

2011 Barkley Marathons: A thunderous Spectacle of Testicles

Race Report by Jason Barringer

The possible themes for this year's Barkley are many; two types of testicle spectacle, a 1 am start, a 10th finisher, Laniak looking a lot like Forrest Gump as he headed out on #4, thundersnow, and 70 minute mile averages to name just a few. This year was my second go at the Barkley, and after having a decent first quit (1 loop in 11:20 something) without any major screw-ups, I was looking forward to see if I could improve on my quitacious undertakings this year. Having come in from 11th on the wait list this year, I only had about 3-4 weeks of having an actual Barkley spot, so the angst of 3 months of dread was missing and the real panic didn't set in until we drove out of Atlanta mid-day on Thursday.

We arrived at the campground Thursday afternoon to find it full, but we were able to grab a tent spot alongside Joe N.'s van. We started milling around camp talking to folks, seeing what the weather had been like during the week and just catching up in general. Immediately, I picked up on the rumors that an early start would be in our future. Also tossed around was the possibility of climbing the prison wall, a reverse loop start, a hat draw start and many others. I dismissed them all, after all, what would camp at the Barkley be without baseless rumors.

We eventually settled in around the fire to enjoy a couple of homebrews with the two Mikes (O'Melia and Bur). Bur decided that we each had to not only state our intentions for the weekend, but also describe our minimum acceptable performance that would keep us from the embarrassment of "complete and utter failure." I stated the intention of finishing two loops with reaching Garden Spot on lap 2 to be the absence of failure, both complete and utter. [note: I will leave it to the two Mikes to decide whether or not they will share their intentions]

As we awoke Friday, even more people were streaming into the campsite. After a little more socializing and a "cultural exploration" trip to the Oak Ridge Wal-Mart for last minute supplies, my wife Angela and I decided we would like to go for a little hike. I decided that a little briar reconnaissance was in order, so we drove over to the gap on Hwy 116 and walked the park road to the old prison mine trail and to the base of rat jaw. Yep, it was true that we had yet another year of growth to contend with and both directions (up and down) on the jaw contained a tangled mess that would make Lyle Lovett jealous. We also noticed that many of the park's wildflowers were beginning to bloom and would be a nice treat during the torment of the following days.

As we got back to camp, I started marking my maps, (yes maps, I always keep my feathers numbered, just in case) packing my bags and setting out lap 2 supplies. I was trying to travel a little lighter this year than my first. I carried a shell, an extra shirt, leather gloves, a nice variety of food and my "oh shit" bag [extra light, batteries, matches, small first aid kit, emergency blanket, extra map and extra compass]. I planned on using water bottles and filling up from the many water sources on course instead of carrying a bladder. I started with one hand-held bottle and then had an empty bottle with a small filter attachment in my pack in case I needed to carry more water later in the day. I decided against carrying a trekking pole this year and am pretty glad I didn't have to worry with it (I did utilize the Rob and Dewayne strategy of redneck trekking poles on the last two climbs though). Another thing I did this year

was to actually write out the compass bearings on the map. As I was doing this, I got the bright idea to write all of the major bearings on a small piece of paper to keep in my pocket for easy access. I hoped that this would keep me from referencing my map all of the time and make me a little more efficient during the loop. This ended up working very well for me and I think I only pulled out my map once or twice during the whole loop.

Friday night, I finally got to sleep about 9:30 trying to get some rest in case of an early start. No sooner had I dropped off into a deep sleep ...

I sat bolt upright in my tent, looked at my watch (12:06) and after a quick expletive or two, immediately started dressing for the loop and getting breakfast ready. I actually felt good and was getting pretty excited about the chance to do a big chunk of the loop (especially Stallion mountain) in the dark. Last year, I got to know Stallion pretty well and wanted to give it a go in the dark. With about 5 minutes to smoke, I started walking up to the gate and for some reason thought to feel around my waist and something wasn't quite right. I thought for a second and realized I had left the small hip pack with about ½ of my food in it at the campsite. Potential tragedy #1 narrowly averted.

We started up Bird Mountain and I fell in behind Hiram having some nice discussion and enjoying the clear sky and the campsite bathroom light which seemed to taunt us from the bottom of the hill. The climb was a nice warm up and I was glad to feel nice and awake as we approached the North Boundary candy ass section. As we topped out I picked up the pace a little bit and started making my way down the hill. There were a couple of small blow downs, but mostly this was a fast and fun little section. As I was getting towards the bottom, I started catching up to some lights and as we got to book 1, I had caught up with a small group. We all dutifully got our pages and started up towards Jury Ridge. During most of the NBCAT I stayed about 100 yards behind this group and was able to enjoy a very serene evening. I could see lights stretched out in front of me and behind me and had a wonderful view of the clear night sky with the occasional flash of lightning off to our north. I caught up with the group in front of me as we reached the coal ponds and we formed a nice little conga line heading up to the Garden Spot to get book 2. [If I remember correctly, the group included Mike B., Bill L., Joe D., Robert Y., Marcos, Nick, Blake W., Dewayne. This group stayed somewhat intact until we started up rat jaw.]

As we got down to the water stop, we started discussing our strategies for Stallion Mountain. We had several in the group that knew the route well, so we decided we should be in good shape, even though it was dark. About the time we started climbing up to the ridge going to Yellow Indian, all hell broke loose in the sky above us and we were being pelted with hail and shaken by thunder. We all seemed to manage nervous laughter as we worked our way to the book and stood in line waiting to take our pages, ignoring the fact that we were standing on the highest spot around, in the clouds, in a thunderstorm. I remember someone mentioned that Laz must be getting quite a laugh out of this back in camp.

As we started off Yellow Indian, going towards Fyke's something didn't seem quite right. I yelled up to the front to check our bearing and sure enough, we were going almost 180 degrees in the wrong direction, luckily we had only gone about 100 yards this way and quickly got back on course. We briskly

made our way past the beaver pond and the fire ring and blew by the road to Fyke's, but again quickly realized our error and only had to backtrack about 100 yards or so.

Once we got on top of Fyke's the fun descent began. We found the stump and dove off the hillside and I was clicking off landmarks in my head (there's a big rock at the bottom of the hill, go hard right about 20 yds, grab the game trail going down the old creek bed, after the high wall, go across the clearing to the largest bush and straight down the scree pile behind it, etc.). As an aside; along this stretch, we noticed that several glow strips and glow tacks had been put out on the route down Stallion. We all took in vain the names of the mothers of those that did this. I think we were able to pull all but one or two of the marks down.

As we got down to the bottom of Stallion in the last steep pitch down to the New River, I started noticing a very sharp pain where my right shin and ankle met and hoped that this wouldn't slow me down too much. It seemed to hurt most on the steep downhills, but wasn't a big deal on the rest of the terrain. We crossed the New River dry and went across Hwy 116 to grab book #4. We had a little trouble finding this book (turns out there are two marshes side by side that have old white trees next to a dead stump) but it only took a couple of minutes to find it since we had so many folks in our group to spread out and look.

The climb up Spectacle was nice (I always find it amazing that one can "recover" on a climb like that, but it's a nice change of pace to be able to turn your brain off and just climb for a minute) and was a lot more briary than I remember it and I was glad that I brought my leather gloves. We reached the top of spectacle and grabbed a quick bite then started down towards the butt slide. My leg absolutely killed me going down this, but I quickly figured out that the hurt wasn't getting worse and I seemed to still be moving pretty good, so I just resigned myself to the fact that my leg was going to hurt the rest of the loop. We found the book at Raw Dog falls easily and started working our way back to hwy 116 where we chose a horrendous route up what I am assuming was the city of Petros' town dump.

I am of a mind that in the grand lore of all of the big name areas on the Barkley course, that Pig's Head Creek does not get its due. It is steep, nasty and slick briar choked and its one of my favorite sections. I found myself on all fours more than once trying to get up to the jeep road. It's here that we saw the sunrise, what a treat. Also this is the area where Robert swore he heard a band playing. We continued up to the base of Rat Jaw where we ran into the lead group coming off the climb, they didn't appear to have any musical instruments with them, so I guessed that Robert was just crazy.

We started up the nasty. I can't particularly remember anything on rat jaw standing out. It's like getting booted in the crotch a thousand times and trying to remember a specific kick.

We got to the top and I stopped for a few moments to change shirts, eat and fill up my extra water bottle, because I was guessing that now that the sun was out, the next two climbs would get a bit warm. Then for some reason as I took off from the water stop, something didn't seem right so I stopped. Like an open hand upside my head it hit me, "you forgot to get your page dumb ass." Thankfully I had not started down rat jaw yet. Potential tragedy #2 narrowly averted.

Marcos and I started down the Rat and ran into several folks in various stages of distress on the way up and eventually met back up with Dewayne and Robert before we had to tackle the last steep section down to the guard house. From the looks of Dewayne, they did not choose a good route down the upper section.

We started down the lower part of the Rat towards the prison and Dewayne and Robert treated Marcos and I to a rousing, high-lonesome rendition of "Don't Come Out of the Hole" that would have made Ralph and Carter beam with pride. My leg was still giving me grief on the downhill, but I figured out that if I sort of hopped sideways down the steeper sections, it didn't hurt as bad. At the Barkley, you don't have to move gracefully, you just have to move.

We got through the tunnel and were all relieved that book #7 didn't require scaling the wall. We sat for a minute to eat a little more, admire the prison and quiver at the sight of the bad thing that lay before us. We found the ridge relatively easily, so navigation wasn't an issue at all here. What was at issue was my energy, I started getting really tired about halfway up this climb and at times was wondering if I was moving at all. Even copying the use of the redneck trekking pole didn't help too much. I didn't stop moving though and finally got to the top of Indian Head and found the eye of the needle right away and got book 8.

For zipline, I picked my bearing and went. As I got closer to the bottom, I started doubting myself and kept checking the compass. Finally, to stave off the frustration that I could feel creeping up, I stopped at one of the little creeks to fill up with some fresh water and take a deep breath. Once I rested for a minute or two, I walked to the left about 10 feet and lo and behold, there was the road that crossed the creek, I had nailed the first part of the descent and as I looked around I started remembering all of the land marks. This made me feel a lot better and I started down the right side the creek on the "trail".

Unfortunately, due to my leg, I could not run a step here. Normally, I would have made really good time through here, but since the leg wasn't working so well, I just pulled out a sandwich and enjoyed my hike down to the confluence. I found the confluence and beech tree (book 9) easily then started Big Hell.

I personally think that Big Hell is a little harder than the Bad Thing, but since it is the last climb on the loop, it seems to go by easier. I caught up with Marcos towards the top and we went up to the capstone and sat on it for a few minutes before we made our way to the Chimney Top trail. As we got back on the trail, I told Marcos to go on ahead because I was moving at a very slow limp/shuffle at this point. During this time I started trying to think through getting in and out of camp and on to my second loop. I knew the leg would be a problem, but I knew we had ice and that I would have plenty of time to try to fix the leg before I would have to get out of camp.

I touched the gate at 11 hours 34 minutes and headed to the campsite where I had some warm chicken soup and started icing and massaging my leg. My lower leg had swollen pretty significantly and was getting worse and my wife wasn't able to flex my foot downward past 90 degrees. After about an hour, it became obvious that I wasn't going to go back out so I walked up and took my medicine. One lap, 11 hours, 34 minutes. Complete and utter failure.

As disappointed as I was to not continue onto a second loop, I had an absolute blast on the one loop, and all things considered turned in a good loop and improved from my previous venture here (more difficult course and nighttime start with a similar loop time). Specifically, I didn't "quit" on the way up Big Hell like I did previously.

I am convinced that my injury is due to not being used to running on gnarly terrain for long periods of time, and I knew coming in that I didn't have as much woods time on my legs as I wanted. I also learned that even though my mind and frankly the rest of my body sans right lower leg, were willing to start two loops, that I wouldn't have made it much further. I was feeling the energy leaving on the last two big climbs and there is no way I could have done any of the big 4 again on loop two. My goal since first trying this race two years ago was to "get out on a second loop" and frankly that is a BS goal. I am going to have to set my sights on "getting out on a third loop" and train to that, specifically focusing on rough terrain and hills.

The race has gotten under my skin. It is the Barkley.