

The 2015 Barkley Marathons - A Successful Failure  
Race Report by Frozen Ed Furtaw  
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The 2015 Barkley Marathons was my 19th run at the Barkley. It was special, just like all the others, but maybe a little more so. Here are some of the reasons why.

Last year, the 2014 Barkley was a debacle for me. It was the only time I have ever quit during loop 1. The year before that, in 2013, was the first time I had finished loop 1 over the 13:20 time limit. In all of my 16 Barkley runs prior to those, I had finished at least one loop within its time limit. So using Barkley as a measuring stick, I can clearly see myself falling shorter by the year in recent years. My age (67) is undoubtedly a part of this slowing, but the slowdown seems to be happening faster than ever. My rate of slowing down seems to be the only thing speeding up with age!

Adding to my worsening Barkley failures, I was sick last fall while en-route to the Barkley Fall Classic, and was not even able to start that race. So I have felt that I have been in some kind of rapid decline for the past couple of years. I was in need of “redemption.” This is probably not a good reason to appeal again to laz for entry into another Barkley. But I did, and he grandfathered me in again, so I trained through the winter as well as I could. Lingering low-level health issues kept my training level lower than I would have liked. My maximum training week comprised four runs totaling 35.2 miles in about 11:40 total time, with about 8,540 feet of climb and equal descent.

As an athlete, I have come to see minor health issues as having a useful purpose to serve: they help to define our limits. The term *overtraining syndrome* has been used to describe the tendency toward health problems or fatigue indicators, such as elevated morning resting pulse rate, when one is overstressed from a relatively high level of training. In my Barkley training this year, I felt that I was experiencing the early symptoms of overtraining syndrome. Thus I realized before this year’s race that my Barkley limit would be smaller than in most past years. In my entry essay, I quoted laz saying that, for some of us, doing one Barkley loop is the “achievement of a lifetime,” and I set the completion of one loop as my goal. I told Gail before the race that I was determined to finish one loop, even if it took me 20 hours. I carried a space blanket with me from the start of the race, in case it did take me all day and all night to finish that loop.

The delayed 11:22 AM start of the race made the all-night prospect closer to reality. It felt great to finally get started. I was in a line of runners as we ascended Bird and England Mountains, crossed the Pillars of Death, and started the descent toward the first book. After getting my page, I followed my memorized route and compass readings down through the Flume of Doom that took us through a narrow gap in the line of cliffs in the upper part of the descent to Phillips Creek. After I got down the Flume, I looked around and saw Michelle Roy right behind me, and another runner further back who seemed to hesitate at the top of the Flume. I had a surge of competitiveness, and keep moving quickly down the mountainside. Michelle stayed close, and I think she was the only runner staying with me as we went down toward Phillips Creek.

As we approached the creek, I could see that we were a little too far downstream, so we went to the right, upstream with the creek on our left. I noticed some bright pink ribbons tied to tree branches in a line going toward the trail crossing of the creek. I wondered if perhaps a Barkley runner had put the ribbons

there in training to show the way. I hope that wasn't the case, but I didn't think the ribbons should be there, so I pulled them down and put them in my pocket. I also asked Michelle to pull down a ribbon as she passed it. We got to the creek crossing in 1hr:18min race time (RT). I knew this was close to my usual times there in recent years. After checking my records, I see that it was actually the fastest. My previous times in 2012 through 2014 were 1:20, 1:24, and 1:21, respectively.

As we were going up the North Bird Mountain Trail to Jury Ridge, other runners caught up to us and we had a pack of several runners as we headed down from Jury Ridge toward book 2. I knew from the course description that it was at the same location as last year, which was the first time it was part of the course. I recalled that last year, I had gone down this mountain too far to the left. So this year I used compass bearings more diligently, and led the group right to the book. We got there just as some other runners who had been ahead of us were leaving the book. My time to book 2 was 2:06, compared to 2:14 last year. The better navigation this year had saved me a few minutes. We then headed up Hillpocalypse. By this time, as I recall, the group I was with included Michelle Roy, Fred Pilon, Charlie Taylor, Joe Kowalski, Edward Sandor, and Chris Gkikas. Climbing this incredibly steep hill was when I struck up a conversation with Michelle about her possibly developing a science class using the Barkley and concepts of energy expenditure of hill-climbing. Michelle teaches science and mathematics to intermediate-school students, and she also coaches cross-country running. I noted that she could also incorporate the history of Martin Luther King, Jr. and James Earl Ray into that lesson. She liked the idea.

When we got back up to the North Bird Mountain Trail, I continued to press the pace as well as I could. We reached the Garden Spot in 4:07. I was feeling good at this point, since my target time to get there was 4:10, and last year it took me 4:17. By this time, Fred was no longer with us, but as I recall, Julian Jamison was with my group for a while in this area.

When we got to the dirt pile in the old logging road on Stallion Mountain, we worked our way slowly through the briers on the steep hillside, trying to follow the course description that warned about not getting too far left because of a "high wall." I had a severe leg cramp as we were going down the steep slope, and I had to stop for a few minutes to massage out the cramp. I took electrolyte and calcium pills. I noticed that we had gotten to the top of a high wall, and we could see the coal road below us. Michelle went a little more to the right and scrambled down, while I went more to the left and found an easy (except for the briers) way down. We re-grouped on the old coal road, and then continued down through a narrow steep valley between more cliffs on both sides of us. We soon got to the Barley Mouth Branch and went down an old trail to the next good coal road. This road soon took us to Bobcat Rock, and then we went down Leonard's Buttslide, found the next book at the Park boundary post, and crawled back up. It was adventurous and exhausting. It seemed to be steeper than usual, but I recalled how horrible it was last year in the heavy rain and slippery mud, and realized that it was not as bad this year. However, we had to go farther down and then farther back up this year, so in summary, it was still horrible this year.

From there we slowly made our way up through Laz's Rebirth Canal (the tunnel in Bobcat Rock), up past Hiram's Pool and Spa and the Official Resting Sofa, to Stu's Borehole Rock. I got my borehole book page at 5:26 RT, compared to 5:33 last year. So I was maintaining very close to the same pace this year despite the extra Buttslide distance.

I made a slight navigational error going down at the bottom of Stallion Mountain, where I missed the described turn to the right to go down a valley to the powerline along the New River. We apparently went

down the next valley after that, because we came out to the New River where we could see the powerline on the other side of the river. I could also see a Park boundary gate a few hundred feet to the left, and I knew that we had to go to the right to get to the proper river crossing. When we got there, I saw that the log across the river that I had crossed on in recent years was gone. So we just waded through the New River, and up the steep trash-strewn hill to Highway 116. This navigational miscue probably didn't cost us more than a couple of minutes compared to the correct route. In fact, it may not have taken any longer, because if you look at the map of this area, the way we went looks a little shorter than the prescribed course, but I think it is more overgrown with brush in the valley we took compared to the proper valley. In any case, we got to the New River in 6:01 RT, whereas last year it had taken me 6:17.

Now we began the adventure of finding the new part of the course. I like new parts of the course because they add an element of uncertainty to the navigation, and hence an increase in the challenge. As we passed by the base of Testicle Spectacle, I commented that laz had replaced a manly part of the course with a female part, since the new book location was referred to as a "female tree." One of the runners in my group at this point was Jeremy Ebel. I was surprised that Jeremy was way back here in the slow part of the field; I had expected him to be much faster. He was methodically studying the course and map, but he had apparently gotten off-course and then caught up to my group. After we went past the base of Testicle, Jeremy got into high gear and went ahead of the rest of us. As I followed him up the ridgeline, I could see Female Tree with the book in its plastic bags in the crevice, and I called out to Jeremy to be sure he had seen it and gotten his page. He had, and he continued uphill out of sight. This left Michelle, Edward, Chris, and me in our group.

After Female Tree, our foursome got to the top of the climb and took the jeep road under the Testicle power lines, and shortly after, turned left to go down the new route to Raw Dog Falls. After a few minutes, we thought we might be too far left, so we pulled out our maps and concluded that we were one ridge too far over. We cut across the small valley on our right and got onto the next ridge, and went down along that. This downhill ridgeline was thick with briars, so we assumed it was the correct route and we eventually got down to where we could see the dirt road that goes past Raw Dog Falls. We got to the falls in about 1:08 from the New River. In recent years on the old route, that had taken me between 46 and 56 minutes. So I estimate that the new Female Tree and Brier Ridge parts of the course had added about 15 to 20 minutes to my time compared to the former route over Testicle Spectacle and Meth Lab Hill.

From the falls, we went down the road to the bottom of the hill. We looked up at Danger Dave's Climbing Wall and unanimously decided to take the Pussy Ridge Long-cut instead. We had no trouble navigating to the rusty drum, across Highway 116, up Pig Head Creek to the Prison Mine Trail, and up Rat Jaw. I was happy that the Rat Jaw briars had been trimmed recently. On our way up, we saw Julian and then Hiram and Dusty, who were all on their way down. When we got to the top, a small cheering section greeted us. It was nice having a reception party. I got my page, noted the time (8:29 RT), and refilled my bottles. My target time to get here was 8:00. My time from the New River to Frozen Head had taken 2:28, compared to 2:23 last year in bad mud. By this point, I could see that we were probably not going to be able to make the 13:20 one-loop cutoff time. However, I had no intention of quitting. I started down Rat Jaw as quickly as I could, because it was cold and windy up there atop Frozen Head. On the way down Rat Jaw, we passed by Joe Kowalski who was on his way up.

This is about the time when it got dark, and I realized that I was in for a new experience. Because of the late start of the race, this would be the first time that I would have to do the Bad Thing and Zipline in the

dark. I had always had some trepidation about Zipline in the dark because of its treacherous rocks. Now I would actually have to do it for the first time. But first we had to get through the prison tunnel. It was spooky. When we got to the end of the tunnel, we looked at the stone wall to the left and concluded that we could not safely climb it, so we waded into the deeper creek at the inlet end of the tunnel, and then scrambled up the steep slope onto the grass behind the prison. After getting our pages at the prison wall, we headed up toward Razor Ridge and Indian Knob in the dark. It took a little ways for me to become convinced that we were on the proper ridge, but by using my map and compass, I soon became confident that we were going the right way. When we got to the top, we were almost exactly at the entrance to the Needle's Eye, so we had nailed the navigation. We went through the Eye and found book 10 and got our pages. Then we went down Zipline. As I had anticipated, it was very slow going, working our way steeply downhill through rocks, briers, trees, and ravines. When we finally got to the bottom, it had taken us exactly an hour to go from book 10 to book 11; one hour to go less than one mile downhill. In recent years, this descent in daylight has taken me between 41 and 50 minutes. So doing it in the dark, thanks to the late race start, probably added about 15 minutes to our time.

We got our pages and began that last long uphill trudge to Chimney Top. Navigation here was easy; we just keep going up as steeply as possible. It seemed like it took forever. We stopped to rest for a couple of minutes part way up, and I encouraged the others to go on ahead if they could, but they all declined, saying that they were having to struggle to keep up with me. So we continued up together, and then finally we could see the capstones at the top, and then we were there. After describing to my fellow-travelers how I had gotten lost in the capstones here during several past Barkleys, I carefully led us through the maze and we soon found ourselves on the green-blazed Chimney Top Trail, heading in the correct direction. Now we knew it was all Candy Ass Trail back to the finish. We actually jogged much of the way down Chimney Top Trail. This was where Michelle, Edward, and I pulled ahead of Chris. When we got to the bottom, we had to fight our way through some downed trees across the trail in the area that has been abandoned because of the missing Judge Branch bridge. When we got to Judge Branch, I tried to keep my feet dry for that final creek crossing by stepping on some rocks that had been lined up across the creek, but one of my feet plunged into the water. One of the other runners with me speculated that if I had been using two trekking poles instead of just one, I might have been able to keep both feet dry instead of just one.

As we were walking in the dark up the road approaching the campground, our party of three decided to play a little trick on laz. I know that he diligently tries to be at the gate when each runner arrives, so we all turned our headlights off and arrived surreptitiously at the gate in the dark. No one was there, so we called out to laz that we were there, and he hurried over. I touched the gate at 14:25 Race Time by my watch. laz didn't even count our pages since we were well over the time limit. But I will admit that I was satisfied and even very happy with my result. I asked Dave Henn to "tap me out for the last time," and he blew a perfect rendition of Taps for me. He then tapped out Michelle and Edward, and then Chris who finished a few minutes later. I thanked Michelle, Edward, and Chris for adding to the enjoyable time I had out there throughout the day on our journey together. I told them that they had picked the right veteran to follow for navigation, but the wrong one for speed. It was very cold there at 2 AM, so Gail drove me to our motel room in Wartburg, where I got a hot shower and a good night's sleep.

I consider this run to have been a "successful failure" for me. Clearly I failed in the conventional sense. Once again, I could not finish even one loop within the time limit. But I had achieved what I wanted, which was to finish one loop at all costs, and the costs actually had not been too bad. It had been a perfect

day for running, perhaps the best running weather I ever recall at Barkley, since it was cold, dry, and sunny. The people I had run with were a delight to meet and talk to. I could not have found a better group with whom to spend the day.

And now for the hard part of this report: explaining what I meant when I asked Dave to tap me out for the last time. Throughout the winter, as I was training and experiencing health limitations, I frequently had the feeling that training adequately for the Barkley is becoming more and more difficult as I get older and the course continues to get tougher. It is becoming more difficult for me to justify my grandfather slot in the entry field. So I had been entertaining the thought that maybe this would be my last run at Barkley. But then, Frozen Head gave us a perfect day for running, and laz gave us a fun new twist to the course, and I had as much fun doing one loop as ever, with some awesome people. So now I am not sure about next year. I guess I have until next winter to see how I feel about it then.

Meanwhile, the race continued. I had thought all along that Jamil Coury and Jodi Isenor were the favorites to go the distance this year, and I knew that virgins John Kelly, Johan Steen, and Jeremy Ebel were all very well prepared; I considered each of them to be possible 100-mile finishers. But Jodi had gotten sick just a few days before the race, and did not finish even one loop. Jamil was the only runner to go beyond three loops, but he succumbed to sleep deprivation and slept for about eight hours out on the course during loop 4 before finishing it over the time limit. My congratulations to Jamil for winning the race, and to John Kelly for being the only other Fun Run finisher. This was the lowest number of Fun Run finishers since 2006, when no one finished the Fun Run within its 40-hour time limit. I also congratulate Eva, Johan, Dale, and Toshi for finishing three loops over the time limit. This is the only time in the event history that as many as four runners have done that in a given year. Most runners just quit when they know that they cannot finish a loop within the time limit, so it is to the runners' credit that so many finished loops over the time limits this year. I also think that the large number of over-the-time-limit loop finishes is an indicator of how difficult the course has become. The course changes this year probably added 15 to 20 minutes to the loop time for most runners.

This year was the first time that there have been five female runners to finish one loop within its time limit. My congratulations to Eva, Bev, Heather, Nikki, and Dusty for that. Now that the course has been feminized with the new book location, maybe the women runners will be encouraged and able to do better!

After the race, I wrote that "The universe is back in order: no one finished the Barkley 100 for the first time since 2007." This result seems in order to me because I know that the nature of this event is that its difficulty is adjusted periodically to keep it at the limit of what is possible. For the past seven years, we have seen a string of amazing performances that gave us one or more finishers each year. It didn't take much adjustment this year to put the race difficulty beyond the current limit of the runners. Now I hope that Raw Dog keeps the course difficulty about the same for a few years, to give the runners time to figure out again how to get better until someone again can complete it.

I do not now know whether or not I will want to (and if so, if I will be allowed to) enter the race as a competitor again. But for the foreseeable future, I intend to be there each year to witness the further evolution of the world's toughest trail race and its runners.