

The Barkley

“Where Dreams Go to Die”. Printed on every race bib at this year’s running of the idiots, the phrase gave cause for disquiet laughter among the 40ish participants, but proved frightfully true for many. I was among the masses, with crushed dreams and quads, shredded aspirations and clothing, and twisted expectations to go along with my twisted body. But I’m getting ahead of myself.

Barkley doesn’t start with a cigarette, as you may have read. Barkley doesn’t start an hour after the conch, or at the yellow gate, or even at Frozen Head at all. It starts in the depths of winter, when you start training before you know you are in. Obsession will get you a foot in the door, and if you find that crack you take full advantage. I started ramping up my climbing in the month before the application date, and after the “Oh, glory day/Oh, Shit” feeling of receiving my condolence letter, immediately went into 100% hill climbing mode. Over the next few months I ramped up the climbing, going up and down and up and down and up and down a hill near the house that climbs 750’ in .4 miles. A day or two a week on this, treadmill maxed out at incline at lunch, long runs and adventures on the weekends, and the physical aspect was coming together. At the same time, I pored over maps I’d seen hundreds of times, read and reread race reports, watched any video I could find, and fretted endlessly about the navigation. I found a few veterans who were kind enough to answer my questions, and give some great advice both on the route itself, and on preparing and training for the race. Early March found me at Frozen Head, learning the park and exploring the trails, and by the time it was time to taper, I was set. I had a quarter of a million feet of climbing in my back pocket, a mental map of the park, a tried and true gear and nutrition plan, plenty of confidence with off trail travel, and a healthy bit of hubris coming into the race. What could go wrong?

Saturday morning arrived clear and unseasonably warm, and with a minimal amount of fanfare we were off into the woods around 10.30 AM. Felt good going up the first climb, and arrived at book one with no trouble. Cruised around the hill, dropped off the side, and within 200 vertical feet felt my quads going out on me. I have no idea what happened, the hill was in line with what I’d been training on, but for some reason that day, the muscles decided to revolt. I stopped and tried to loosen them up, but to no avail. As the field passed me by, I struggled down the hill, in many places having to lift my legs with my hands just to step over a branch or rock. Over an hour later, I was at the bottom of this 1500’ descent, my legs wracked with pain. I gingerly started up the far side of the canyon and after a few minutes, the legs loosened up and started feeling, well, pretty damn good. Back in this SOB!! I powered up and found the correct turnoff, cruised off the side and was immediately back where I started, unable to descend. Stretching, salt, water, nothing seemed to touch this. I made my way down, fully aware that the last three months of training and the last four years of applying were going out the window, since there was no way I was going to make my times, or even finish a loop like this. No goddamn way at all. I made my way down, 6” at a time, unable to even bend my stupid legs and their stupid torn muscles, wondering why this stupid thing was happening to stupid me. At the bottom I found the creek, made my way over to the book, and started back up the hill. Again, no problem climbing, even to the point of climbing up the cliff instead of going around. I got back up to the

North Boundary trail, and figured a bit of light jogging on a gentle grade would be fine. Stupid legs with their stupid light jogging wouldn't even go this stupid stupid stupid. This sucks. Walking was even bad, but at least allowed me to keep going and not get any worse. I made it up to Bald Knob, and since I obviously had nobody around me I chased the golden squirrel at the top. Hmmm. Brown pee. Dark brown pee. That's a bit disconcerting. This was the point where I started coming to terms with the idea that something more than just pain was happening, and maybe I should be a bit worried.

Back up a bit. I put on a somewhat Barkleyesque event in the fall called Euchre Bar Massacre, and one of the participants this year was a man who had run Barkley many times, Chip Tuthill. I got to know Chip that weekend, and his enthusiasm for Barkley was second only to his enthusiasm for his grandkids and family. Chip passed away unexpectedly late in 2015, and along with other Barkers, was honored with a moment of silence at the start, and a memorial at the Garden Spot. After check in, as lies were being told around the BBQ, I started chatting with Frozen Ed Furtaw and some of the other old timers. Ed had been in touch with Chip's widow, and had agreed to sprinkle some of Chip's ashes around the course. Ed had heard that I knew Chip, and asked if I would be willing to help spread Chip's ashes around the course. Of course, I was honored to be asked and gladly accepted. Ed and I discussed how Chip would have wanted to remain with the course, and how part of the experience that Chip could still bring us was to inspire people to beautiful places. It's not discussed much, probably because it doesn't sound tough, but Barkley is a very beautiful course and allows a number of wild places for introspection.

This story is told because Chip kept me continuing on the loop. As I was on Bald Knob realizing this thing with my legs was not going away, and that I might be doing myself a bit of a disservice by continuing, I wondered if it would be smart to head back to camp and get checked out. I decided to push on to the Garden Spot, and to spread the rest of Chip's ashes there on the top of the bluff, where the memorial now is. Dropping off the backside of Bald Knob, I tried to walk down the backside and said something that rhymes with "Duck it" and slid down on my butt (it is worth noting that this was not the infamous buttslide). I made it down to the trail and up to the Garden spot, walking the whole way and ready to call it a day. Unfortunately for me, Ed and a few of his cronies were up there enjoying the fine weather and views, and telling more lies, as men are apt to do. Having spread Chips ashes themselves, I couldn't do the same, and when I told Ed I must be in last place, he just laughed at me and told me there were lots of people behind me. He also told me that I should have no problem finishing the loop in the time limit. Have I mentioned that men tell lies? Thus encouraged, I headed back down toward Stallion Mountain. The legs were feeling a bit better with the walking I had been doing, so I did some light jogging which felt great for about 3.4 seconds. On the descent to the Bar(k)ley Mouth, I hit the limit and sat down on the trail worried for my own safety and wondering if I was being a moron by continuing (spoiler alert: I was). I started back up the hill toward quitter's road, but quickly rationalized getting two more books that were fairly close. I turned around and made my way to the buttslide, a wide open scar across the land leading down to the river below.

I descended down to the bushes, poked around a bit, and came up with another runner who was looking for the book. Dammit. Another runner meant I couldn't head back to camp without looking like a weenie, so onward we went, up to Fykes and down Stallion. We crossed the New River together, and made our way up the new section where we found another runner (sans directions) looking for the book. Together we found the book and went over the ridge to the next climb. I was feeling good going up, so lost the other two on the way up and made my way along the twisting route to Danger Dave's wall, which was just begging to be climbed. Back down to the book, up garbage valley with the smell of rotting dog carcasses and diapers spurring me on, and across the road to Rat Jaw. Up the trails, over to the cut, and up the briars to the firetower right at sunset for my enormous braille page that barely fit in my baggie. Back down to the prison, into the tunnel...damn, this tunnel is a lot longer than I thought. Got to the end, looked at the stream, then the ventilation shaft, then the stream, then the other ventilation shaft, then... fuck it, this is Barkley and if I'm only getting one loop I'm climbing the son of a bitch. Up the shaft I went, struggling and nervous until I rolled onto the grass with a "Fuck you Barkley, Woohoo!!" into the clear night.

I came across another runner on the next climb, we gave our hellos and I continued on. Climb, climb looking for the capstones of Indian knob. Climb until I hear the jet engine sound of the wind at the tops of the hills and know I'm there, but no capstones. None at all, let alone the right one. I'm at the top, where are the capstones. Couple of steps later I figured out I had somehow hiked up onto the top. Feeling rather (more) stupid, I climbed back down and found the book. Down zipline, on a great bearing, come across the trail, take it to the right and, hmmm. This seems to be petering out. I'll just follow the creek down. Damn, this doesn't seem right. Nobody mentioned having to downclimb a 40' waterfall. Oh well, here's the confluence. But where's the Beech tree? All the streams are coming in at the correct bearing, where's the damn tree? 20 minutes of this nonsense leads me to an inkling that I might be at the wrong confluence, so I go downstream to the next confluence. No beech tree. I explored half a dozen confluences before seeing a light of a veteran who was there to lead me on my way. Just as I'd hoped, he had been there before and gave me these words of encouragement, "If we can find the right place, I might be able to recognize it. Maybe this is it?" This was not it. More confluences, more exploring, more time went by until we saw two more lights go by (remember the runners I was with earlier) and a shout of "we're on the jeep road". An hour and a half of farting around in the woods, and finally got the book. One more straightforward climb and descent, and a stream ¼ mile from the campground that caused the first wet feet of the day, and I was back, getting taunted and laughed at by Laz, with good reason.

I started getting kidney pain the following day, and it worsened over the next couple of nights. As that subsided, my weight skyrocketed and my liver became extremely tender. Eating was uncomfortable, I would have one taco and feel like I just ate two thanksgiving dinners. Chills and fatigue settled in, and for two and a half weeks I was at a loss why I had gained 25 lb, with swollen legs, stomach, and face. I finally came across an article on hypoalbumen (low protein), an affliction that was typically seen only in the elderly but matched my non specific symptoms, and pointed me in the right direction. I started downing protein shakes and eating egg whites, and a week or so later seemed pretty well resolved of my maladies.

Even with only one loop, the mental recovery has taken a lot longer to bounce back from than expected. Here we are in June, and I'm now starting to get fired back up again about different events and adventures. The focus of the training block, even more than the race itself, left me wanting some down time, and I took advantage. Got back on the bike a bit, did a few adventures and some low key running, but nothing structured or high intensity.

So will I go back? Barkley is a process, as much as the course is not a specific course but a general route, with each person required to accomplish certain tasks. Accomplishing these tasks, whether it's figuring out how to apply, putting in the required training, figuring out the route and maps, finding books, etc. will move you along, but they are a house of cards, with one failure knocking down everything else that got you to that point. You can apply and get accepted, train your ass off, get to the park and know the route, and miss one book or get lost one time, and it's over. Maybe next year you can apply again, and maybe you will get back in. I'll rebuild the house of cards when I want to take that risk again, and if I'm lucky enough to be invited back. But I'll keep obsessing, because it's exactly that house of cards that makes this event so fascinating, and difficult, and wonderful.

Sean Ranney
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