...

My grandfather, paw paw, used to look at me when we were gleaning the fields of the local farmers and say, "Boy, you don't want to do this when you grow up." He would then grab a handful of beans from a plant that had been shredded by a "mechanical picker", hold them close to his nose and breathe deep. We gleaned so many "leftover" vegetables, that my grandmother would make enough soup for the entire community. I did leave them for all those years at college, the first to do so, but I found I did miss the hard work in the fields.

The New River was cool, but refreshing...Jim Harris and I tried, in vain, to tip-toe across without incident...however we both managed a sit-down mid-stream. The coolness of the water was appreciated, however, as we gathered book 5 and started up Testicle Spectacle. Enough steps will get you anywhere and soon enough we were careening down Neo-Butt Slide. We quickly found Raw Dog Falls and book 6. Quickly Danger Dave's Wall appears like a skyscraper...it was daring someone to scale its harrowing side, so I dug it...literally. I grasp small twigs and kicked my toes into the dirt trying for purchase. I commented that we should have "pro" here...trying to sound like some experienced climber, when in fact all I do is read a great deal.

Pig Trail is always fun! Here the gnats started in and were a constant companion pretty much throughout the rest of the loop. Having been to Barkley before this section was added, makes it more difficult (IMHO)...that is, knowing that after all this climb, all you really do is end up at the bottom of Rat Jaw and another hellacious climb. The sun full on your shoulders and the Troubadour waiting at the top to capture the moment digitally, made the climb seem longer than usual. We did gather book 7 in the crevice of the wall before finding the water at the Fire Tower (and some angel had left a few sodas as well!).

The Hump and book 8 came faster than I expected, but I knew the dreaded Zip line waited like coarse grit sandpaper to remove the remaining skin from my shins. Indian Knob and the Needle's eye (where Laz once told us to beware the dangerous Tennessee Rockpecker ) gave us book 9. Pat and Mike dove down the Zip line with purpose. They are simply amazing at their route choices and placed us at the conflux of the two streams and the old trail beyond. It is amazing to me how you can find a Beech tree on a high dirt wall in the middle of nowhere, but I swear, if you hit the lower convergence of the streams correctly, that tree literally screams like a beacon. Book 10 pointed us straight up. Jim asked about the route...Mike replied, "Follow the steepest route up, if you see something steeper...take that..." This works and Jim and I pulled slightly away and found book 11. From there we decided to "run" some of the easy trails back to camp to break up the group. After all, you would not want a huge bottleneck standing around waiting on Laz to count pages! Who has time for that?

My grandfather did some hunting, but only out of necessity, never for sport. Perhaps it was being raised in the Depression era; perhaps he loved the land and only used what was needed... I once killed a squirrel with an old .410 shotgun and he forced me to clean it, cook it, and eat it. I haven't hunted or killed wild game since. "Just because you'ns can kill somethin', don't mean ya should. Just do what's necessary." he told me.

I repacked quickly and was out before Jim, Mike and Pat. I managed okay until the clear cut and dove too low. It was well dark, so I decided to lie down and figure out what to do next. Luckily, Mike, Pat and Jim came striding above me and I scrambled up to join them. I will not bore you with the details, but needless to say we all took turns "getting the sleepies" and marched like zombies through the night...doing what was necessary.

The dawn brought new life and by the time we reached Big Hell, Jim and I once again pulled away from the others. My quads would not allow me to do much more than a shuffle down the easy

trail, and Jim pulled away to finish his 2<sup>nd</sup> loop a few minutes before me. Laz counted the pages and asked if I was going back out. I told him, I thought I had too. I had failed on my Fun Run attempts too many times. I was, however, sick of everything I had brought to eat. I could not stand the thought of “power food” or pop tarts or candy or anything. Carl Laniak suddenly asked if I would like a sausage and egg biscuit...I thought he was joking, but just like magic, he handed me the prize and I engulfed it in a couple of bites. Then as I was leaving someone else handed me a breakfast burrito...I thought I was in Heaven. I walked slowly out of camp to start my reverse loop...trying to keep my stomach in check and trying to figure out if my new number was prime (a task given me by Laz as I left). As it turns out it is not...rats!  $171 = (57*3)$ .

I missed the decent down Big Hell to the left and ended up at the high walls...I worked my way around and found Byron Backer at the book. He was in distress, dry heaving and cramping, but incredibly moving okay (any forward progress is great at Barkley). We spent most of the day together off and on, but by Stallion Mountain, I pulled slowly away with the excitement of getting a Fun Run finish. I did manage to get lost going up Stallion, but did not get too upset...just some yelling and screaming at myself...pulling out the compass, yelling at it, yelling at the map, etc.

I refilled at the water stop, grabbed my Garden Spot page and was determined to get through the clear cut before the 2<sup>nd</sup> night fall. I barely made it and in fact, I did not turn on my light until Jury Ridge (which unfortunately came much later than expected since I thought the climb after the main Bald Knob was Jury Ridge...alas it is not.) I finally grabbed my last page (and my gloves which I had left there on the previous loop!!) and started up Bird Mountain. After a couple of switchbacks it started to rain and my exhaustion level was redlined. Less than half-way up, I lay down in the middle of the trail in a fetal position and whined about the cruelty of it all. I would then down a couple more switchbacks and resume my fetal position. It was then I thought of my grandmother long passed, her calloused hands that were somehow so tender, her telling me things like, “I remember the labor pains of your birth.” (I knew she was not my biological mother, but I understood what she meant...), her way of pointing me in the right direction. Uneducated...blah! My grandmother died of a deteriorating lung disease, for the last two years of her life she had this shallow short breath...pulling at life. As I lay on the ground on the last set of switchbacks I recognized it...it was emanating from me...a short raspy cadence of breathing. I stood with adrenaline and finally gained the top of Bird. I shuffled down the 14 switchbacks (yes I counted them) and finally touched the yellow gate. Laz told me I had less than 5 minutes to head back out for the 4<sup>th</sup> loop. I stared him in the eye and said, “I can tell you now that I am done OR I can let the time expire...your choice.” He smiled and played the best version of Taps I have ever heard at Barkley.

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