

Race Report
The Barkley Marathons, 2014
Jeff List

It turned out to be the crux of my Barkley experience, and it was only an hour into the race. Rounding the bench from book 1, a multi-time veteran was at the head of our group when he suddenly dropped down the slope. My friend Billy Simpson from Memphis, who only got off the waiting list and received his written instructions minutes before the race started, shouted “Jeff, we’ve HAVE to follow him!!” Solemn warnings from before the race also echoed through my head: “A virgin must follow a veteran” -- drilled into me again and again from almost everyone I talked to. I had zero first-hand course knowledge and no formal orienteering experience to test if my navigation practice had done me any good. Who was I to buck the accepted Barkley wisdom? But I felt that the veteran had dropped off the bench too early, and with a hard gut check I said NO, I’ve GOT to do this my way, no matter how it works out. In an instant I was alone, but reveling in the freedom and intensity of finding my own path through the woods with only myself to blame if my Barkley failure came early.



Veterans Frozen Ed Furtaw and Stu Gleman sharing their course wisdom with the virgins. Photo: John Beard.

Back in December I was shocked to learn I was #23 on the waiting list, knowing that this meant I had some chance to get in. I trained throughout an unusually harsh New England winter, tested gear, read everything I could get my hands on, and studied maps -- all as if I was really in. I planned on getting down there a week in advance to learn the sections of the course where this is allowed. But one week before the race I seemed to be stuck at #5 on the list, with no movement for weeks. I mostly gave up hope and abandoned the plan to get down there early. Suddenly mid-week the list started moving again, and by Wednesday I was #2 and decided I had to go. But an early spring snowstorm on Cape Cod kept me home until Thursday morning, when I moved up to #1. As I drove past the Tennessee border on Friday, I received word that I was IN!! Wow, at least I'd get the instructions in time to read them, but I'd start the race "extra virgin," with no chance to see any of the course. But what did help, and helped a lot, was the detailed course rundown that Stu Gleman gave me the evening before the race. Also tips from Frozen Ed Furtaw, who wrote the book on Barkley. These gentlemen are more than willing to do everything they can to help you. Thanks.

Loop 1 went about as well as I could have hoped. I picked my own spot to drop off the bench past Book 1, down Jaque Mate Ridge, and hit the Park Boundary corner cairn almost perfectly. On the rest of the loop I was sometimes solo, sometimes traveling with one or more virgins, or, between the Garden Spot and the bottom of Testicle Spectacle, periodically following a veteran. I never spent much effort to stay with anyone in particular, but if it made sense for a while, that was great. Probably the most valuable mode of travel was with a fellow virgin -- there was another mind to help figure things out faster, but I was still learning for myself. Enjoyable hours were spent like that with Brad Bishop and Heather Anderson. I finished Loop 1 in 11:33, feeling strong and having truly loved every minute of it. A friend had told me that the Barkley route was not even pretty, but I like the feeling of open hardwood forests when the leaves aren't out (and the snow isn't either), and thought most of the course was spectacular.

I made a pretty quick turn-around between loops with the help of Elise Harrington and John Beard (thanks!!). As I left the yellow gate solo on Loop 2 just before 12 hours on the race clock, someone mentioned I was still on pace for a 100 mile finish. Yep, all I needed to do is run 48 more hours at the same pace and I'd be all set! Darkness came near the top of the Bird Mt. Trail and the navigation got a lot tougher. My navigation practice in New England had not involved nighttime. I just couldn't get up the nerve to wander all over the mountains off-trail in zero degree temperatures and deep snow all night.

My first navigational blunder came at the bottom of Jaque Mate Ridge, after veering off far enough south, I thought, that I'd hit the trail above the boundary corner. But I hadn't crossed any trail before hitting the stream, yet it looked like the right flow volume to be Phillips Creek and a bearing said it was going in the right direction. What?? After a brief moment of panic (was I really too far north??) I reasoned that I had must have simply skipped over the trail in the dark. A short backtrack confirmed that yep, I had done just that.

The navigation down from Book 2 on Jury Ridge ("Hiram's Vertical Smile") didn't go as smoothly as in the daylight, as it was much more difficult follow the correct ridgeline. But I still popped out on the doubletrack at the bottom O.K. On the first loop I had noted a certain half-rotted tree with a screaming horror face right at the bottom of the correct ridge (thinking Loop 3), and this also turned out to also be great place to strike out over to Book 3. So I located this tree on the doubletrack first and had no trouble

shooting over to Book 3. Up the ridge behind Book 3 I came to the wall. On loop 1 I had scrambled up a steep muddy break in the cliff, with small dead and alive trees to cling to. I remembered this spot being more or less right where I'd come up the ridge, or maybe a little to the left. But in the dark things looked bigger and steeper, and after wandering back and forth on the bench below the cliff, I finally had to admit that yes, THAT was where I'd scrambled up the first time. So I did it again.

Once I re-gained the North Boundary Line Trail, the weather got worse. The temperature dropped from the mid 30's to below freezing, the rain turned to snow, the wind increased into the 20 and 30 mph range, and the fog thickened to about a 20 foot visibility. Over the years I've hauled twice as much warm clothing in my pack as I've ever needed on 1000's of miles of trail, "just in case." That finally paid off at Barkley, because I used everything I carried and never had to consider quitting that night due to the weather.

The North Boundary Line Trail merged with the Cumberland Trail, and I paid attention to the sequence of hills and valleys until I knew I should be crossing Son of a Bitch Ditch. But with the fog and dark I couldn't see it. The trail started going up again, but still no ditch. How could I miss SOBD?? I wandered back and forth on the trail for a while confused (yeah, I was wandering back and forth on a perfectly good trail, in the middle of the night, looking for a nasty ditch to jump into). But another runner came along and informed me that SOBD was right here, it was just very small down lower where the Cumberland trail crossed it. THEN I remembered that Marcy Beard had described exactly that before the race.

Soon I arrived at the coal ponds. On Loop 1, I helped lead a group of virgins astray when I overextended the advice that when the dirt mounds on the left side of the coal ponds end, head up right to rejoin the Cumberland Trail. Well, if you go just a little farther past the first "end," they start up again, both the coal ponds and dirt mounds. We went way too far around the mountain before Heather determined we needed to just go up, but instead of the easy switchbacks of the Cumberland Trail, we had another straight up, ultra-steep trailless scramble to the bench below the summit. But the benefit of the mistake on Loop 1 was that there was no way I was going to repeat it on Loop 2. But also the guy who straightened me out at SOBD showed the way, and yeah, the turn is where the coal pond dirt mounds *first* appear to end.

I stopped to put on another layer as I climbed towards the hollow roar of the wind blasting through the trees above, at the so perfectly named "Garden Spot." It was a windy, snowy, foggy whiteout on top, and on my first pass I walked right past book 4 – I just couldn't see it. But in a short while the trail didn't feel right, maybe it levels out or starts going downhill, I can't remember exactly, but I turned around and walked 10' to the left of the doubletrack (hoping that the boundary markers would come into sight while maintaining visual contact with the road) and immediately found the book. I quickly ripped out my page and ran out of that hostile place, and the stop at the water jugs was a welcome break from the wind on the ridge. Soon I was traversing the side of Stallion Mt. past the dirt bumps before hitting the first bench above the Barley Mouth Branch basin.

I knew I needed to drop off this bench to the next bench, then drop again to Barley Mouth Branch creek. But exactly where to drop I couldn't remember, because I hadn't memorized enough here on Loop 1. I did O.K. on the first drop, avoiding the "high wall" that I had seen from below on Loop 1. But upon dropping from the second bench I immediately ran into a nasty wall of briars. It was faster to just go the

40' back up to the bench and try again. On the second attempt, I was about 200' vertical down the slope, when others up on the bench shouted down to ask if I was on the right route. Ha – don't ask me! More questions rained down from above, but by then their voices were drowned out by a stream cascading somewhere out there in the dark to the right. A few steps later I came to the edge of a black void, a cliff of some undetermined height, the top of which formed a narrow ledge in a higher cliff to the right. I was tired of backtracking, so I shimmied along the 18 inch ledge, through the cascade I'd heard, until I reached a steep dirt slope I could get down. I soon hit a larger stream, went downstream a bit and checked the bearing to confirm I was O.K., and continued down the Barley Mouth Branch until I hit the major jeeptrack. Always nice to really know where you are for a moment!

Up the jeeptrack you just go until the road starts downhill, and at that spot Leonard's Butt Slide and book 5 is below, while the keyhole through Bobcat Rock is above. But even finding that keyhole wasted time -- I had to just go up to the wall somewhere and grope back and forth along it until the gap appeared. Above that, I came to the steep rise and lip that should overlook Hiram's Pool, but I couldn't see anything but fog and black. I knew I could walk to the right and probably find the couch and bench in a few seconds, but I demanded proof of where I was right then. So I picked up a stick, tossed it into the fog and got the satisfying splash I was hoping for.

After the next climb I arrived at the bench below Fykes Peak where book 6 must be. But I guess I went right by the big flat rock on the first pass, and had to wander all over the bench searching. All footprints but my own were wiped out by the accumulated snow, but eventually I stumbled across the rock and book. From the rock I was well oriented again to traverse around to the broken ridge line below Fykes that eventually gets you down to the New River. I found the first drop-in point O.K., but after that things got slower, with plenty of wandering back and forth on various benches trying find previous muddy tracks for the right drops and routes around cliffs. This was another section where I didn't memorize nearly enough on Loop 1.

I had worked my way fairly far down, when a compass check said that the ridge I was starting to follow was going way too much to the left. At the same time a voice coming from two lights about 100 yds to the left asked if I was going the right way. Beats me. They mentioned that their compass said they needed to go hard to the right, and I said yeah, mine too, but they also said they spotted another light yet farther to the left, and figured they'd follow that. I only thought to myself that seeing a lone wandering light, like mine, doesn't mean a whole hell of a lot at this point. I decided to believe in my compass (and the other guy's), and went down a gully to the right. I arrived at the jeep trail at the bottom right at the "partially downed power lines." (OK, *now* I know what the heck that means.) On Loop 1, we had landed farther to the east, turned right on the jeeptrail, walked past the park boundary, and shortly after the veteran had shown where the log over the river was. So I was able to find the log again, not that I had the remotest thought of trying to cross that slippery thing given that my feet had been soaked all night. But I knew if I struck out towards the highway from the log crossing, I would come out perfectly at the highway pullout and the route leading up to Testicle Spectacle. I never saw anyone else's light, looking up Testicle Spectacle from the bottom or looking back down from the top, so I wondered where those other folks going down Fykes had ended up.

At Testicle Spectacle book 7 I felt relief because I knew it would be easy navigating for a quite a while. Wrong. Descending Meth Lab hill, I somehow forgot from Loop 1 that the jeep track wanders through the woods a bit, and it didn't seem right. I had already passed a bench that might have marked the turn towards Raw Dog Falls, and although I HAD checked it out for the turn, just to be sure on the way down, I somehow doubted that I had checked it out well enough. So I went back up Meth Lab Hill, way up, until it was painfully obvious that yes, the turn had to be way farther down. Going way down again, I finally arrived at the obvious "neo-buttslide" (with the correct bench and turn below) and kicked myself for forgetting that landmark.

Traversing around towards Raw Dog Falls, I remembered from Loop 1 that all I had to do is get past the prow of the gentle ridge, then home in on the sound of the falls to get straight to Book 8. Worked perfectly in the dark – hallelujah! -- at least one tiny segment went smoothly that night.

On Loop 1 I had followed Brad down the jeep trail below the falls, and soon he announced, "that must be Danger Dave's Climbing Wall over there." I had to agree, but mistake 1 here was that I didn't think about how I would find it on Loop 2 in the dark. Mistake 2 was climbing the wall instead of bypassing it on Pussy Ridge. Sure, the climb up the wall was fun, but would I want to do that on Loop 2? Would I know how to find Pussy Ridge in the dark? I failed in all of this and on Loop 2 I couldn't see a trace of the wall from the jeeptrail, so I wandered back and forth, occasionally poking down and across the stream, only to find a cliff on the other side. I tried to just walk down the stream bed, but it was too rough. I finally went way down the road, where the road crossed a stream seemingly going the wrong way (but a look at the map showed it to be a side stream coming in from another valley). I went a little ways up the correct stream from here and soon spotted the "tree with a 2 by 4 nailed to it about 15 feet up" that marks Pussy Ridge. Found, but all the time I just wasted could have been saved by thinking about it for like 30 seconds on loop 1.

I didn't navigate the next part all that great either, never seeing the rusted barrel again, but eventually got up to the highway at about the right spot. But the moment I popped out on the highway my bubble was burst. Off to the east, I thought I could see, just barely, the first glimmers of twilight. I hadn't checked my watch once all night, didn't see the point, but pretty well knew my progress had been really slow. If sunrise was just around the corner, my race to complete Loop 2 in time to start Loop 3 was lost.

I saw Jared Campbell at the bottom of Pig Head Creek on his 3rd loop. He took the time to stop and ask if I was O.K. and ask my name. That would be kind of like Lance Armstrong stopping during the TDF to check on some kid on a tricycle. Speaks volumes about Jared's character. I also couldn't help notice that he didn't seem to have a speck of mud on him (while I was covered from head to toe). What does he do, just float over the terrain? Later speaking to others that watched him from the fire tower, that sounds about right.

Up the Pig Head Creek ridge, it became undeniable that the sun was rising. At the top, at the junction with the Prison Mine Trail, I finally checked my watch: 7:05. I had about 2.5 hours to go what had taken me nearly 5 on Loop 1. I now knew that navigation just good enough to keep me from getting completely lost is not nearly good enough to reach a loop 3 start – the navigation would have to be near-perfect for me to have any chance at all.

So at that point, standing at the top of the Pig Head route, I was very late. But I wasn't physically wrecked. I had plenty of food. And it would be a beautiful day. I didn't have to quit -- but I did. A variety of excuses formed in my head: "the loop wouldn't be official anyway" and "they might think I'm lost and come looking for me," and, the most lame of all, "really, I'm as good as timed out right now." But I know now -- it took me more than a week to accept this -- that I had simply run out of the will to continue. I had a rare opportunity to better learn a backwoods part of the course you can never see outside the race, Brushy Mountain Prison through Chimney Top, and I just threw it away. I hiked back to camp by Fire Tower road and the South Old Mac Trail, getting back around 9:00 am (I think). Loop 1 plus 8 books on Loop 2 in around 26:15.



My turn to quit. Photo: John Beard

Stats: As best I can figure, including the quitting hike I went about 45 miles with about 22,000' feet of elevation gain. With a time of 26:15 that's a climb rate of about 838 feet/hour (including time for descents). A 40 hour 3-loop Fun Run finish requires a climb rate of about 970 feet/hour. My climb rate at the 2013 Hardrock 100 was only about 850 feet/hour (for a 39:51 finish). Yep, the Fun Run at Barkley is harder than Hardrock, no doubt in my mind.

Thanks to Laz, and everyone else involved, for creating the most amazing race. I've never experienced a race as intense and exhilarating. And I'm very thankful that because of the Barkley incentive to learn, when I go off trail now, wherever it is, I'm no longer trying to follow a line on a GPS screen. It's just so much more satisfying to navigate by the landscape around you.

Postscript: Would I have done better trying to follow a veteran the whole way? There are certainly quite a few stories about virgins getting far while following a vet. But I'd wager that there are vastly more cases where the vet left the virgin behind ("scraped"), or simply decided not to start loop 2, leaving the virgin to fend for themselves. Maybe I could have gotten farther following a vet the whole time-- I don't know and I don't really care – I wouldn't have had nearly as much fun doing it that way, nor learned nearly as much. The course knowledge I have now will help tremendously the next time, if I'm lucky enough to get into this unique race again.