

Allan Holtz's 2011 Barkley Race Report

The Barkley will squash you like a bug, where your best is not good enough. These words from Gary Cantrell ring very true to most Barkley runners. They certainly are reality for me. More than any other race, the Barkley will challenge your limits on every imaginable level. How much endurance (ability to access body fat for long periods and maintain muscle capability and process ingested calories efficiently for long periods of time) do you have? Not enough. How fast of a climber are you? Not fast enough. How fast can you descend steep slopes? Not fast enough. How sure footed are you on rough uneven terrain? Not enough. How strong are your foot and ankle joints and muscles to hold up to relentless uneven canted terrain? Not enough. How good are your navigational techniques in the daylight? Not good enough. How about navigating at night? Not good. Can you move well on limited sleep for up to 60 hours if need be? No. If you are uncertain of being properly on the correct trail can you regain confidence and or get back on course quickly? No. Can you continue to move quickly while verifying you are on course? No. Can you remain mentally focused when confronted with thorns, hail, snow, cold, heat and rain – all working in tandem to drag you down to the depths of despair? By defining a race with a 1% finish rate Gary Cantrell has truly provided a magical test of nearly everyone's ability where personal victories can be defined in small increments.

This year, coming off of a 1 year hiatus, I hoped to complete a 3-loop fun run. My first 2 attempts of the Barkley ended in overtime after one loop (16 hours with a 13:20 time limit per loop for 3 loops or 12 hour limit per loop for a 5-loop goal – a complete race), having been lost for too much time. My 3rd attempt enjoyed the benefit of the navigational wisdom of Leonard Martin and until striking out on my own down Zipline of loop 2 I was on target for a “decision” regarding a nighttime counterclockwise loop 3. So my Barkley history was one of being barely fast enough to continue and needing near perfect navigation for continuing with navigation a serious personal challenge. It is really amazing how fast time flies when you are studying maps and compasses uncertain where to go. I assumed my previous 3 attempts would be enough to eliminate navigational errors this time, so even at age 61, I thought a Fun Run was a reasonable goal for me.

I left home (Oakdale, Minnesota) Monday about 4:00 PM central time. I arrived at my early campsite (my car at the Oak Ridge Walmart) Tuesday 4:00 PM eastern. I ate at the Super China Buffet that evening. My fortune cookie (prophetic I hoped) said “come rain or shine, conquer your day”. On Wednesday I reserved a Big Cove campsite (#17) at Frozen Head State Park for Friday-Monday and hiked up the Candy Ass Chimney Top trail to Indian Knob and back (11 miles total). I stopped briefly to spot the book atop Big Hell and the book location at Indian Knob. I was uncertain I had actually found the correct spot for the Indian Knob book as I did not see the book in its normal hiding place. Kudos is hereby given to the library staff for effectively hiding it in its shelf. I went back to my early campsite and ate at Ryans Buffet. The following are pictures I took during my 11-mile hike on Wednesday. Note the fog at near the mountain peaks. This can be a serious nighttime navigation issue.



On Thursday morning I did some additional shopping for a rain suit, something tough to fight the Rat Jaw briars I had been forewarned about by Chip Tuthill on Wednesday. That afternoon I drove to Armes Gap and first hiked a bit south to look both ways at Testicle Spectacle. Then I hiked the opposite direction to the lookout tower atop Rat Jaw. There was some snow near the tower and I could see about 150 feet into the dense fog with the temperature about 33°F. I was walking slowly, and wearing my new rain suit this was a comfortable combination given my pace and the ambient temperature at the time. I wanted to test out my briar armor so I walked down Rat Jaw a little bit. The suit seemed to pass the test from a durability and protective standpoint, although forward movement was extremely difficult (even downhill) through those briars. I also realized that such a PVC-over-nylon suit would be too hot to wear if the temperature were much higher. I again slept at the Walmart lot and ate at the Super China Buffet. It has been a fun trip so far. The first 3 pictures are looking down Testicle Spectacle and the next 9 are on the way to the top of Rat Jaw and the lookout tower. There are flowers amongst the thorns and a bit of snow on the ground and again, plenty of fog. I could see the top of the lookout tower but not the top of the communications tower. Those briars are over 6 feet tall.



On Friday I officially checked in, talked with new and old friends, and enjoyed some Barkley chicken along with Abi's banana cream pie, David Hugh's baked beans, lots of cookies, cake and my fruit salad before showering, lubricating, dressing into my running clothes and filling my backpack by 9:30 PM. I then made the mistake of spending an hour reading the course instructions before going to sleep. I should have tried to bed down by 7:30 PM...

At 12:35 AM I was kindly awakened by window rapping and loud shouts from my site mate of - "the conch shell sounded 30 minutes ago". I am eternally grateful for this additional wake-up call, as I was soundly asleep and totally missed the conch sound. I quickly consumed an additional meal of 2 slices of bread, 1 Nutrigrain bar, 1 granola bar and 1 banana – washed down with some chocolate soy milk. I made a quick check of my preparation and cinched my back pack in place. I secured a 32-oz water bottle and 32-oz bottle of home-made gel cross-shoulder. I wore a headlamp, shaded hat, handheld light and a hooded shell jacket over a stretch long sleeve shirt with long nylon pants and new INOV8 X-Talon shoes over Injini toe socks. On my hands was a light pair of nylon and imitation leather gloves. Also in my backpack I carried the rain suit along with microfiber pants and shirt, another pair of warmer gloves, another full 32-oz water bottle and a 20-oz bottle of gel, a small bottle of iodine tablets, extra S-Caps (electrolytes) and an emergency whistle. Around my neck was a compass. In one pocket was a laminated set of course instructions and a laminated park map. In another pocket was my book-page baggie. Attached to the front of my pants via its built-in belt was my water-resistant camera. All set to go, or so I thought...

After waiting a minute at the yellow gate, the cigarette was lit at 1:07 AM Saturday, April 2, 2011 and I started off up Bird Mountain Candy Ass Trail midst what soon appeared an endless snake-like stream of light, as the

runners spread out according to their individual speed. I had no trouble to book 1, leaving that site 1:12:15 after the 1:07 AM race start. I knew I was going much faster than I would be able to maintain (average heart rate 125 beats/minute – maximum 140), but did not want to risk losing sight of the group of 7 (included Ed Furtaw, Abi Meadows, Sue Thompson and others) of which I was a part. Somewhere just before the coal ponds it began to hail, snow and rain. Fortunately it did not last for more than maybe 30 minutes and the hail never got larger than ¼-inch. A couple spots a couple members of our group had leg-cramping issues. I hoped that would not happen to me.

Probably a combination of the early start, my ingesting solid food just prior to the start and my “fast for me” first few miles, but shortly after SOB ditch and passing the coal ponds, about halfway up the final switchback climb to the Garden Spot (~mile 8 of the 20 mile loop), my bowels demanded attention. Now I was alone and in the dark, both literally and figuratively as soon became apparent. I self-navigated the remaining switchbacks to the road leading to the Garden Spot, but somehow missed the painted rocks and went to what appeared to be the end of the road. I’m not sure how much time I wasted looking for the book, but finally with my page (44) from book 2 in bag left for book 3 at 4:20:57 into my run (OK – walk). Due to my potty stop and slowdown looking for book 2, my average heart rate had dropped to 113 with a maximum of 137 for this section. The water drop came easily. I drank from a jug and refilled my shoulder-slung bottle. I had so far not touched my backpack bottle – just extra weight.

On the road on the way to Stallion Mountain I saw 2 other runners coming towards me. I knew I was on-trail at this point, so this was not good for them. I asked them where they were going and they were looking for book 2. Shortly after that brief human encounter I obviously made a navigational error, because after much saw brier scrambling I found myself below and to the right side of a huge vertical wall of rock. I knew I was off course, but not sure exactly where I was. I thought as I moved away from this cliff, that it looked a lot like the Yellow Indian, but it did not register with me that in fact it was the Yellow Indian and that book 3 was atop the Yellow Indian. Anyway, I followed swamp and briers and roads and road crossings until reaching the 5-way intersection and fire ring. I decided I needed to consult the directions and map. At this point I knew I was on-course, but had missed (by a lot) getting book 3. So I back-tracked and retrieved book 3 and retraced my way back to the fire ring. I was 6:20:02 into my run at the point when I finally got my book 3 page, it was light out and I knew there was no way I was going to complete this loop in 13:20. Getting from book 2 to 3 should have taken me maybe 30 minutes, but ended up taking me 2 hours. My average heart rate for this section, with all my stopping to consult map and directions was only 87 with a maximum of 128. As one loses confidence in their having picked the correct path, they slow down, as deadly a sin for completing the Barkley as being lost itself.

My frustration was evidenced by my failure to record on my watch my segment times between books 3, 4 and 5, finally remembering to do so again at the top of Rat Jaw (book 6) – a total walk time of 12:37:08. My average heart rate between books 3 and 6 was 96 with a false max of 163 (heart rate strap movement and or moisture issue probably). I had navigated (and moved) reasonably after book 3 to book 5 (Raw Dog Falls). While uncertain where to begin my descent of Fykes Peak, I never saw the described landmarks for descending from the inverted cone), I successfully wound my way down that mountain, seeing the park boundary markers and the partially down power lines before crossing the New River. I did not worry about wet feet in the New River, although I did find the underwater rocks to be rather slippery. I retained balance and found the stream coming down the far side of the road, the power-lines overhead and book 4 at the base of Testicle OK. Following are

pictures of the Yellow Indian before and after getting book 3 and the descent down Fykes to Testicle. Do you see the “face” in the brightly lit rock? The 3rd picture shows a rock cliff in which one needed to carefully find a crack through which to safely descend. Then I followed a valley with a tiny stream down to the “partially downed power lines” that I travelled under and then downstream and upstream photos of the New River where I crossed.



About halfway up Testicle I saw another runner near the summit. Not sure who it was. About 1/3 the way down the other side I thought I heard voices off in the woods to my left. If so, those runners were off course. I slid down the short butt slide and followed the shelf to my right around and down to the dirt road with about a 100 yard climb back up the road to the falls and book 5. Then I (assume) I did not travel the road far enough down before crossing the stream and climbing Danger Dave’s Wall. Anyway using plastic tent spikes to assist my climb, I then continued down the top of a narrow ridge and into a valley and I continued down, crossed a dirt road (fit the course description – or so I thought) and then shortly after started to see houses off to the side. I passed a goat pen and knew (before then) I had somehow gone too far. I took a gravel road up past a couple nice homes and saw the dam to the reservoir – not from above, but from below the reservoir. More time spent studying the map confirmed where I was and I walked up through the grass, back into the woods and onto highway 116. Here are two pictures of the climb up Testicle Spectacle.



I started to climb highway 116, looking for that pig’s head on a stick. In prior years I had seen it from the road and expected to see it again. After many switchbacks of climbing I decided the coming switchbacks were very sharp and corresponded to some on the map way above the Pig’s Head turnoff. So I headed back down highway 116, still looking to see the pig’s head. I came to a nice large stream flowing down off of the mountain, but

nopig's head. I continued down the road. Shortly I saw 2 runners (Cheryl Lager and Joe Ninke – so I was indeed currently in last place of those continuing to move) entering a climb next to a tiny stream. I assumed this had to be the spot, although I did not see a pig's head, until starting up from the ditch I turned, and there on a stick tied behind a tree was the promised head, only visible after you had correctly chosen the path.

About halfway up the bushwack climb to the old mining road I caught up to Cheryl and Joe. I assured them we were on course at that point (although I was a fine one to give course confidence). By the time I reached the old mining road to go left to Rat Jaw I could no longer see them. I started up Rat Jaw under the power lines for maybe 20 feet, gave up and moved to climb left of the power-lines until the first shelf. Then I crossed to the right of the lines ascending through the cliff gap and on to water and book 6 at the top. As near as I could tell, no one had gone through the briers, under the power lines, up Rat Jaw. My path appeared very well worn. I had consumed much of my spare bottle between water drops. I refilled both water bottles and emptied my spare gel bottle into my main one and descended Rat Jaw to the stream exiting the prison, mostly retracing my steps to the prison mine road and then continuing down the path most travelled to the prison. I saw Joe and Cheryl for the last time on this loop coming up Rat Jaw as I was about 1/3 down. At the prison I stayed on the large rocks bordering the stream and tunnel entrance, grabbed the open gate and pulled myself into the tunnel. That tunnel crossing was a cool experience. At the other end I choose the wetter easier way out, i.e. the knee deep rock climb rather than the shallow-water wall climb. The following pictures show the old guard shack at the base of Rat Jaw, the rock-gap while climbing to the right of the power-lines, saw briers starting down to the prison from the old mining road and the prison from near the butt slide.



After getting book 7 (again I failed to get my segment time) I spent a lot of time determining the correct path to Indian Knob. The directions said, from the book to look south to the water tower, only the only “water tower” I saw was to the north. I walked to the far edge of the prison wall and could not see another water tower. The instructions said to go uphill to the left of the water tower. I saw a road extending uphill to the left of the water tower. Was I to start up that hill on the road or simply bushwack nearly perpendicular to that road up the mountain? I started up towards the two (fuel?) tanks on a narrow shelf/ridge (was that the ridge referenced in the instructions?) and wandered towards the road and went up it a bit as it also started back down having peaked about the same level as the fuel tanks. I finally decided to simply follow a rough SSE compass bearing from the prison bushwacking up the mountain. This worked reasonably well. I summited near capstones about 150 yards left of the Needle. Unlike my visit on Wednesday book 8 was now easily visible. I reached this book in a total time of 16:01:52 with an average heart rate of 90 maximum 116 from Rat Jaw. The following pictures show the prison near the stream exit, a close-up of the entrance to the tunnel, the tunnel, a view of the prison exit wall with book 7 by the poles and a reverse prison wall view showing an alternative exit from the stream next to the wall.



Unlike my previous Barkley adventures, this trip down Zipline was uneventful and reasonably fast. I stumbled over rocks and downed trees and through some briars with occasional tiny stream crossings, but mainly following a larger stream down the mountain till the proper confluence was reached. I used my altimeter to give confidence I was still on path. I picked up book 9 without problem in a total time of 17:12:12 with an average heart rate of 88 and a maximum of 111 coming down Zipline. The following pictures show various scenes coming down Zipline.



My climb up Big Hell was slightly faster than my descent of Zipline. I came right to book 10 with no problems 18:16:13 into my walk with an average heart rate of 104 maximum 122. So I ascended Big Hell 6 minutes faster than I descended Zipline. Both were approximately the same distance I think with approximately 1600 feet of elevation change, but the footing was better on Big Hell. In the past I had issues finding the Candy Ass Chimney Top trail, but not this time. About 1/6 the way down the easy trail (slow jog) I was passed by the lead pair of runners on their 2nd loop (Ouch!). I picked up my speed to keep with them about 50 yards back for a couple miles until I tripped shortly before the stream crossing a little over halfway down. It was dark when I quietly strode up and touched the yellow gate about 19:34 after I started... I did not get my lights out of my back pack until I finished the loop, listened to a mighty finely played rendition of Taps and had more chicken, beans, cookies, 2 large slices of pizza and banana cream pie. I had consumed about 2500 calories of gel during the loop and according to my heart rate monitor I had burned 6469 calories during the one loop. Joe and Cheryl came in with all book pages in 23:31 ending the parade of first loop finishers. Their time I think might be a Barkley record for the slowest loop one in which runners actually found all of the book pages. Slower times have been recorded for incomplete loop 1's. The following pictures are from the ascent of Big Hell ending with an appropriate book for the last one in the loop. Please note Gary Cantrell does not consider Candy Ass trail and paved road "real road", so this book did indeed mark the true "end of the road" for the first 2 Barkley loops. You can faintly see darker leaves where runners ruffled the leaves, easily marking the trail up Big Hell for daytime travel at least.



After a needed nap in my car at the park Saturday night, I noted my weight was down to 156 pounds and supposedly 11.5% body fat Sunday morning after a welcomed shower. I weighed 160 pounds at 10.5% body fat the Monday before leaving home. I drove to Oak Ridge and ate at Ryan's Buffet Sunday morning. I came back to camp and late afternoon trudged up and back down the Old North Mac Trail to the intersection of Panther Branch. My legs were a little stiff, and my right knee joint was somewhat tender, but not too bad. Just a few rat bites and no blisters or abrasions. My shirt, shell jacket and long nylon pants and gloves had provided adequate briar stop protection. It got up to 79°F Sunday afternoon and was still 74°F at 7:30 PM, so it was hot "out there" for all those still on the course. The following pictures are a sample of the view up the north old mac trail.



Brett Mauvre finished loop 4 at 8:30 PM Sunday and started loop 5 clockwise at 9:30 PM after receiving some Laz - park ranger negotiated course changes due to a 50-acre wildfire east of Testicle hill that threatened the race continuation and was getting bulldozer fire lines to protect a gas well and nearby homes. I bedded down. The temperature was 60°F when I got up at 6:30 AM Monday. My weight and body fat now measured 161 pounds and 10%. At 10:27 AM Monday morning Brett came walking confidently up the park road and touched the yellow gate and the "easy button" full of smiles and rat bites, tossed his handkerchief and bag of book pages at Laz, who with Stu Glemen double checking, verified a successful completion of loop 5, assuring Brett as the Barkley finisher number 10 and his entering the ultra-running ultimate hall of fame. The following pictures show the dramatic conclusion to a successful Barkley run, rat bites and all. First an anticipatory crowd (some 25 witnesses remained yet Monday morning), then the victor appears...



I then quickly double checked I had collected my belongings and headed to Oak Ridge for a final stop at the Super China Buffet, before a long drive home. Through a good part of Tennessee and most of Kentucky I encountered rain on the way home, at times it was hard with many cars waiting it out aside the road. At least Brett (a Barkley virgin by the way) did not suffer such a horrendous downpour during his 5-loop run, only hail, extreme sleep deprivation, a night time first counterclockwise loop (3) due to the early start, heat and fire.

I got home OK 7:30 AM Tuesday, April 5, 2011. I think I might make a small note sheet for next time (given my one-loop time this year a next time opportunity might be a bit presumptive on my part) in which from the current course at least, I using a string for approximate distance and a straight edge and compass determine an approximate step count and direction set from the map for the various "less-than-obvious sections of the course. Given my age and speed, I can't afford any navigation issues again.

My final assessment – a super fun time

P.S. On Thursday, April 7, I went 12 miles on my treadmill (first running after the Barkley), the first 8 miles at 7 mile/hour 0% slope. The interesting part is that for those 8 miles my average heart rate was 8 beats per minute higher than during the first 8 miles of my treadmill run at the same speed and slope the Sunday before the Barkley. So even though my legs felt OK to start that run, my body was obviously not recovered. The Barkley will squash you like a bug.