

THE BARKLEY MARATHONS - APRIL FOOLS WEEKEND - 2007

Ah, the lure of Frozen Head State Park, Tennessee, the home of **The Barkley Marathons** - perhaps the toughest ultra in the world.

I guess my adventure started in Wartrace TN at the 2006 Strolling Jim, where I summoned the courage to introduce myself to Gary Cantrell and expressed my interest in joining the crew at the Barkley. After a brief question and answer session he surmised that perhaps I was crazy enough to give it a shot. I knew something mystical was drawing me when I set my alarm on Christmas night for 11:45 pm so I could drive to my office to send an email to Lazarus Lake asking to be included in the 2007 field. "Remember that the day after Christmas doesn't begin at sunrise" he had cautioned me. I sent my email at 00:02 on the 26th. To my fright and delight I received word that "My Mommas brightest child would NOT be doing the Barkley"... in other words, I was accepted! Wonderful.

What is it inside you that urges you to do something when everything indicates that you can't?

The next period of time was spent gathering some necessary equipment. Compasses, a book on orienteering, clothes that wouldn't tear when the saw briars tore at me, a water treatment instrument, a new back pack, a whistle in case I fell in an open pit or something. Maps of Frozen Head were ordered and received. Reports on prior Barkleys, and advice from previous competitors were read, and reread.

I arrived at the camp site on Friday afternoon and was fortunate to find an open site to set up my camp. It is an annual reunion of veterans from around the world. It isn't hard to find the race director's camp. Just look for the 1957 Willys Jeep and a hanging wall of license plates. (the entry fee for The Barkley is \$1.60, an essay entitled "Why I should be allowed to run the Barkley marathon", and if it's your first time you must include a license plate from your home state. I thought the UK alum plate looked pretty good, but not as cool as some of the others, including BARKLEY; FUN RUN; and CAVE DOG). I checked in and received my race # 49 and my written directions to the books. (The Barkley requires you to find 10 books along the course and tear the page corresponding to your race number from the book. You are given a new number if/when you start out on each successive loop). Included in the directions was a list of starters and their "Computer Projections" for each...

Steve Durbin - KY - "breaks his leg while kicking himself in the butt for entering this race".

Sweet! I sat down and highlighted the actual course onto my FH topo map. I then laminated the sheets and maps for protection against rain. Then I arranged my backpack with food, lights, and water. I had capacity for 70 ounces in my backpack, plus an additional two half-liter bottles. I thought that surely 100 ounces would be sufficient. Next I set my alarm for 6 am.

My biggest fear was missing the conch blast (your warning that the race would start in exactly one hour) since I was at the far end of the camp from the yellow gate. I generally have problems sleeping the night before a big event, and this night was no exception. I was awakened at least twice by a blood-curdling shrill of a scream. My guess was that it came from the lungs of Ted "Cave Dog" Keizer. I got up to walk to the rest room around 5 am and things looked normal, so I crawled back into my tent, unzipped the window vents, and watched... and listened.

I had no difficulty hearing the conch at 7:09 edt. It was a sound that sent chills through my body. One hour now until the beginning of what I anticipated was going to be a journey of a lifetime.

With the excitement level of a child on Christmas morning I jumped up and prepared myself. Even though everything was carefully packed the evening before I shuffled through the pack making sure I had what I thought I needed. By 8:00 everyone had made their way to the yellow gate. The small gathering of friends, relatives, and well-wishers made small talk and there was the normal amount of nervous laughs in response to the usual corny statements made before a race. Special guests this year included photographers and writers from *The Washington Post*. At 8:09, Gary Cantrell lit the cigarette signaling the start, and 34 souls began the 1320' ascent up the 1.3 mile 'candy ass' trail to the top of Bird Mountain.

My experience in the woods has been limited to running marked trail runs. That knowledge, plus what I read from the orienteering book was a good indication that I knew just enough about navigation to assure myself of getting lost. Again, I knew this. So, although I may be an idiot, I'm not as dumb as I look, and I devised a plan...

My plan was to position myself towards the middle of the pack and just try to stay with someone for as long as possible. I knew that I couldn't expect anyone to wait for me, but I had hope that I could keep someone in sight, and then if dropped I could wait for the next person to come along, and continue on. Heck, I was feeling some fatigue before we even reached the top of Bird Mountain, but soon enough we were there. In the wink of an eye everyone in front of me took off down the other side to trails that weren't nearly as established. They were marked by orange ribbons, and it was on this section that I first learned that double ribbons indicate a switchback. Good to know since I would have surely scurried forward and missed the trail turning back. Within a few minutes I come upon Balasz Koranyi of Hungary. He was crumpled over and in pain from a severe mishap involving his ankle. *His day was over.* Pat Costigan came up behind me and helped me through this section to book 1, entitled *Lucky You*. Evidently finding the first book was cause for celebration for only me as Pat was soon gone.

Dave Henn was the next person to come along, giving me someone new to follow. I was able to stay close enough to him to get me past **Son-of-a-Bitch-Ditch** (ten feet wide and ten feet deep; you climb up some tree trunks to cross). Soon after, I found out how very difficult it could be. I got off the path at the top of the ditch and was about 15 feet downhill of the trail. It was really tough getting back on course. I thought then that I sure didn't want to do any extra ups and downs, and a frightened inner voice reminded me... *DON'T GET LOST!*

Alone, I found the coal ponds and stopped to ponder which way to go. Just as I had made the decision to go up and over a large rock formation I heard voices assuring me that I was on course. "Frozen" Ed Furtaw (who knows the area like the back of his hand), and a couple more guys got me headed in the right direction... and it was NOT up and over the large rock formation. (Lucky Me, indeed). We made brief introductions and for the next 10-15 minutes they referred to me as "David". Hmmm... but as long as they were helping I decided that David is a cool enough name. (I have a nephew, and a brother-in-law with that name and they are both cool). I soon found that I couldn't keep their pace, and struggled to keep them in sight, eventually losing them just before the summit near the Garden Spot. (This was the first time that I wondered if my trip to Tennessee was going to include one, possibly two pages, and my mind started to process the story for why I only finished a small portion of the day). I pulled out my directions for the first time and checked my landmarks... "okay, here is the small pile of rocks... I guess I go up this hill leading to the very top of the Garden Spot... good... now, find some stones painted blue and orange... okay... look south... get out the compass... south... go 10-15' and look inside a small stone cairn for book #2. Yippee.

The first of two water stops (consisting of probably 50 one-gallon jugs of water placed on the ground) was next, so I refueled and waited for someone else to come along. That someone was Pete Ireland, a veteran of a few Barkleys. Pete was hobbling due to suffering a fall, which resulted in a bad bruise on his leg. This injury made climbing difficult for him, but it made it easy for me to stay with him. After a zig (which ended at a 30' cliff with no way down) when we should have zagged, we found book 3, and with some discussion and bushwacking (including our first real taste of sawbriars and blow-downs) we hiked up the Fykes Peak section of Stallion Mountain and to what we believed to be the location of the next book.

According to the directions...

"if you look in that hole you will see BOOK 4. Just reach right in there and get it. The snakes rarely come out this early in the year. If it is a warm, sunny day, you might want to be careful."

It was, indeed, a warm sunny day, (I wonder how warm it has to be to be considered warm to a rattlesnake?). *We reached in.....*

and pulled out the book.

My first encounter with a rattler would have to come later.

Delighted to be in possession of 4 pages, Pete and I traversed downward through a draw and some treacherous terrain, and we made our way to the New River, which was easily crossed. (Perhaps a little too easily, but I'm sure a little thunderstorm would fix that). We crossed the road (the course takes you across a pretty nice road leading back to the camp on several occasions. I guess to tempt you into taking the easy way back), located the waterfall, and made our way around it.

I cast my eyes for the first time on the **Testicle Spectacle**, (a private audience with me will gain you an explanation, or you can probably figure it out on your own... it's pretty self-explanatory) an 800' ascent over ½ mile. It was here that we saw a man strolling along on what appeared to be a highway compared to what we were on. Just as I was about to suggest that we go follow 'that guy' his pathway ran out and

as he stared through the 6' high sawbriars for a route to the top, we called him over to a better track up. (if there is such a thing). A brief introduction introduced me to Stuart Gleman. Stu didn't exactly seem thrilled with the meeting and I didn't imagine that we would be spending a lot of time together. (As fate would have it, I was wrong).

Pete was really hurting and encouraged me to go with Stu. The first thing I noticed was that the shorts Stu wore covered his legs only to mid thigh. I was very pleased that I had chosen long pants as I cringed at the thought of the upcoming climb. The "trail" went through the heart of the heartless briars. There were older, thicker briars with longer spikes, and there were the young, extremely flexible briars. These demons would wrap themselves around me and more than once pulled my cap off. I would turn to retrieve my cap in time for another sticker-laden wand to slap me in the face. At a brief rest stop I got a pretty good look at Stu's arms and wrists. They were cut and bleeding so badly that I don't think he could have seen the time on his watch without wiping the face of it first. His legs didn't look a lot better. Stu trudged through the briars like they were not there. When I asked him about it he said he just ignores them. (a method I began to employ later in the journey). Stu has been there many, many times. He has finished one loop in as fast as 10:15, but offered that the course was changed last year making it more difficult than in previous years. (Cantrell, a.k.a. Laz, changes the course at his whim). The course difficulty and his disclosure that he was perhaps 20 lbs heavier caused Stu to have climbing problems of his own (fine with me).

We made it up T.S. and then on up another little hill to book #5 *Bright Days, Stupid Nights*, and decided that this would be a good place for a little break. Before moving on I looked back down the T. Spectacle and saw Pete, surrounded by briars, still making his way up. Pete dropped out of The Barkley only minutes later.

At this time an old Jeep and its three passengers made its way along the dirt roadway. I couldn't help but notice the look in the local's eyes, and it wasn't hard to read their minds. Fools. (I'm not talking about the guys in the Jeep). Across the jeep path was the **Neo butt-slide** down Meth Lab Hill (site of an old Meth Lab, of course) leading to **Raw Dog Falls** and the site of book #6! There really wasn't any choice but to slide down NBS other than perhaps hang gliding. It was actually fun sliding on the loose dirt for a couple hundred feet. A short trek down a creek led to a wash (a place water comes down when it rains) and the directions said to climb up just to the right of the wash. "It isn't actually vertical, only about an 80% grade". This is **Danger Dave's Climbing Wall**. I don't know if anyone made it up at that exact location. Stuart immediately dismissed the notion of trying it, but I wanted to be able to say I did it. My attempt included crawling, gathering some energy and breath, and scrambling almost straight up to the next small tree or something to grab onto. When the hold didn't hold, I'd slide back down to the previous tree with a thud. When I was only 10' from the top I had to abandon the notion that I was going to make it that way. I realized that I was using a helluva lot of energy, so I quickly (a little too quickly I might add) slid back down. I called for Stu and after a very anxious moment in which I imagined he was out of my life forever, a voice came back telling me to continue on a bit to a spot that was easier. (maybe only 65%)

This ascent had a glorious, lush new growth of poison oak (or poison something.. my back, arms, and legs now tell me) all over the ground, with more continuing up the trees that I grabbed for support. I did manage to crawl out, but the pleasure of being on a level surface was short-lived as it was soon onward through the next valley, up the left side of the creek, and across the highway (another chance to quit resisted) to **Pig Head Creek**. The directions claimed that PHC was marked appropriately with a pig head on a stick. I'm sorry to say I missed seeing that little jewel.

PHC "trail" led to the Prison Mine Trail and by some really cool old mine ruins and to the old Guard House. To our right was the beginning of the dreaded **Rat Jaw Trail**. The directions ask "*Is that steep, or what?!!*" Indeed.

Rat Jaw Trail (I shudder at the thought)... (a pathway under the power lines that go up to the Fire Tower) is a long very steep climb containing 4 level spots, a 90 degree turn left, two more level spots, and on to the top, to the Fire Tower, and the next water spot.

This took forever, as we stopped several times to rest. Each time Stu would suggest that maybe I should go on, but I knew my chances of finishing were slim and none without him, and stuck with a plan to finish... regardless of how long it took. We were both out of water, and had been out for some time now. During the second rest period Stu reached into his pack and pulled out his last can of RED BULL. I'm sure he would have preferred downing every last drop, but he offered half of it to me and I carefully poured a precious 3 ounces into my water bottle, and not as carefully consumed it.

The sawbriars on Rat Jaw are second to none, and cover 80% of the practically imaginary pathway. There is a cable lying on the ground, and I guess it at one time was attached overhead. Stu identified it as an old television cable, a not a LIVE WIRE. Still, it was with a bit of trepidation the first time I used it to pull myself up a particularly steep section. (By this point maybe it's 50/50 on whether you care if it's energized or not). Halfway up Rat Jaw we found book 7 hidden in the crevice of a large rock formation, and summoned the strength for the final ascent to the Fire Tower and the coveted water stop. There we drank copious amounts and refilled our bottles. I ate the rest of my turkey and cheese wrap, took an electrolyte caplet, and shivered from the cold wind as we rested at the highest point of Frozen Head State Park. Ten minutes into the rest we encountered Alan Holtz (for about the fourth time for me). Alan is much faster, but tends to get misplaced and is forced to catch back up. He decided to stick with us for a while, and we followed our Yellow Brick Road to our Oz. (Weird thoughts come to mind at Frozen Head).

From the Fire Tower we had what was to be the easiest mile of the day, down a sweet jeep road. Wouldn't you know that I developed a cramp in my upper leg causing me to stop while the others went on?

"Terrific, there go Dorothy and the Tin Man"...

I stretched, used the rest room for the only time of the day, and found that a slight jog made the cramp go away, so that's what I did for about a quarter of a mile as I caught back up, and brought myself from being the last person on the course from loop one, to being tied for last with the other two.. (This little jog was the only running I did during this 'marathon'). As suspected, the easiness was short lived and we headed off trail again, this time for **Chimney Top** and **Indian**

Knob, where after a lengthy, tiring climb, we entered the Needles Eye of the Capstone and I collected page 49 from book #8, entitled *The Reason I Won't Be Coming*. Looking down from here we saw the infamous **Zip Line Trail**.

Zip Line is a great place to have a zip-line, but a hellacious place to travel down on foot. It is VERY steep downward (falling 1600' in $\frac{3}{4}$ mile) through briars, boulders, and blow-downs. It is the route that most of the water takes going down the mountain. Alan decided to hurry on, still hoping to finish in the allotted 13:20. The voice of reason (not to be confused with the voice that prodded me to enter this expedition) cautioned me to stick with Stu. Stu claims that on a good day if you know where you are going you can make the descent in 20 minutes. That sounded good! A quarter of a mile later he told me that a friend of his broke his ankle there a couple of years ago and had to hop the rest of the way. *He hopped the rest of the way...* Immediate thoughts were of lying there all night with a broken ankle. *I better be even more careful.* We picked our way through the rocks and other nastiness. After about thirty minutes (and still a long way to go to the bottom) it was dark enough to get out our lights. Fortunately I have a powerful light; unfortunately it cast a shadow on Stu since he only had a crappy little light, and that shadow kept him from seeing the trail. He suggested I stay back a short distance to lessen the problem. For some reason I just couldn't convince myself to stay back hardly any distance, so his next decision was for me to lead. Oh No... Problem with me leading was that I couldn't figure out where to go, *because there is NO TRAIL*, and so we struggled onward. The big rocks were slippery, and oftentimes the fallen tree branches and other brush gave way when you stepped on them, causing you to crash through to your calf, or even to your thigh. This was not the place to break something. *But hey, this is The Barkley, what did I expect?* A few more prayers were said, (I often pray for guidance and courage from my mother and sister, and if it's a reasonable request, I normally obtain it) and we finally reached the bottom. There we saw another light and sure enough it was our friend Alan; searching in vain for the book. Stu went after it like a bloodhound and we found it in about 5 minutes. I don't know if I would have found it in 5 hours... good ol' Stu.

From here the directions tell you to continue up the same trail by constantly choosing the steepest way up... they call it "**Big Hell**"... and it is ... Alan led, followed by me, and then Stuart. (It took us almost two hours to climb the .9 mile hill with its 1600' of elevation change and no visible trail to speak of). Many times the only way to keep from falling backwards was to pull up on a tree or sapling, except oftentimes we found ourselves grabbing briars. Thank God for the gloves I brought with me. Alan was off-trail soon enough, and so Stu took the lead again. If Stuart had slipped, causing him to slide downward he would have taken me, and then we would have taken Alan down with us in a snowball of bloody bodies, leaves, briars, and small trees. And the worst part of THAT fiasco would have been the fact that we would have had to climb that particular section again. Luckily, it didn't happen, and by following the steepest ascent we ran right into book #10... *Walking with Lazarus*. Perfect.

From here, at the top of **Chimney Top Mountain**, Stu assured Alan and me that the course was easy to follow the rest of the way. Even though all hopes of finishing the loop within the time constraints were left

on Big Hell, Alan took off. (Alan was in great physical shape, having trained an average of 75 miles/week leading up to this day). "No way" was I going to leave Stu at this point. (I was somewhat concerned about Stuart's ability to make it back to camp... he was exhausted). I definitely had a new outlook on things and felt the euphoria of knowing that I was going to indeed finish a loop. The huge descent down "quad buster" didn't seem so bad. We stopped for about 15 minutes and stared at the almost full moon and I felt new life energize me. Being out in the middle of nowhere as the clock rolled past midnight only caused my spirits to soar.

It was with a measure of regret that we strolled into camp to find the awaiting Mr. Cantrell. We simultaneously touched the yellow gate and endured our bugling out of the 2007 Barkley. 17 hours and 31 minutes after we started.

My first-time worn virgin-white shirt and new rip-stop pants were completely covered in dirt and blood, but it was hard to keep the smile off my face as I showered and then enjoyed the best tasting burned on the outside/raw on the inside chicken I've ever eaten at 2 in the morning.

I frickin' loved it. I'm sorry that I won't appear in the official results anywhere because of my late time, but I do have all 10 pages, and I have seen the course; in fact I've seen 5 hours of it in the dark, so it was kind of like taking a second loop. I've seen the course several more times as I daydream and my mind frequently drifts back, back to Frozen Head. Am I surprised that a man like Stuart Gleman, a PhD in Physics, who currently lives in Florida and has worked for N.A.S.A. has chosen Wartburg, TN as a place to buy property? No. Am I ready to join him there as his neighbor. Not just yet... I haven't lost it that bad.

No way would I have finished had I not waited for people to come along to stay with. I learned a lot and hope I will be given the opportunity to attempt it again next year. I believe I'll get in since it was my first year, and I eventually finished without quitting. Next year I will do more climbing to prepare. The Stairmaster work helped my quads a lot. They never were a problem. My Montrail's (shoes) dug into my heels and that is the only thing that hurt... and I have the blister still on the back of my heel... a week later.

Now... how do I top this? Wellllllll I only finished ONE LOOP (20 miles)! This event known as The Barkley marathons is actually a 100 mile event and should include 5 loops. Loops 3 and 4 are done in reverse order, and if you make it to loop 5 you have your choice of direction. Since the race began in 1986 only 6 people have finished in the 60 hours allotted. (No one has finished in the current format, although Flyin' Brian Robinson of CA came within 1/2 loop this year). The course record is just less than 57 hours; held by the Cave Dog.

The Barkley Marathons course is a 20 mile loop containing 20,760' of elevation change per loop, with the average gradient being 19.66%. The course has .48 miles of paved roads, 1.92 miles of jeep road, 4.69 miles of candy ass trails, .4 miles of mixed trail, 8.43 miles of real trail (yeah, right), and 4.08 miles of 'what trail'

Steve Durbin
Runner #49
April 6, 2007





