

# Death of an Ultra Runner

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**be warned... It's very, very long...my race report  
from the Barkley Marathons 2016.....**

**In a place where the sky meets the horizon and  
kisses the Brushy Mountains lays a land that  
has captured the imagination of countless  
souls. Each searching for an answer to a  
nagging desire etched on the scarred walls of  
their heart. Numerous men and women have  
asked me what drove me to to come to this  
"corner of the woods". What was my nagging  
desire? Why? I had no answer for them. I still  
don't.**

**I arrived at Frozen Head on the Tuesday before the fabled race took place. I was a virgin and had never been to the park before. In the preceding days I explored as many of the "candy ass" trails as I could and met a wondrous lot of diverse yet homogeneous human beings. Runners, crew, family, media. Individuals all, but united by a race of legendary status. Brought together by the mystical, magical and mesmerizing, Barkley Marathons.**

**I slept surprisingly well Friday evening into Saturday morning. I had felt so certain that the conch would sound in darkness, but felt relief with the realization that the race would begin in the light of day. My gear was all prepared. When the conch sounded all I would need to do is put on my pack and head to the yellow gate.**

**9:43. The unmistakable ripples through the airways resonated deep within my core. The conch, the seashell, the Horn of Humility, had summoned us. Invited us. Wanted us. The yellow gate. Be there. All the preparation, all the training. The early mornings, the late nights, the Rat Jaw workouts. It would all now be put to the test. The cigarette would be lit. One hour to race time.**

**I was nearly the last one to the gate. The anxiousness and nervousness was replaced by calm and I recollected something one of my best friends had once told me. " Keep moving. Straight lines. Purpose." Straight lines at Frozen Head? Not meant literally of course. Straight lines. Don't waste energy. Have purpose, keep moving. Indeed. It seemed that within moments of my arrival smoke billowed from the nostrils of the man we have come to know as Laz. A snake oil salesman of sorts from days gone by. The wares he's peddling, however, are not fraudulent and neither is he a charlatan. What he has to offer is pure. Real. Perhaps too real. We were off!**

**I found my friend Joel and headed up the road a couple hundred meters to the single track that headed up Bird Mountain. I was now an official starter.**

**I did not run up the switchbacks but hiked at a moderately brisk pace. About halfway up I realized that Joel had fallen behind a bit. He was sticking with his game plan, I was sticking to mine. Our paces weren't a match. I reached the summit of Bird and went left on the Cumberland. I encountered a runner on the Pillars of Death slowly and gingerly making his way across. After he secured sure footing I hopped across and passed him. As I did he stated that he didn't want to get injured this early in the race, explaining his slow crossing. No worries. We all approach the race differently. I continued on running at a comfortable pace. Pushing but not overly so. As I took a turn around a small rise I saw a couple of runners ahead of me. I caught up with them and proceeded down the ridge line. It was Heather and Nicki. Through the Fanghorn Forest and quickly to book one. Grabbed our pages and took off. Soon we were on our descent down Cheque Mate Hill. I was trailing close to the girls. Perhaps a little too close. One of**

Heather's trekking poles caught me square in the mouth. Heather Anderson is one of my heroes. Her thru hiking is legendary and I admire her immensely. Being smacked in the face by one of her sticks was practically an honor. With Heather taking the lead we nailed the descent and quickly found ourselves on our way up Jury Ridge. It was then that I realized my primary compass (which was hanging around my neck) was gone. Somehow it had flown off or had been snagged by a brier. Either way it was now deep in the throat of the Barkley. I had a secondary but it was in my pack. Rather than stop to get it out I continued upward. As we ascended I passed Nicki and didn't see her again during my time "out there". (on a side note this section is where I came across a large rattler during a training run earlier in the week...with temps still relatively cool, he moved slowly and didn't attempt to strike)

**Arriving at the Jury Ridge sign Heather took a bearing. Being without compass at that moment I followed. The descent was made down the ridge line and then the drop down to book 2 via Hiram's Vertical Smile. Heather's navigation was flawless. We came out on the bench just south of the old gas well. Right where we needed to be. A short run south then east towards the creek and the confluence. The trees, the rocks, the book. Bam! Also in the area getting their pages were Bec, Jennilyn and Brad. We all started our ascent up Hillpcolypse to the NBT.**



**During the long climb I pulled ahead slightly and joined Brad. He was climbing well and moved swiftly. We hit the trail and immediately started running. I had met Brad earlier in the week. I found him to be very intelligent and extremely knowledgeable about the park. He also had a great sense of humor and was a pleasure to hang with. I had learned a lot from him during the time at Big Cove. Knowledge is a good thing. Especially when you're a virgin at the Barkley. I soaked up everything I could then, and was absorbing everything I could now. During our time together Brad pointed out certain landmarks and quizzed me often. We ran steadily on this section of the trail and finally made our ascent to the top of Bald Knob. There we encountered the remnants of ancient capstones and easily found book 3. At this time we came across Dale. We all grabbed pages and made our descent. Brad and I hit the trail and quickly followed it to the right. Within 50 meters Brad made an abrupt stop and turned around. He said we were going the wrong way.**

**One of many lessons learned on the day. Don't blindly follow anyone regardless of how knowledgeable they are or how many times they've been to Frozen Head.**

**We got back on track and made our way to book 4 at the Garden Spot. Through Son of a Bitch Ditch and past the coal ponds we went, moving with purpose . Just past the coal ponds we came to a short but very steep incline. I asked Brad if it had a name and he stated that it did not. I christened it Brad's Ballbuster. Continuing eastward we hit the coal road and then up to book 4 overlooking the bluff. Dale was once again with us. I secured my page, stuck it in my baggie and tucked it safely into a zippered pocket. Book 5 loomed ahead.**

**Brad took off quickly down the coal road as I took a moment to relieve myself. I ran with Dale the short distance to the first water drop to find Brad filling up. I quickly refilled my bottles and mixed my nutrition into one of them. We took off. Brad leading the way. Running speedily down the road we crossed the berm and then proceeded to take a left. At this time John, running and looking strong, passed and took the route to the right. He yelled over to us that going left would put us at a high wall. Brad kept going left as John continued right. I chose to stay with Brad. Within a couple of minutes we indeed arrived at the high wall. 12-15 feet perhaps. Straight down. The only way down without losing precious time was seemingly right over the edge. Brad went first. He shimmied down grabbing a branch that was growing out of the cliff face. Hanging there he hesitated a moment before making the final leap down. The jump, even hanging from the branch, seemed a long way. I went over the edge. I secured the branch with my right hand and tried**

to find footing on the smooth wall of rock. The branch snapped without warning and in the blink of an eye I landed flat on my back. The fall knocked the wind out of me, and though I hit my head hard, it didn't render me unconscious. I slowly got up and spotted Brad. I was a bit groggy but took off running. Within 25 meters or so I tripped on a log and face planted. My chin bounced off the ground and rattled my noggin for the second time in a matter of minutes. This section was not kind to me. I got up, shook my head, saw Brad and took off. Another 100 meters and bam!! Down again! I was getting a bit perturbed but jumped up and finally caught up. We hit the coal road and made our way to Bobcat Rock and the top of Leonard's Buttslide. The Buttslide is very steep. Invariably, there was some sliding going on to get to the book. About halfway down we ran into Dale who was on his way up. Down to the bottom and a bit to the right was book 5. Pages gathered we made our ascent.

**At the top we made our way around Bobcat instead of through. Up we went to the Pool and Spa. Brad and I made sure to sit on the luxurious sofa, albeit only briefly. Unfortunately the next couple of miles are rather hazy and recollection is poor. Perhaps the falls I took affected me somehow but I barely remember anything about book 6. I have very little memory of how I got there and secured my page. My thoughts become clearer as I recall the descent down to the New River and the highway. Still with Brad we followed close to the park boundary for a hundred meters or more and then took a more south westerly bearing. We knew we could use the river and the highway as backstops and could almost descend anywhere. When we reached the New River and made our crossing we could hear vehicles and made our way to the highway. When we popped out we were 200 meters or more from the waterfall on the other side of the road. We were getting close to book 7.**

**Brad and I ventured down the road. Several vehicles were parked along the section where we would turn and head towards, and then across, Testicle Spectacle. We surmised that the vehicles belonged mostly to media. I believe we were correct. People waved and cheered us on. There was a short climb and then across the Spectacle to book 7. It was to be 3/4 of the way up the ridge in the hollow of a dead tree. So many dead trees. We searched. And searched. No book. Perhaps 20 minutes. No book. Finally Heather, Jennilyn, Bec, Conrado and one other runner showed up and were looking with us. Another 5 or 10 minutes lapsed and Heather said we were on the wrong ridge. Everyone quickly made their way to the spur to our left. Perhaps a 100-150 meters we were at the dead tree. Book 7.**

**Up the spur paralleling Testicle. I was once again with Heather. On our ascent she pointed out the tree (Women Tree) that the book had been in the previous year. We reached the top in relative short order and made our way along the road for a bit and hit the descent to Raw Dog Falls and then over to the old rusty barrel for book 8 and then up to the highway. I was a bit south of Pig Heads Creek but only about 100 meters. I made my way over and Conrado was there. Water was flowing nicely and I refilled my bottles from the creek. Most of my water came from the creeks. Throughout the entire loop I was never short of fluids. I stayed well hydrated. As I filled, Jennilyn, Bec and Heather (and a couple others) made their way up. I topped off my bottles and proceeded to make the ascent. I stepped on the culvert at the drainage and promptly slipped and cracked my shin hard on the edge. It hurt terribly and produced a gash on my leg but it didn't bleed excessively. The pain was intense for a few**

**minutes but I bit the bullet so to speak, and began climbing.**

**I caught up to the girls and made steady work of this portion of the climb. I was glad I filled my bottles as the long climb up Rat Jaw was fast approaching.**



**We hit the road that lead past the old mines that prisoners used to work. I passed Heather and caught up with Jennilyn. We got to Rat Jaw rather quickly and started our ascent. Now it was Conrado, Jennilyn and myself. I felt strong and powered up the nastiness post-haste. I had been "bitten" by briers throughout the day but they were not in the biting mood on the way up to the tower. The climb was long and relentless but went extremely well. I reached the tower with Conrado. Jennilyn was not too far behind. Several people were at the top cheering us on. It was absolutely amazing. My friend Leon was there taking photos. I'm seriously envious of that mans beard. Yes I know, one of the Seven Deadly Sins. Book 9 was on the table along with gallons of water. This book happened to be in Braille. The infamous Lazarus Lake always has something up his sleeve. Ha! No worries, we were allowed to take any page.**

**I waited for Jennilyn to refuel and then took off down Rat Jaw. We made good time descending one of the most infamous hills of the race. Conrado and Nikolay were right behind us. As I hit the prison I was unsure of which way to go. I waited until everyone arrived. I followed. The final few feet to the tunnel were through a brier infested patch of hillside. Once we got to the front of the prison Heather and Bec joined us as we made our way through the tunnel and to book 10. The tunnel was longer than I imagined and the water flowed strong and was about shin deep. Book page in hand, we started the ascent up Bad Thing. Nikolay took off, hitting a different line than the rest of us. I took a bearing after a few strides, checked where I was in relation to the water tower, and continued the climb. One foot in front of the other I made my way up to Indian Knob with purpose. I chose my line and focused on my breathing. I hit the top within 20 feet of the keyhole. I navigated well through this section and was happy to contribute as we all grabbed our pages from**

**book 11. Dominique had now joined us and he and Nikolay quickly took off down Zipline . I started down and noticed that Heather was taking a different line down than I had intended to take. I checked my bearing one more time. The others were following her. I nearly took off in pursuit but decided to stick with what I wanted to do. I started running. I got to the bottom, crossed the creek near the confluence, located the large embankment and found the book. Dominique and Nikolay were there taking a short break. The page from number 12 was now in my possession.**

The climb up to Chimney Top was not difficult but seemed to go on forever. About 3/4 of the way up Dominique and I took a short break to put headlamps on and waited for Nikolay. We made our final surge up to the top and found book 13 quickly. We took our pages and made our way to the candy ass trail and the final few miles to Big Cove. I had all my pages and was feeling good physically and mentally. I ran at a brisk pace all the way to the yellow gate. Touching that gate gave me such a wonderful feeling. I can't pinpoint it, but it was something that I had never felt before. I handed Laz my pages and he counted them out. I was giddy with excitement and joked with him as he did so. A euphoric calm enveloped me and I couldn't wait to get back "out there". My crew, Michael Nichols and Larry Kelly, were incredible! They got me fed quickly and helped me prepare for loop two. I couldn't have done this race without them! They were invaluable! I changed my shirt and buff as they were sweat soaked but did nothing with shoes or socks. They were wet but my feet felt

good so I left them as is. I was anxious to get going so I grabbed my bowl of mashed potatoes and headed back towards the start. Making sure I had everything I needed I started to reach for the new BIB # that Laz had in hand. Before I snatched it from his grasp I realized that Michael was still holding my trekking poles. Close call.( for those that don't know, once a new BIB number is taken from the hands of the race director no more aid can be administered. Nothing can be added or taken from your pack or your person) I grabbed the number, said my goodbyes and trotted up the trail.

Halfway up my climb of Bird I came across Nikolay resting on the trail. I stopped for a moment and then we continued on together. We quickly got to the top and made our way to book 1. I changed batteries in my headlamp and we took off for book 2. On the descent down Cheque Mate Hill I took no less than 6 falls. One of these were very hard and I cracked my lower back on a log. I laid there a moment to recover and when I arose Nikolay was out of sight. Instead of taking a bearing I just continued in the same direction. This turned out to be a big mistake as I came out not quite knowing where I was. I went through the creek and up an embankment and found the trail. Elated, I took off running, once again not checking my compass. I saw a headlamp behind me and I slowed. After s switchback or two I stopped and waited. George, from Germany, was soon upon me. We traveled up the trail for perhaps another 15 or 20 minutes. Things didn't look right. George said the same. We were apparently going the wrong way. George had followed me

halfway up North Bird Trail. So many mistakes. We made our way back down. Much time was lost but we were finally on the right trail heading up to Jury Ridge. After hitting the sign we headed off trail, down the ridge and then down the Vertical Smile towards book 2. We came out on the bench a ways south of the gas well. Making our way north a bit we cut east into the woods in search of the confluence and ultimately the book. We were right where we should be. The "rocky island", the confluence, the gas well just to the north. We searched. One hour. Two hours. George had had enough. He said he was heading back to camp. I made the decision to continue looking. The book had to be here. Somewhere. Back and forth I went. Starting from the gas well heading south. Looking everywhere. I went farther south than I needed just to make sure. Each side of the creek. Up and down. Across. Back and forth. To and fro. Three. Four more hours I searched. I couldn't find the book. It should have been right

**there. Undoubtedly it was. I just didn't see it.  
Where the hell was it?**



**On a rock in the middle of the stream there appeared to be a naked figure just standing there. Apparently of Native American heritage and sporting no clothing whatsoever. I remember thinking "hmmmm.... a little cold for that". I wasn't hallucinating. Wasn't really that tired. My eyes were just playing tricks. It was at this time, however, that I made the decision to end my adventure. I called it a day. I accepted defeat and made my way back to camp. A few hours later the sun had breached the horizon and its warming rays were more than welcome. I choked down my emotions as I reached the yellow gate . Laz was there along with Joel and Brad. I explained what happened in the dead of night. Frozen Head did not want me to find the book. In solemn defeat I graciously accepted the playing of "taps" to signify the metaphorical death of an ultra runner. My race at the Barkley Marathons was over.**

**On the way home I had many hours to go over what had went wrong. The many mistakes I made. What could I have done differently? Should I have practiced my navigation more? Done more climbing? More speed work? Should I have eaten better? Worked more on memorization skills? Gotten more rest? The first loop had went so well in the light of day. Was it the darkness? I had spent a lot of the first loop with others. Was that it? Was it being "out there" on my own that got me? Why couldn't I find the book? How far could I have gotten had I found it? What is Barkley all about? What is the meaning of life? In life and at Barkley things sometimes just go the way they go. In retrospect I should have never returned to camp when I did. I should have continued without the page or waited till the sun came up and searched some more or waited until Jared or Gary came by again. I should have finished the loop regardless of how many pages I had or didn't have. Why? Because I realized on my long drive home that**

**the Barkley isn't about the clock as I believed when I gave up and headed back to be tapped out. The Barkley isn't about whether you finish in the allotted time or whether you have all your pages. To me the Barkley is about pushing oneself past what we believe is our limit. Pushing past our perceived notion of what we are capable of. Pushing ourselves until we can't push any longer. Barkley is about life and finding the meaning of it in its Frozen Head Cathedral. The trails, the course, the books, the clock, the bugle, Lazarus Lake. On my long drive home I realized it's not about any of that. It's about finding the "John Kelly" in all of us and continuing on our path regardless. It's about finding out who we are. Finding ourselves in this unpredictable, crazy world we live in. Finding out what we're made of. The Barkley is a religion of sorts and its temple is constructed within our souls. No, it's not just a race. It's so much more. I cannot wait to return.**



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