

26 hrs failure

This is a story about the tragicomedy called The Barkley 100. Play director Laz, a character of himself, carefully casted the actors, after the individual runners applied for entry.

'What makes that race so difficult?', people back home asked me after reading my race report in Dutch. Hard to answer. It could be the elevation change, but since the altitude of the start and finish is the same, elevation can hardly be the problem. The navigation maybe? No idea. Without fog or snow, this year I experienced no navigation problems, it was perfect Barkley weather. The distance? Definitely no problem! The 100 miles (make it 40 miles, in my case) do not really stress modern ultra runners anymore. And rumors say a Barkley loop is less than 20 miles, after recent course changes. Maybe we, the actors, make the race more difficult than it really is...

Every runner points out his own goal before heading off in the first loop. Some runners come to act one loop, some try to act a Funrun, few of us come to race the 100 miles.

I found myself in a group of runners on our way to Garden Spot after some hours. We had no problems with navigation and hiked and ran fast. Too fast, I felt. German George agreed. People like Jason and Ty, who were running in our group, were much stronger than we were. After Book 5 I continued at a more relaxed pace and soon I was on my own again...

I like the moments on my own in the Barkley, taking my briar bath, solo suffering and grumbling. This is holiday, isn't it? Looking for the best way to tackle the way down to New River after Fykes Peak and crossing the river, I discovered that my 'bridge tree' I used in previous years was not there anymore. I was lucky to run into the fast group ahead of me again after crossing the Barkley Highway formerly known as Testicle Spectacle, just when they found book 7. Again the group took off, without me. My uphill performance this year was far from optimal. I leap frogged the second half of the first loop with some of the runners ahead of me, but was most of the time on my own. Halfway down Chimney Top Trail I had to put on my head lamp, night was falling. At the yellow gate, Elise did a brilliant job to get me out in loop 2 in 25 minutes, after a first loop in about 10.20 hrs.

I had more than 15 hours for a second loop. It was night when I hiked up Bird Mountain for the second time and was glad Dale caught up with me. We decided to run through the night together, joining our forces. A new chapter of this Barkley had started.

Night and Barkley are a devilish combination. It's so easy to make navigation errors, and some books are difficult to find without daylight. I mentioned Dale that one of the runners this year, Rhonda-Marie, was blind. He was amazed to hear this. We tried to figure out how hard that must be for the runner and her guide. 'Well at night it will make no difference for her', Dale concluded. 'Maybe in the dark it's even easier for her. She's used to that.' I was mainly interested in Rhonda-Marie's hallucinations. Do blind runners also see strange things after some loops? Interesting matter.

We nailed book 1, 2 and 3, lost some minutes finding 4 and 5, and made after an easy book 6 our way down Stallion again. Then at book 7 we saw three lamps coming down the ridge parallel to Testicle. We were curious. Three runners that made it already to this point on loop 3 at six in the morning? That would surely be the way to set a triple new course record.

But they were no third loopers. They were the famous 'three amigos' in Loop 1 who would make it to the yellow gate in 32 hours: Kimberly, Brad and Starchy. They looked pretty exhausted, more like characters from a horror movie. We explained where to find the book and asked if they needed some help, but they responded they were OK. Well, OK enough to continue.

When Dale and I went on after wishing them good luck, I realized they were playing their specific role in this theatre. The role of the underdog heroes, runners who put an extreme effort to reach a goal beyond their limits: finding all the books of the Barkley, before being disqualified for crossing time limits. A complete useless effort from a race perspective, but very meaningful for them and probably many others. Where they losers? Where they heroes? Who cares. They put a great new chapter to their lives and to the Barkley.

At the oil drum we caught up with Ty and Jason, but in the first daylight climbing Pig Head Creek Trail and Rat Jaw, I lost everyone. I was so slow. I ran out of energy after hours without food, gels or sugar. I just did not manage to eat. In longer races that occurs often to me. It's normally a matter of spending some time recovering or having a beer at an aid station and continue. But in the Barkley there is no time to recover, and there are only two aid stations with beers, for a Funrun.

Hours past by when I descended Rat Jaw and Zipline and climbed the two last details. Slowly I ran out of time, my time cushion evaporated. I started hallucinating climbing up Big Hell, hearing and seeing funny things. Just before the last book on ChimneyTop a really funny hallucination asked me if I were Mig. That never occurred to me before. A hallucination that talks like a woman, with blond hair in braids. 'Come on Mig, we have 1:15 hrs to the cut off time.' Then I realized this was not a funny hallucination but a Barkley runner. Jennilyn grabbed her page and was gone, before I realized I had to make some decisions. It took me some time to make up my mind. I decided to try to do my best to descend as fast as possible to the gate, at least to get my second loop within time limits. At the top of the trail at Chimney I had about 60 minutes left. I managed to ran down the trail with very short time left and got at the yellow gate within three minutes of the cut off time.

There I just sat down, a kind of ultra enlightened. Laz made a countdown. Two minutes, one minute, thirty seconds... I just waved away all efforts of Elise, Mike and Ed to get me on the third loop. I just needed a beer, to celebrate my ultra enlightenment. My show was over, my act was done, time to fade away. I think I sat down for a while, digesting my emotions. Seconds before the time limit got her, Jennilyn had taken off for a third loop, brave woman, strong mind. A bugle played some tones I recognized, Dave probably tapped out someone, was that me?

Thanks braid woman, to make me run that last 60 minutes.

Thanks Elise and Mike, who were there when needed.

Thanks Laz, Raw Dog, Dave and all others around, who made this -again- a beautiful weekend in Tennessee.