

My Barkley Tale of Adventure and Misfortune
by
Howie Stern

Bad things happen at the Barkley...A phrase that seems to continue to ring through my head even a week after the race...

I arrived at Frozen head on Thursday afternoon, tired from not having slept on the red eye flight from Los Angeles. After buying a map and snagging a campsite, I wandered around looking for any familiar faces. I found Frozen Ed and talked for a while with him, Carl Laniak, JB, Carl Asker, and Stu Gleman. It was really cool to start to put faces to all of the names I had grown familiar with. With daylight dwindling, I decided to take a trip up Bird Mountain to check out some of the candy ass trail we'd be starting out on.

The climb up seemed pretty tame, not at all steep compared to what I imagined Barkley to be like...However, I knew this was just one piece of the puzzle, and I expected the real climbs and descents to be exponentially more difficult...As I neared the top, the trail and trees were soon covered in snow and fog now surrounded me. This was now a little more like what I imagined *out there* could be like. After taking a few pictures I headed back down to camp, all the while thinking about what lie in store for me once the race began...

There had been talk about what the "surprise" could be. Would it be an early start? A reverse first loop? Veterans one direction and Virgins the other? All of this added to the mental games that this race seems so famous for...

Coming into the race I had one primary goal, not to quit. Period. I'd rather time out than give up. Sure five loops would be nice, but I new as a virgin with no prior experience on the course, that would be most likely unrealistic. I had trained more as a hiker for this race since I figured I'd be doing much more hiking than running out there. I felt pretty good about my fitness level, but I still was not in the shape I had hoped for. The tremendous amounts of snow we got this winter didn't help either. The one thing that always concerned me was navigation. I had never been to Frozen Head and although I new the general layout from maps, I had no concept of how they really looked at ground level...as I would soon see...*in the dark*...

After spending Friday meeting Laz and the rest of the Barkleyites I got all of my stuff together and got to sleep at about 10pm. Surprisingly I wasn't nervous. I was really excited to get out on the trail. Sometime around midnight a car drove by. Just after that I heard a horn sound. My immediate though was, "shit, I really hope that was just the car and not the conch." Ten seconds later the horn sounded again. I then cursed as I heard others saying similar things in their tents. Yep that was the surprise. A 1:05am start. I guess I got my secret wish of seeing what navigation was like in the dark. What a dumbass...

I made it to the yellow gate just in time for the lighting of the cigarette. Off we went. Some people ran, others started hiking. I ran for a bit then happily started to hike. I settled into a steady pace. I wasn't sure who was around me. I probably should have paid more attention so that I could have figured who would be good to stay with. I led a group of about five to the top at which point I stopped for a second to take off my jacket as I was cooking. That group, which was composed of Mike Bur, Dewayne Satterfield, Rob Youngren and some others were gone in a heartbeat. Heading down the candy ass trail I was having a great time. I was a little worried however because I was alone. After a short time I arrived at book 1. I could see the other group heading up Jury Ridge just ahead. Cool, I thought. Found the first book on my own.

The climb up Jury wasn't that bad. I tried to conserve energy so I didn't bother to try and catch to group up ahead. I think we were maintaining a consistent distance between us. I was having a great time and felt like I was moving well. At some point I came to a trail sign but I saw an orange blaze on the trail straight ahead so off I went without a second thought.

Shortly I came out to a wide dirt road. I was confused as this seemed wrong. I waited for a few minutes to see if any others would come. I got impatient so I took off to my left. After running for about five minutes I started to notice white blazes on the trees. This seemed wrong. I then came to a sign for Squire Knob. I pulled out my map and realized I blew it. I turned around and ran back pretty hard to where I first came out on the road. I saw another little trail take off down the hill from there. I followed it a few hundred feet down but it went nowhere. I started getting frustrated as I realized how much time I was wasting and I still wasn't sure where the hell I was. I made it back to the road and then decided to run back up the trail with the orange blazes. Shortly I came to the trail sign and figured that's where I originally blew it. At this point, I had wasted a half hour. Damn, I was pissed. Soon there after I saw lights. Only problem is that they are coming towards me. What the heck? Turns out it was Steve Durbin, Mike O'Melia, Cheryl, and Joe. I then stayed with them as they described where I made mistake and they tell me where to go from there.

I leave them take off running trying to make up lost time. I should have been well past book 2 by now if I hadn't gotten lost...Then the hail started. I quickly put on my rain shell and continued on down the trail. I passed SOB ditch but then got all twisted around at the coal ponds. Damn, am I really lost again? It really hits me that I have been to complacent with details while following the candy ass trail...I stay calm and decide to turn around and see if I can find the others...

Shortly thereafter, I see my former group come toward me. I guess they had been joking that there was no way I was going to make it on my own...I was far from ready to be counted out yet...

Off we went around the coal ponds. Durbin seemed to know the way but was even a little unsure himself. At some point we came to a creek, crossed it, then ascended a steep slope looking for the switchbacks up to the Garden Spot. I think I was the first

one in our group to find them as I was moving pretty quickly up the slope. I should have taken a bearing here to see which way to go because apparently we picked the wrong way. The switchbacks petered out so we just headed up. After what seemed like endless upward wandering we arrived at the top of something facing a line of boundary markers. Taking a bearing off the markers we realized we needed to follow them to the east. A short while later we came out on the jeep road as Allan Holtz was going past. He said book two and the water drop was back down the road.

Rejoining the rest of our group, we searched around and finally found book two. I was amazed how cold it was up there. We quickly took off and made our way to the water drop. The hillside down to the water was really slippery and boy was it a bitch to come back up. I broke into my sandwich here as I wanted to keep my energy level up.

Negotiating Stallion seemed to go pretty well. I was feeling antsy and really wanted to run on all of the flat and downhill stuff, especially to make up so much lost time, yet, I wanted to stay with them because I did not want to get lost again. We found book three pretty easily and then we split up. I went with Durbin and O'Melia and Cheryl and Joe stuck together as they thought we were going the wrong way.

We all wound up meeting together at the party spot fire ring and headed up to Fyke's. At this point I decided to pick up the pace and go on my own as I could now see since the sun was up. I still had my sights set on a fun run so I knew I had a lot of time to make up and I was still feeling really good. I guess my mind had really shifted gears as to the reality of Barkley and I made sure to constantly consult my map, compass, and directions to make sure I was always heading where I needed to be. I hate having to rely on others so now was the time where I'd either sink or swim. Plus, I knew if I made it to a second loop, I needed to know how to get around the course by myself.

I made a few mistakes while making my way to the New River, but wound up on the old road at the bottom. I saw the partially downed power line ahead and was relieved to know I was on course. I crossed the river and headed up to the highway. I immediately knew where I was as I had driven on 116 the day before. I came out right at the top of the pullout, crossed and headed up the left side of the creek straight up to the old road. I quickened my pace as the terrain was pretty mellow. Around the bend the Testicle Spectacle revealed itself in all its glory. I could see someone near the top. Cool, a human!

I found book four immediately and took my page. The mud was pretty bad there but oh well...Climbing the Spectacle was really fun. There was a decent path through the briars and I made steady progress. The top was a little tough as it seemed really steep and slippery. I jogged down Meth Lab Hill and cruised out right after the NBS. On the approach to Raw Dog Falls, I hit the road first so I went up hill a little to the falls. I thought I saw a book on the other side but it turned out to be a can...After a re-reading the instructions a few times, I turned around and book five was literally

three feet behind me on the road!

I got a little twisted around again and had trouble finding Danger Dave's Climbing Wall. (Funny thing is, at home, I re-read the instructions and it now made perfect sense and I can "see" exactly where I needed to go) I probably wasted another twenty minutes here at least. I never could find that rusted barrel. After wandering around I finally saw somebody and I followed them right up to the highway crossing.

I found Pig Head Creek easily and began climbing. I don't think I took the best route to the ridge as I found myself climbing on all fours struggling up the steep hillside. Once on the faint jeep road, the climbing was much easier. Sensing my energy becoming low, I downed a Snickers bar and felt much better. At the top I popped out on the Prison Mine Trail where I saw another runner who looked pretty beat. I guess he passed me while I was wandering around the Danger Dave's area.

I ran down to the base of Rat Jaw. Holy crap! That thing looked like the nastiest, steepest, dreadlock looking nest of briars! I started up and quickly found a faint trail leading up the bowels of the powerline cut. The first pitch was slow and steady progress up to where the lines bend. Pitch two just seemed to drag on and on...The briars really sucked and I got completely stuck a few times. I understand why Laz said they're sometimes called "wait a minutes." Eventually I popped out at the top and made my way to the tower. Durbin(who must have passed me while I was wandering around Danger Dave's area) and Charles Raffensperger were up there. We chatted for a few moments and Durbin took off first. Charles and I shared some sarcastic humor and briefly chatted with some civilians. It was weird to see regular people after having been "out there" alone...

After eating a little and filling my water I took off. I quickly caught Durbin as I was trying to run as much as possible. I got to the bottom and then headed down the rest of the way to the prison without and real difficulties. I did notice the briars seems really stiff and annoying just above the prison just before you reached the tunnel.

I pulled out my flashlight for the tunnel and headed in. How cool! The drippings off the roof and the cobbles lining the tunnel just looked so otherworldly. Once on the far side I opted for the shaft exit. As a rock climber, it felt like a 5.6 chimney sort of thing. My wet feet were the only concern. I choose the right side as there seemed to be more footholds. After manteling out the top, I quickly made my way to the book. I kept on thinking of the things that must have gone on in this area while the prison was open. Another priceless Barkley memory.

Pretty much at this point I realized I was probably going to time out. However, completing the loop was my only thought. I did not see it as failure, but as a chance to really learn the course on my own so that when I'd be out here next time, I would know how to get around on my own.

I pressed on. Heading up the initial pitch of Bad Thing was indeed a grunt as the directions stated. I found myself pulling on trees to make forward progress as my energy was waning. I was beginning to pay the price for not bringing enough calories. Once on top of the knob, I crossed razor ridge and headed up, up, and up. It seemed like it took forever. I didn't feel necessarily bad, I just couldn't move fast. I guess I was bonking for the first time. After what seemed like an eternity, I came to the top, went to the right and found book 8 immediately. Sweet! I was so happy to be finding all of the books pretty easily now.

After consulting the instructions, I pitch off down the briar-infested hillside known as Zipline. I took out my compass to take a bearing but apparently it had broken. The needle just flopped on the bezel...Great...No biggie, I just used my map to locate features and eventually found the confluence where the old jeep road started. I will say the going to get to this point was slow. I would pick up others tracks from time to time, but then they would just disappear. It got frustrating...

Once on the jeep road I was so happy to see a path beaten down by the other Barkers. It felt good to run again on a bit of real trail. I began to look for Beech Fork. I was wondering if the book would be hard to find since Geradi had such a difficult time when he was out here. Pretty soon the jeep road crossed the creek so I knew I was near book 9. A small stream came in from the right. I wondered if it was the Beech fork, but there was no steep embankment on the other side. I decided to go a little further downstream and sure enough, there was the real Beech Fork and the large embankment.

I crawled up it and looked to my right at the top. Bingo, there was the beech tree and book 9. I got a kick out of the title, something dealing with Geraldi as I saw the name Geraldi a massive amount of times on each page!

After eating the small amount of food I had left, I began my ascent from the bowels of Hell. The directions were perfect. Pick the steepest way up at all times. I did just this and there seemed to be a virtual trail the whole way. Hell didn't seem near as tough as Bad Thing. Maybe because I knew it was the last real climb or maybe because I was just feeling better. In any event, the top came after some 40 plus minutes of climbing. I went straight up to the first capstone and found the book easily. I remember being really happy that I had managed to find all ten books, eight of them on my own. If nothing else, I was proud of that.

At that point I was ready to get off the peak and begin the long descent back to camp. I wasted a few minutes finding the candy ass trail since my compass was busted, but once I figured out north, I found it quickly. I ran pretty well off the top and it sure felt sweet to just turn my mind off and just let my legs float. I ran out of water as I started climbing rough ridge. That kind of sucked because it made me feel like I was bonking again. Anyways, I powered up the climb and then just kind of jogged/walked the rest of the way back to camp.

It was bittersweet seeing the yellow gate at the end. I was really happy on one hand, because despite being alone most of the race, I had still managed to find all the books and complete the loop. On the other hand, I was disappointed because I was over the limit and could not continue. 15:58 for 20 Barkley miles...Ugh...Every time I saw somebody come in off of subsequent loops, I was wishing I was still out there.

All I have been thinking about is next year. I so desperately want to go back! I felt like I learned so much out there about what it takes to finish this race. I made many rookie mistakes. Getting lost early on I think was the most damaging. If I could have hooked up with the people who were a few minutes behind me I would have most likely finished the loop in time and could have gone on...But then again, its all speculation. I have definitely been bitten by the bug and will be back ready to go!

Outside of that, I had an amazing experience meeting and hanging out with all of the people that make the Barkley so special. And Laz, what can I say? You put on such an incredible event. I was both humbled and inspired and thoroughly enjoyed your conversation, twisted humor, and hospitality!

Howie Stern (who apparently thought he signed up for a 10k)