

Back on the Horse
2012 Race Report
By Brett Maune

Introduction

When I submitted my application for the 2012 Barkley I was not planning on trying for another 5 loops. If anything, I was thinking of trying to break the 1 or 3 loop records. Then the banter on the Barkley list started which quickly got me stoked for another 5 loop attempt--and for this I am forever grateful Barkley List! The goal this time around was to try and break Flyin' Brian's course record. To do this my training objective was to achieve a level of fitness such that I could theoretically break the record even if Laz implemented a nightmare course change which increased loop time by 10%. Given the unpredictability of the Barkley I desperately wanted to have as much of a "fitness cushion" as possible.

Although on paper I was in great shape, mentally was a different story. Prior to the start this year I had serious doubts whether I would finish. Despite being in better shape and knowing the course, I was strangely less confident this time. I didn't know why. Perhaps it was because I now knew firsthand the hell that lay ahead. I could no longer hide behind the veil of blissful ignorance. My pessimism was only amplified further as the forecast for the race kept deteriorating and the expected temperatures kept climbing. I consulted Frozen Ed and he thought no Barkley had ever been run with such warmth and highs in the 80s. I seriously questioned whether it were possible to complete the Barkley under such conditions and was despondent by the prospect that all the time and effort spent training would now be irrelevant due to the weather. Carl (sorry Carl) faced the brunt of my pessimism as I obsessed over the weather and as we strategized on how best to deal with the heat.

Loop 1

I awoke and got out of my U-Haul van about 5 min before the conch blew and so had about the most rest one could ever hope to get the night before the Barkley. As we all lined up at the yellow gate all traces of my pessimism from the prior days had disappeared and I felt ready and eager to get this year's Barkley underway. The cigarette was lit and we were off! I quickly settled into a fast hiking pace up the Bird Mountain switchbacks and found myself sandwiched between Beverley and Alan with Beverley setting a solid pace. We then caught up with Jared and John near the Pillars of Death and continued hiking towards England Mountain. We followed the ridge down and veered right to meet the coal bench that led to Book 1. In no time we were descending Checkmate Hill and had little trouble reaching Book 2 at Phillips Creek in about an hour. We then settled into a pattern of power hiking the uphill and running the downhill of the North Boundary Trail (NBT). Soon it was just the four of us (Jared, Alan, and Beverley) staying together in a tight group that lasted through nearly the entire loop.

On the downhill leading to SOB Ditch my foot clipped some unidentified object and I flew head first down the trail. Somehow I managed to instinctively tuck into a ball and land on my back. The momentum caused me to roll over onto my feet and I continued running without losing as much as a step. This was the first of several major falls (with countless smaller ones) I had this year but the others were not handled nearly as elegantly. I don't know what it was this year but it always seemed as if I were falling down or narrowly averting a fall. I don't remember having such problems last year. If this is the norm, then I think it is amazing anyone could ever finish 5 loops without serious injury.

In any case we had no trouble getting the book at the Garden Spot and on Stallion. I took the lead on the descent from Stallion and had no difficulties, which provided a little boost in confidence. In no time we found ourselves at the base of Upper Rat Jaw where I finally saw with my own eyes that the rumor was true and the briars had been cut down. I ran over to an old power line lying on the ground and used it to haul myself up the initial steep slope. We quickly ascended to the tower where I was surprised to see a large group of spectators. We all grabbed our pages and refilled water bottles and soon started our rapid descent. As I approached the rightward bend in the power line cut on upper Rat Jaw, my foot clipped the sawed off stubs of a briar clump and I flew superman-style for what seemed like an eternity. Eventually I landed on the “cushioned” briar-covered ground and slid for a ways getting slashed and groaning throughout. Ah, the Barkley.

We navigated through the prison grounds, up the Bad Thing, down Zipline, and up to Chimney Top without any significant problem. While at the last book the four of us took some time to regroup and I noticed some were already urinating for the second time on the loop whereas I had not even done so once though I drank about as much as everyone else. By discussing this with Beverley I realized I was probably taking too many electrolytes and was retaining water. I am the first to admit that I have no clue how many electrolytes I “need” and what the various symptoms are for the different electrolyte/water imbalance scenarios. My usual regimen is to take an endurolyte an hour and I had been sticking to that plan religiously out of fear because of the heat. For whatever reason, this was now too much and through the course of the loop I developed a dangerous electrolyte imbalance. I immediately stopped taking the pills and hardly took any for the remainder of the entire race. I didn’t know it at the time, but I now think I narrowly avoided a disaster here. Had we not taken a short break and the discussion with Beverley never happened, I may never have completed loop 2.

From Chimney Top Jared and I ran ahead down to camp. That was the last we saw of Beverley and Alan during a loop. We finished the near-flawless loop in 7:41, which was faster than my goal of mid 8’s but I felt it was conducted at an appropriate pace for the first loop and did not feel we went out too fast. While in camp my untested crew, comprising of my wife (Hareem) and mother (Joette), were amazing. They helped bandage my feet, restocked my pack, and shoved food in my face all with the efficiency of a professional pit crew.

Loop 2

Loop 1 had gone so well that loop 2 was bound to be worse. I gorged myself while in camp and still left with a turkey sandwich in hand to be consumed while ascending Bird. My stomach felt bloated and unsettled during the ascent. At the time I attributed it to eating too much but I now think it may have been mostly due to my dangerous electrolyte imbalance. I pushed on and soon we were on the NBT and climbing towards Jury Ridge. I had been trying to force the pace as much as I could with the goal of descending Stallion with the last of the evening light, but I felt I was on the verge of a major blow-up. I told Jared of my situation and that I had to get my stomach under control. I slowed the pace ~10% and apologized for doing so. Being a virgin, Jared was effectively tethered to me and had little choice but to match my pace. I did not like holding him back but I thought I would be jeopardizing the entire run otherwise.

Needless to say, we did the Stallion descent at night but I navigated it flawlessly, which was the closest I ever got to redemption for last year's fiasco. The rest of the nighttime loop went by without much of a hitch. My stomach remained unsettled the entire loop with only gradual improvement towards the end. I struggled to keep up with Jared on all the climbs and was dismayed at how horrible I felt. As we reached the Beech Tree we caught up with Matt, Psyche, and Naresh. Pleasantries were exchanged but I remained silent. At the time I was lost in thought and mulling over the seeming impossibility of completing 5 loops. Despite being in better shape than last year, I was feeling worse on loop 2 than I did until my blow-up on loop 4 of the previous year. I needed a miracle. Fortunately Jared wanted to sleep an hour in camp and I was happy to oblige. I originally toyed with the idea of attempting the run with no sleep but now I welcomed the break as an opportunity to regroup and for my body to fix whatever was wrong.

Loop 3

I had the feeling I had just fallen asleep when I was awakened by my crew. Nevertheless, I was a new person when I awoke. The break had completely transformed me and I now felt great. I never again had any doubt about finishing 5 loops.

Jared and I hiked up to Chimney Top and made our first nighttime descent to the Beech Tree. After some wandering we eventually arrived at the stream a couple hundred feet below the book. The ascent up Zipline started fine as we followed the old jeep road. When we crossed the stream I suggested a line up towards the Eye of the Needle. Jared raised concerns and pulled out his map and compass. He suggested a bearing but it didn't "feel" right to me. He eventually deferred and we began our ascent. Fortunately the first light of dawn arrived just as we reached the ridge, which allowed us to see the towering Chimney Top peak in the distance. We were at least a mile off course to the east! I still don't know what happened, but I am convinced somehow the streams rearranged themselves! A virgin with a map and compass should always be trusted over a veteran's shaky memory...Jared took the massive detour in good stride and never complained even though we now had to suffer through a lengthy briar infested ridge traverse. Eventually we got to our book.

To make up for the Zipline fiasco I then botched the descent down the Bad Thing as well. We did not traverse far enough right and missed Razor Ridge and got funneled into the drainage which dumps one at the road above the water tanks. Three books. Three navigational errors. Not the best of starts but fortunately the rest of the loop went perfectly including our first ascent up Checkmate Hill. That sucker is a beast!

Loop 3 was where I felt the balance was shifting between Jared and me. On the previous two loops (especially 2) I felt Jared was stronger and could have potentially gone significantly faster. I began to consider the inevitability that we would finish 4 loops together and then he would trounce me on loop 5 for the win. Somewhere in the middle of loop 3 though I developed the sense that parity had been achieved--perhaps this was due to the onset of Jared's foot problems.

Loop 4

After a quick turnaround in camp, we headed out with the goal of making the most of the remaining daylight. We started the loop in a thunderstorm, which lasted just long enough to not significantly cool the air, increase the humidity further above the already oppressive level, and turn the entire course into a muddy Slip'n Slide. Daylight was not enough for us to

nail the descent down to the Beech Tree and we again had to backtrack upstream a couple hundred feet to the book. This time we nailed the Zipline ascent and the following descent down the Bad Thing to the prison.

I first noticed Jared starting to struggle during the long ascent up Rat Jaw and began to get worried about our pace. My top goal this year was to break Flyin' Brian's course record and I wanted to have at least 15 hours (if possible) for the final loop to do this. At the rate we were going I wasn't sure if we would make it. I considered the possibility of pulling ahead after the nighttime ascent of Stallion, when we would be past the navigationally challenging parts, but eventually decided to stay with Jared through the entire loop. By that point we had completed ~3 2/3 loops together and I thought we may as well do the full four as a team.

Jared took the lead during the ascent of Checkmate Hill. Despite his severe foot pain he was still a strong climber and polished off a fourth loop Checkmate Hill ascent in ~27 minutes, with me finishing about 20 seconds behind him.

Towards the end of the loop we discussed the topic of preferred loop direction a couple of times. I preferred the clockwise direction because I expected zero navigational problems if I did the loop in this direction. Incidentally, I also believed this was best for Jared because I thought the counterclockwise direction was best for virgins for nighttime loops. A counterclockwise loop avoided the potentially catastrophic nighttime descent of Stallion. I preferred clockwise because I thought it would minimize my time. If I were shrewd and wanted to maximize the probability of winning, I would have chosen the other direction. I also never considered the course change and the addition of Checkmate Hill in my decision to go clockwise. At the time I thought this addition was irrelevant even if starting at night. In hindsight that was clearly a mistake!

When I arrived in camp I didn't know whether I was going to sleep or not. During the discussions on loop 4 Jared mentioned he was planning on sleeping, but I was noncommittal and wanted to decide based on how I felt at the end of the loop. Well, now I needed to decide! I was initially leaning towards taking a short ~30 min nap, but then I remembered my failed nap last year between loops 4 and 5. With the added excitement of a 5th loop showdown and uncertainty as to when Jared would start, I knew I would never fall asleep and therefore should not even try. So now I wanted to get started with the loop as soon as possible. I was standing at the van and getting ready to take off my shoes and tend to the feet when I was struck by an idea. I thought that if I left camp REALLY quickly then this, itself, could conceivably act to dissuade Jared from pushing hard on the 5th loop. So without ever sitting and taking off my shoes I left camp and started a clockwise loop 5.

Loop 5

When starting loop 5 I felt pretty good about my prospects for breaking the course record and intended to do the loop as fast as I could. I expected no difficulties for loop 5 with flawless nighttime navigation to Rat Jaw. There, daylight would break and I would finish off the remaining climbs in early morning before the oppressive heat would arrive. The plan was so simple. At the Barkley, however, reality often does not match one's expectations and my problems started immediately at Book 1. From England Mountain I descended on the spine of the ridge as usual. I followed the trail created by previous runners and quickly arrived at Fangorn forest. I soon intersected the coal bench and expected to be collecting my page in a matter of seconds. From the first two daytime loops I remembered taking a left

on the bench, but that was correct only because we had veered to the right and met the bench on the east side of the ridge. Apparently most runners on loop 1 and 2 veered to the other side of the ridge and that was where the dominant trail led me. So now I reached the bench on the west side of the ridge and I needed to turn right to get to the book. I didn't know this and I turned left.

I walked a couple hundred steps down the bench and nothing looked familiar and I began to get worried. I turned back to my starting point and then proceeded in the other direction for a few steps until I reached a spot where trees, briars, and brush blocked progress. Out of laziness I decided to not maneuver past the obstacle since it was in the "wrong" direction anyway. The book was just beyond the obstruction. Barkley comedy ensued. I ran back in the other direction for half a mile before being satisfied that the book was definitely not further down the bench. I ran back to the starting point and consulted the map and compass. One of the interesting aspects of severe sleep deprivation is that it turns you into an idiot incapable of any high level reasoning like that required for navigation (at least for me). I should have realized immediately that since the book was at the northern tip of the coal bench where it intersected the spine of the ridge that I just needed to head north along the bench to find it. Unfortunately concepts such as "north" had little meaning by this point. I was reminded of my loop 5 experience last year when I struggled to understand the last minute course changes.

For lack of anything better to do, I began questioning my assumptions. Perhaps I was not on the correct bench and I somehow found a remarkably similar one. Or perhaps I descended the wrong mountain--Laz did mention we should be mindful of that possibility. I decided to climb to the summit and retry the descent. Same result. I met the bench just a few yards from the first attempt. After more useless map analysis I decided this time to hike all the way to the Cumberland Trail close to the Pillars of Death and verify I in fact descended England Mountain. I scouted the area around the summit and soon found myself completely disoriented. For a brief period the Barkley even dropped in priority and was overtaken by the goal of not needing a search party come find and rescue me. After much wandering around the summit I convinced myself (as much as possible at that point) that I in fact was on England Mountain and tried the descent for a third time. Same result. I met the bench in the same place as the previous two attempts. So now I KNEW THE BOOK HAD TO BE HERE AND YET IT WAS NOT. The sense of panic ratcheted up a couple of levels. I was becoming disillusioned and began considering draconian measures such as skipping the book and returning in daylight after completing the rest of the loop. I consulted the map and compass again and that is when I finally had the epiphany that simply heading north along the bench should lead me to the book. So I started heading right and soon got to the obstruction where I initially turned back on my first attempt and maneuvered past it. After a few more steps I was at the book. Ouch.

During the frantic search for the book I deliberately refrained from looking at my watch. I was already keenly aware that each passing minute was jeopardizing the course record and the win and having a running tally of the lost time was not going to aid in locating the book. I was so focused on finding the book and oblivious to the actual passage of time though that I was not consciously aware of my growing hunger and thirst. Almost immediately after finding the book my attention was liberated and I realized I was starving and very thirsty. I lost two hours searching for the book and it had been nearly three hours since I last ate and drank in camp. I was now on the verge of bonking and had to dig out of the caloric deficit

while hiking much of the NBT. I eventually recovered my energy but never again was properly hydrated.

I passed John coming the other way near Jury Ridge. I think I may have surprised him at first because he came to a halt when I rounded a bend and came into view. We encouraged each other and proceeded our merry ways. Dawn broke as I ascended towards the Garden Spot. This was depressing since I expected to be climbing Rat Jaw at this point in the day. Now that daytime arrived I was eager to make up for as much time as I could and I ran as much of the course as my feet would allow. I had no idea how long Jared stayed in camp and estimated that the earliest I could encounter him was on Stallion and now expected to see him at any point. At the fire ring near Fyke's Peak there was a truck parked with opossum hunting logos. I soon encountered the hunter returning from the road leading to Fyke's Peak. While passing he asked if everything was OK. I first thought that was kind of strange, but then I realized I probably looked like I needed rescue given the briar-slashed limbs and my haggard look.

I descended Stallion and Jared was still nowhere to be found. When I rounded the corner and Testicle Spectacle came into view I was sure I would see him descending but did not. I arrived at Raw Dog Falls with still no sign of him. Although by this time I knew I was ahead, I became concerned that Jared's foot problems could be jeopardizing his completion of the Barkley. For all I knew he may never have started the 5th loop. I was relieved when I finally saw him just as he finished the descent of Rat Jaw. As we approached each other I asked about his feet and we wished each other luck for the remaining portion of the loop.

Almost immediately after parting company my relief for meeting Jared turned into anxiety. After all, this was still a race. Although I was definitely ahead at this point, I was competing against a past winner of Hardrock and I was definitely not going to make the mistake of underestimating his abilities. I estimated the quickest conceivable time 'anyone' could complete the rest of a CCW 5th loop from Rat Jaw to be about 4 hours. Therefore, I figured I needed to finish my loop in less than 4 hours to guarantee a victory. I considered the remaining climbs and descents and thought it was possible for a sub-4 hour completion, but the oppressive heat was certainly going to make this difficult. I then mentally divided up the remaining course segments and created target splits for the various sections.

With a renewed sense of purpose I began powering up Rat Jaw at the fastest pace I could sustain. Soon I was at the top and for the first time I was greeted by a lonely fire tower. I dropped back down from the edge of the fire road just as I caught sight of Wouter coming up the road. He soon yelled something as I was running down Rat Jaw but I was in too much of a hurry to stop and just raised my hand in acknowledgement. I made quick work of the descent and the prison tunnel and found myself beginning the ascent of the Bad Thing right on schedule. The heat and humidity really became oppressive at this point and I soon became completely soaked from the profuse sweating from the rapid ascent. I questioned the logic of pushing so hard given the risk of a catastrophic meltdown but I was determined to finish the remaining course as fast as my fitness and condition allowed. By the time I reached the Eye of the Needle the heat and exertion severely parched my throat and drinking all of my water failed to quench my thirst. I became concerned about the prospect of overheating combined with severe dehydration and relished in the thought of cooling off in the cold creek near the Beech Tree book. Now the midday heat made even the descent of Zipline oppressively hot and the rugged terrain seemed to drag on forever. Finally I

reached the old jeep road and soon found myself at the stream below the Beech Tree. I immediately lay in the stream with the hope that the cold water would quickly cool my core body temperature. After a couple minutes I turned over on my stomach and stayed until I began shivering. Wow, I had never been so happy to be so cold in my life! I started the ascent up Big Hell soaked and shivering and felt great. I was a third of the way up the climb before the last sensations of being cold disappeared. Soon I was once again overheating and dripping with sweat and relieved when I finally reached the top and the last book.

Reaching the last book and ripping out the final page is such a memorable experience. In some ways it feels like the true end of the race. A year ago at this same spot I had no reason to hurry. I had plenty of time to reach the yellow gate and my finishing time didn't matter. Then, I leisurely walked the entire way back to camp in about 1.5 hours. This year was different though. I was still racing against Jared and needed to run in order to achieve my sub-4 hour goal. I endured the intense foot pain caused by running and ran the entire downhill back to camp and touched the yellow gate ~3:38 after our encounter at Rat Jaw. Even though I thought it was inconceivable for Jared to have beaten me back to the gate, part of me expected to see him running down the road from Bird as I came running from the other side and having to sprint to touch the gate first. Only after I touched the gate did I believe that I had the course record and managed to finish ahead of Jared!