

Barkley Marathons 2011 race report by James Demer

My Barkley adventure started well before the conch shell blew, as I'm sure it did for every runner, crew member and race director of this years Barkley Marathons. I live in Maine and decided to drive to tennessee. On Tuesday, I left my home and drove 600 miles to West Virginia where my dad lives. The next day we loaded up his wife's Honda Element and made the 550 mile journey to Frozen Head State Park. It was cold and windy when we arrived at 7pm but we decided to book our campsite and set up the tent anyway. After that task was complete we drove to Wartburg TN, where my dad and crew, John Demer, had booked us a room in Wartburgs finest- The Scenic River Inn. We were both a little rattled by the quality of this establishment but our fatigue over ruled our high class standards so we loaded in our gear and looked for a place to eat.

One of the best finds of the trip was the mexican restaurant attached to a carwash- El Patron. The food was tasty and cheap and the beer came in 32oz glass mugs.

On Thursday I decided it would be good to go for a run and shake the cobwebs of 2 days of travel out of my legs so I headed up Bird Mtn in a light rain. When I reached the capstones I stopped to look around and noticed that the branches on the top 20 feet of the mountain were covered in white rime ice. It was one of the most beautiful, hauntingly magical sights I've ever seen. At that moment, I knew the Barkley would provide me endless moments of wonder.

Friday was a bit of a freakout for me. There was a trip to almost Knoxville to buy a compass and a headlamp for Carl Asker (who is an exceptional human being in my opinion). When we returned we readied my gear, clothes and food. In the late afternoon I marked my map and ate a light supper.

My awesome Dad fixed up the Element for me to sleep in because it was dark and quiet. I went to bed at 8:30 and by 9pm I was sound asleep. At 12:05 am I heard the sound of the shell, and again a minute later!

I had a feeling that an early start because when I asked Laz what the surprise was he said "you'll find out tonight".

All systems were GO and I started the easy speed hike up Bird. About 5 minutes into the hike I realized that my little backup light was missing and I must have bumped it off my pack at the start. Silly me for not attaching it more securely. I did have plenty of batteries for my primary light so I let that thought fly away.

As I worked my way up the switchbacks I saw Carl Laniak's long stride up ahead and thought He'd be a good person to be near for a while. Brett Maune was right there and a small group of us made it to book one with ease. We made our way up Jury Ridge and I found myself in the lead of this group, running the downhill section, until there was a big blowdown mess and I navigated through it so poorly that I was quickly at the tail end of the group. Welcome to the Barkley, may I take your order please?

That moment was insightful however because it was the first stretch that I traveled with Jon Barker and Joe Lea, 2 of the 3 amazing dudes that I would eventually run the rest of the Fun Run with.

We cruised through the coal ponds and basically went straight up the side of the hill to the Garden Spot and book 2. Details get fuzzy here but I remember Carl and Brett moving so quickly and gracefully. Jon, Joe and I watched them move away at an alarming rate as we struggled to find the best line through the pond. The briars that we went through were probably the worst of the entire race. I was ripped to shreds as we popped out the other side. Then came the hail! It was dense and hard then just like that, it was over.

Its important to let you all know now that my navigation skills were sub-par during The Barkley. My plan from the start was to glom on to someone who could get me through the first loop without too much hunting and pecking for books. This worked out too well for me because I never paid enough attention to my surroundings and therefore never really learned where the books were. Ok, back to the story...

The stump and rock at the top of Fykes peak made me chuckle because it seemed like a such a small landmark. It reminded me of the mini Stonehenge statue from Spinal Tap. I did notice someone had tied a little reflective thing in a tree very close by and I wasn't sure if this was a cheater mark or something completely unrelated. Either way my trusty group knew where to go and down the mountain we went.

Testical Specticle was really fun for me. Being on the power lines allowed me to focus on fitness and climbing again and less on navigation. When we (Jon, Joe, Carl A and me, and maybe someone else?) got to the top we saw a long string of headlamps just starting the climb. That was cool to see. On down Meth Lab we went and when we finally found Danger Daves climbing wall we decided to go up it. It was pretty steep! Someone mentioned that Alan Holtz brings tent stakes for climbing and I wished I had a set at that moment! The group that was behind us on Testicle took the pussy route and caught us at the top of Danger Daves. It was Blake Wood, Nick Hallon, Joe Decker and a handful of others.

On up to Rat Jaw the sun began to rise which was beautiful. At first it was a giant orange ball hovering over a nearby mountain top. Those are the gifts that The Barkley gives out from time to time. At the top of Rat Jaw our groups kind of merged. Truthfully I dont really remember who was with us at the time but I know by the time we reached the prison it was a decent little posse.

We navigated up The Bad Thing pretty easily with Blake leading the way. At some point along the way I picked up a stick to assist with climbing and that was very helpful. In the long run having a trekking pole saved me from back pain I'm pretty sure and just helped get up the steep stuff.

Down Zip Line to book 9 at the stream confluence was a tricky, technical descent. This was probably my least favorite part of the course on all 3 loops. I'm not entirely sure why. I found it hard to navigate and laden with rocks, stumps blowdowns and all kinds of mini ridges that made it easy to get off track. With the guidance of Blake, who could find a magic pebble in the bottom of the sea, we nailed the book and went on to climb Big Hell.

Big Hell Was damn steep and had a surprising amount of briars but it is also built like giant steps so after a very steep section, it levels out a bit and gives you a rest. Blake, Jon, Joe and I powered it to the top quickly and grabbed a page from book 10! WooHoo!! only 40 pages to go!! Jon, Joe and I were ready to go very quickly so we started off without the others and Jon began to tell us a story about how he'd gotten woefully off track here before. Well it happened again. The 3 of us were scratching our heads wondering where we were when Joe said he saw Blake behind us a while back and thought he would have caught us by now. So we turned around and backtracked about 10 minutes, then found our error. Down the candy ass trail we flew, smelling the barn all the way.

At this point I started to struggle. I realized I hadn't eaten enough and was beginning to bonk. Jon and Joe were cruising and I didn't want to disrupt their flow, nor did I want to loose them so as we started the last climb I wrestled some cashews out of the pack and wolfed them down. It was amazing how fast they revived me. As we started our final descent on loop one I was feeling physically and mentally solid. We caught up to Carl Asker and I realized that the group that we dropped at book 10, Chimney Top, had all made the right turn and passed us.

We ran up the hill into camp and touched the yellow gate. On the next loop we agreed to not run that hill again. I think we said meet back here in 15 minutes. By the time I turned in my pages and got back to our tent it was more like 10 minutes. My Dad, superman John, handed me a big bowl of scrambled eggs and rice and began to take care of me. I had asked for the eggs and rice but for some reason they weren't appealing to me and I had a hard time eating. The hardest thing for me to do in any ultra I've run is to eat. Such a contradictory problem and a puzzle I need to solve.

With a fresh pair of underwear, shirt, socks and a full slathering of Body Glide all over my feet we met back at the yellow gate, got our new #'s and headed up the trail for loop 2. I'll tell you now that I did my 40 hours of Barkley in one pair of sneakers- Inov8 X-Talon 240 boots. They got the job done.

Climbing Bird we caught up with Joe Decker. He, along with Jon Barker, Joe Lea, Nick Hallon and me made up a merry band of woodland rovers. Henry the young fellow and Byron Backer were on the same schedule as us but they kept firing forward and resting, while we steadily picked away at the course. On Jury Ridge we saw a ghost like Carl Asker, who had gotten very dehydrated and was having a tough go of it. We wished him well and kept moving. That was the first real Barkley carnage I experienced and it really hit hard. I enjoyed Carls company and I knew he was a strong competitor. If that happened to him, it could easily happen to me. I really started paying attention to eating, drinking and taking the S! Caps.

Fast forward to Rat Jaw. Joe Decker was slowing down considerably on the climbs. He asked us to stop waiting for him so we did and kept going to the top. Joe met us just as we were beginning our journey down and he said he was done. It made me sad because Joe was so great to have on the team. His booming, velvety smooth voice, big laugh, kind words and smile would be recalled by me for the rest of my journey.

Now we were down to the nugget. Jon, Joe, Nick and Me. This was a special group. I don't normally like running in groups and I most definitely like racing alone so I found it refreshing and surprising to be enjoying this gang so much. I also needed them for navigation. I'd like to think I offered something in return but I'm not sure what that was.

I think it was Jon that said "Nick must have a photographic memory" because he was uncanny in his ability to find books. Whenever we stopped to scratch our collective heads, Nick would sniff the air, point a finger, charge away and then shout "I Found it!". That kid has 5 loops in him I have no doubt. 2 words- Human Sacrifice NOT!

When we got to the top of Big Hell around midnight we found Byron and Henry sitting quietly in The Needles Eye. As I tore my page out of the book and our gang sat down to eat some food I felt a cold, empty stillness settling into my bones. It felt to me like a deep despair. The doldrums. I didn't sit or take my pack off. Instead I let my boys eat quickly and then I said "we need to leave this place NOW". All agreed and even Henry and Byron got up. Henry flew down Zip Line and was gone and Byron took a left hand route he insisted was easier to navigate. Us 4 took the middle line and although both Byron and Henry were ahead of us I was glad to be away from the darkness that was hovering around them. We worked together to find the confluence of streams and Nick, true to form, found a trail and then easily found the book.

Nick also showed us a log to cross the river on so our feet got less wet than last time around. Up to book 10 and down to the yellow gate was uneventful. We all decided to go out again together for loop 3 and to spend 1 hour and 15 minutes at camp refreshing ourselves. I was secretly nervous about spending such a long time at camp. It was 1am and the longer we stayed, I feared, the longer we would want to stay. Nick and Jon chose to nap while Joe and I chose to shower. When I entered the large, toasty warm bathroom I found Nick on the floor in a sleeping bag and his crew and girlfriend Stephanie was feeding him some food. Joe Lea jumped out of the shower in just a towel and realized that he'd left his clean clothes in his car. He had to run outside into the cold night to get dressed which seemed like torture to me. I felt refreshed after my shower and Dad got my pack all ready with a full bladder of water and lots of food. I had been using Body Glide on my feet but I thought I was out (turns out I had a full stick in plain sight) so I used Desitin on my feet instead. This would later prove to be a big mistake. At 2:20am, at least 5 minutes after our meeting time, Joe, Nick and I were still in the bathroom. Jon came in and told us that he'd been waiting by the gate. Jon was all smiles though and said "its time to go". We collected our new #'s and off we went in the counterclockwise direction for our 3rd loop.

At this point in my head I was pretty sure I didn't have 5 loops in me. My new objective was to make it to each book and take it from there. We didn't have much trouble navigating through the first few climbs and descents although we were all moving more slowly and stopping at each book to eat and rest. It was making Jon nervous. As we approached the prison the dawn light began to seep into the

steep mountain hollow. We cruised through the long tunnel under the prison for what would become our last time. Its such a thrilling part of The Barkley! This tunnel is a stone archway and almost a quarter mile long I'd guess. The bottom of the tunnel is a stream of ankle deep cold mountain water. Its refreshing yet a secret killer on the feet of those that put Desitin on instead of Body Glide.

We began the long arduous ascent to Rat Jaw. I was amused at how we were on Rat Jaw for every sunrise and sunset since the beginning of the race. This was our second sunrise and it was as joyous as the first. The briars on Rat Jaw power line were impassible. That forced us just off to the side which was very difficult because the pitch up is 35+ degrees and the camber on which we tread was probably 30+ degrees. That adds up to a dastardly ascent.

Finally at the top we saw a couple of teenage boys who had camped out at the summit. I think they were intrigued and surprised at seeing a gang of dirty men tearing the pages out of a paperback book and then hiking down the most inhospitable route possible.

At some point, during a rest break, Jon Barker firmly commanded that we would not make the Fun Run if we continued to stop at every peak and book. It was that riveting moment that made the difference between us finishing a Fun Run in 40 hours or not. My hat was off to Jon and I silently pledged to heed his advice. It was also around that time that an unspoken bond was formed between the 4 of us. In my mind, I pledged my allegiance to this bunch of men that guided me through the nights and days, kept me company and had my back. I would have their backs too.

We kept plugging away, through Meth Lab Hill, over Testicle Spectacle, Past the pig head skull and up Fykes Peak. The climb up Fykes almost broke me. I was struggling and my feet felt like I had been standing on waffle irons. Every step hurt so badly it took my breath away, and I needed that breath for the relentless and unending climb up Fykes.

We decided to get book 3 and stop to rest at the water drop. When we finally arrived there I was almost in tears but I tried hard to hold it in so I wouldn't bring down anyone in my posse. I downed 4 advil and an Ensure, and some granola. Joe Lea noticed that many of the gallon water jugs had been slashed and were drained. It was a sad sight. There was still enough water left for us and whoever was still "out There" we supposed. We all wondered who might do such a deed as to slash the jugs, especially in such a remote location. It wasn't until later that I realized that it was most likely a raccoon or some critter that did the deed.

The advil had an almost immediate effect on my feet and therefore my mood. One nice thing about being seriously food deprived is that your body processes things like advil FAST. It didnt allow me to move super fast but I was no longer fiercely struggling. We made it to the Garden Spot and book 2, tore our pages and then made our way down the steep wooded slope to the coal ponds and the final candy ass trail.

There is still a bunch of switchback climbing and descending on this section and a fair number of miles. We were running out of time. Nick and I spent some time chatting at the front of the pack and as we reached a point in time where our 40 hour Fun Run seemed to be slipping from our grasp he asked me, very tactfully, what I was planning on doing. You see at this point Jon, who had truly led us through the majority of the last 40 hours, was struggling to move quickly. I told Nick that he should do what feels right to him. He had been a tremendous leader and an asset to the group, as well as good company but this is a race and there are no rules that say you need to stick together. I told him that MY intention was to stay with Jon. A voice inside me said that Joe Lea would do the same. It was more important for me to finish after 40 hours with this bunch than to break 40 on my own at the last minute. Nick must have decided to do the same thing because he stayed with us. Nick has earned my respect as a young man with drive, ambition, good nature, generosity and integrity. A small bow to you Nick.

We made it to book 1 and ceremoniously tore out our pages. The 30th page tear. Brett Maune would tear out 20 more pages in his journey.

We wound our way to the summit of Bird and began the switchy descent to camp. The clock was

ticking loudly and I was very nervous that we were not going to make it. When we saw the stream down below and then saw the jeep road in the distance I looked at my watch again. It seemed that we had 15-20 minutes to spare. Our gang of 4 decided to approach the yellow gate in a line and touch the gate together on a 3 count. There was a group of crew members, runners who had dropped and of course Mr. Lazarus Lake. The mastermind of the most devilish trail race on the planet.

Blake Wood finished just in front of us and because I was the last to hand my pages to Laz I was the last to hear taps played for me on the bugle. It was so so sweet.

I headed back to our tent where super crew John tended to my every need. He then took a bunch of us out for Mexican food and picked up the check. What a guy!

That night my feet were swollen like grapes. They hurt so bad I didn't sleep very well. In the morning we slowly broke camp and waited for Brett Maune to finish. When he came up the road to the yellow gate to finish his Barkley and to become the 10th person ever to finish all 5 loops I got choked up and teary. It was one of the most amazing displays of human endurance I've ever seen and most likely will ever see. Brett is not only a Barkley alumni, but a heck of a good guy.

Thanks to my Dad for being a great crew and friend, thanks to Jon, Joe and Nick. I'd do anything for any one of you. Thanks to all the nice people I met at camp who took the time to give me advice and conversation prior to and after the race. Most of all thanks to LAZARUS LAKE, who is a genius.

James Demer