

Pre-race

In the weeks leading up to the Barkley I eagerly anticipated the start of the race, but at the same time I had not been so nervous about something in years. The Barkley was more than just a race to me; it was personal. I grew up across the street from the course at the bottom of Chimney Top. My family had been on that land next to their namesake Kelley Mountain for 200 years (Kelly is spelled wrong on the maps). Those mountains are in my blood, and they were about to get a chance to reclaim some of it. Just as my background gave me enormous motivation, though, it also gave me trepidation. I could handle my own likely failure, but I was the home team and I wanted to represent the community well.



Family hike up Chimney Top when I was 4

My lack of experience also contributed to my unease. I couldn't help but get the impression before the race that many people just thought, "That's cute, the local boy is running." Two years earlier I had never raced further than a 10K that I did back in 2004. In those two years I gradually got myself into shape, working my marathon time down, putting in a lot of long distance hiking, and building my Barkley resume. I still did not have any ultra experience, though, and I only managed to get 10 weeks of real training in after taking time to recover from some nagging injuries.

In those 10 weeks I had trained harder than I imagined I would ever train for anything, though. I ran hills endlessly, poured over race reports, created a Google Earth course map, and planned every detail. I also had the advantage of being familiar with the terrain. I was motivated and determined. As ridiculous as it may sound, my goal was 5 loops. Whatever my chances actually were, I knew that going in thinking anything less would only ensure a poor performance.

The night before the race was cold. Between that and the anxiousness of waiting for the conch, I did not sleep well at all. To make matters worse, my calves had for some reason been twitching and even cramping all night. I had put in too much work and the race meant too much to me to let some cramps and a bad night's sleep be a problem, though. When the conch finally blew at 10:22 AM I got ready and made my way to the yellow gate.

Loop 1

My strategy was simple: stick with the Abbs. As we started up Bird Mountain, though, my worst fears were realized. My calves were as tight as bricks and every step felt like someone was hitting them with a hammer. What on earth could be wrong so early in the race? After all that training, had I messed up my taper that much? Was it nerves? I

knew I had two choices: slow down and ensure myself a loop or two, or keep pushing and hope that things would loosen up. I chose the latter without any hesitation and stayed with the lead pack up Bird Mountain.

By the time we reached the first book it was pretty clear that others had the same strategy as me. At one point Alan made a turn off the course to relieve himself and half the group initially followed him. It was not until book 2 that the strategy was really tested, though. We came down from Jury Ridge too far north and could not find the book. As we were searching, one group bolted down creek to the north, but at the same time Alan began to make his way south. The course continued south back up another climb, so if I went with the first group and it was the wrong direction then the consequences could be pretty bad. If I went with the Abbs then in the worst case we would lose a little more time searching. I did not want to risk a huge error that early so the choice was clear. Fortunately as we headed south Jamil came right down the ridge to the book. The rest of my race would have likely been vastly different if I had made the wrong choice at that juncture.

As we ascended from book 2 my calves began to feel better. We made our way over to the Garden Spot and then by the time we reached Stallion Mountain I felt like a brand new person. That would be the best that I felt for the remainder of the race. We descended Stallion with only a bit of trouble navigating through a thicket, got wet crossing New River, and continued across the highway towards the new book. There were 10 of us at the time and everyone seemed to be going strong.

Jamil and I separated from the group a little and did an excellent job navigating the new section of the course, but as we approached Rat Jaw the 10 person group formed at the front again. I knew Rat Jaw would be tough, but it was one of the few places on the course with a clear path. It was just mindless climbing, and I can handle mindless climbing. I surged to the front and as we approached the top I heard my family and friends up at the firetower. It was an absolutely incredible experience and I knew that even if I got injured and had to quit going back down Rat Jaw, that I at least had that. Any anxiety I felt from not wanting to let people down was gone.

Rat Jaw thinned the lead group down to 7 and the remainder of the loop was rather uneventful. We saw a pretty big hog heading down zipline to Beech Fork and got back to camp just before dark. The Abbs had been incredible navigators and they graciously agreed to regroup with us for loop 2.

At that point I was having a huge amount of fun. Running the course and not knowing exactly what lay ahead felt natural and fulfilling, a welcome change from mindlessly running on roads.



Top of Rat Jaw. Photo: Tyler Landrum



Starting back down Rat Jaw. Photo: John Price

Loop 2

The 7 of us that finished loop 1 together started loop 2 at about the same time. This loop would be completely in the dark. As we started up Bird Mountain I was already feeling nervous about our pace. We needed to be careful not to let the night loop be too slow if we had any hopes of doing 5 loops, but I was not yet confident enough in my ability to locate the books in the dark to try to separate from the group.

We maintained a steady pace to book 1, made our way down Checkmate Hill, and ascended back up Jury Ridge. As with loop 1, we had navigational problems getting to book 2. This time, we somehow dropped off the wrong side of the ridge and ended up right back on the trail we came up. We followed it back to the top and on the second attempt we took a bearing and hit the correct line. On the climb back up Jamil began to surge and separate from the group. I was extremely grateful for the guidance that Alan and Bev had provided, but I knew that I had to stay with Jamil.

The two of us reached the top of the climb and, energized by the new pace, I took off along the North Boundary Trail. Jamil had briefly stopped to get some food, so fortunately he did not get to see me as my burst of excitement brought me around the next corner and right into a tree root that sent me flying over a bank and into a couple of barrel rolls. I popped up and continued, no harm done. I was still having fun.

We continued without issue to the next 3 books and, with Jamil leading the way, we began our descent from Fyke's Peak on Stallion Mountain. As much as I love the land, I hate that section of the course. I don't even completely know why. It could be because it's a long stretch with no landmarks, or because I couldn't identify a clear best route, or maybe just because it was the farthest out, most isolated section of the course. In the dim moonlight, though, I could at least make out the silhouette of Big Fodderstack in the distance. I knew that if we at least stayed on course for the eastern shoulder of that mountain that we would be fine.

We came to the bottom at about the right spot, crossed 116, and headed towards the new book 6. This is where I made my biggest navigational mistake of the race. I took us on a line that brought us to the top of the ridge past the tree where the book was located. We continued along the ridge until Jamil realized we were too high. We went back down a little, but I couldn't believe we would have hit the ridgeline that far up. I had used the exact same creek as a reference that I used on loop 1 when I nailed the book. How could I be so far off this time? I turned around, headed back up the ridge, and followed it all the way to the top. No book. Feeling horrible about my mistake, I took off back down the ridge. It seemed that we went down way past where we were on loop 1, but still there was no book. Then, finally, there was the tree. We grabbed our pages and headed back up the ridge.

Although it didn't make up for the lost time, I nailed the descent to Raw Dog Falls and we continued flawlessly to Rat Jaw. I was again energized by the climb and pushed my way towards the top. As we neared the tower we heard a couple of cheers. By that time the windchill on the peak must have been at least in the teens and Jamil's immediate reaction was, "Are those people!?" At the top it was incredible to see that there were indeed two people huddled under a sleeping bag there to cheer us on. All the water at the tower was frozen solid. I had enough, but Jamil would need to refill at the creek flowing into the prison.

As we approached Indian Knob again I remembered laz's computer projection for me: "Meets the ghosts of his ancestors atop Indian Knob." I laughed and mentioned it to Jamil when we got to the book. Then just after we started down zipline we were startled by a loud, shrill noise that came from behind us back at the capstone. It could have easily been mistaken for a screech owl, but I think the more likely explanation is that laz's projection was correct!

We finished the rest of the loop without incident, arriving back at camp shortly after sunrise. I had now already been lucky enough to see both sunrise and sunset from Chimney Top. The morning light brought new energy and I was feeling great as I prepared for loop 3. Our loop 2 time was slower than I had hoped for, but it was done completely at night and I felt pretty good about it.

Loop 3

I had some issues with my contacts between loops and by the time I was ready to go I had lost about 5 minutes to Jamil. I absolutely did not want my first reverse loop to be solo so I frantically took off, still putting on gear as I went. I was moving fast on the initial climb to Chimney Top, completely focused on catching up. I kept thinking that I saw him out of the corner of my eye, but it would end up just being an odd-shaped rock or a blaze on a tree. Much to my relief, I finally spotted him as he crested Rough Ridge. I pushed the rest of the way to the top and caught him shortly afterward.

When we reached the ridgeline just before Chimney Top we began to pass the remaining runners finishing loop 2. One of them finished their climb as we were getting our pages and, while knowing that Jamil was on loop 3, immediately assumed that I was still on loop 2 and that they were catching up to me. Later on I asked Jamil if I should be insulted that that was the assumption. I don't recall his exact response, but all I could do was laugh about it. I was the dark horse and in reality it was the most likely explanation. By that point I had already run about twice as far and eight times as long (and who knows how many times as high) as I had in any race. What business exactly did I have in the lead group on loop 3?

The loop 2 runners were also helpful guides, though, and Dale was kind enough to re-direct us in the proper direction as we were about to shoot past the book at Beech Fork. That was the last of the people we would pass, though, and our fortunes hit a bit of a bump going up zipline. A rock slid out from under Jamil and he took a hard fall. One of his poles broke and he ended up with a nice bruise on his thigh and a gash on his forearm. After a few minutes he was back on his feet and we continued towards Indian Knob. We arrived at the top too far south, but we made our way to the correct capstone without much trouble.

When we began descending The Bad Thing our different navigational styles became clear. Before each climb or descent Jamil would find the exact spot to start from, take a bearing, and try to stay on the perfect line. My strategy was more of, "screw it, I see X landmark let's go." I figured that if I could recognize a point of reference and aim for a backstop that even if we were a little bit off the time lost would be less than the time spent trying to stay on the perfect line. The best method is probably somewhere in the middle (and closer to Jamil's than to mine).



Leaving on Loop 3. Photo: Andrew Woods

In any case, we arrived at the bottom of The Bad Thing slightly too far towards the front of the prison and made our way back around to the book. When going through the prison tunnel in the other direction I had been climbing out of the ventilation shaft to avoid getting my feet wet. Climbing back down seemed a bit more daunting, but I hate getting wet feet. Fortunately I made it down without issue and we crossed under the prison. Our first full climb of Rat Jaw all the way from the bottom awaited.



Starting down Rat Jaw, Loop 3. Photo: Leon Lutz

I again felt strong going up Rat Jaw. The weather had also gotten somewhat warm for the first time and the water at the top was unfrozen. That turned out to be the beginning of the end for me, though. We went down and picked up the next book and then somewhere on the next climb my energy level plummeted. My legs still felt great, but I began feeling tired, unmotivated, and out of it. I realized that I had been gradually reducing my food intake as my stomach felt more and more unwilling to accept it. I tried to start eating more, but all I had had with me the entire race were energy bars and gels. At that point food in general sounded good, but just the thought of another energy bar made me nauseous.

This energy drain unfortunately occurred near the start of my least favorite part of the course: Stallion Mountain. I hate you so much Stallion Mountain. Going up was even worse, as I had no point of reference to focus on and the climb seemed to never end. The unthinkable thought began to creep into my head: I might quit after this loop. I couldn't believe I was thinking that. There's no way I would willingly quit! Still, though, the thought lingered.

When we finally reached Fyke's Peak I managed to get another energy bar down. At that point it may have been too late for my body to recover, but I did at least get renewed resolve. I continued on, more determined than ever. I began chanting things to myself and making up song lyrics (Chimney Top, you'll always be, home sweet home to meeee), anything to stay alert. Jamil may have thought he was with a crazy person, as I ran along continuously mumbling to myself.

At Garden Spot I managed to down a gel, but that would be the last of any food that I would get down. My stomach was on lockdown and the thought of any food at all made me nauseous. Gradually I began to fade again. We made our way down to book 2 and the climb back up seemed to last forever. There was only one climb left, though. Surely I could make it and then recharge for a bit in camp.

Unfortunately for me, Checkmate Hill was accurately named. I managed to stay on Jamil's heels during most of the climb, but I was beginning to feel light-headed and dizzy. My energy stores were completely gone and I was

somehow just going through the motions to get to the top. I was still with Jamil when we reached the book. I removed my page and then stood there for a minute, unable to focus or find the energy to move again. My motivation ended up coming in the form of a strong, cold wind. I knew that I either had to get off the ridge or get out my warm gear. Somehow the latter option seemed like it was the most trouble so I began making my way through Fangorn Forest towards the trail. The unthinkable thought had crept back into my head, though, and I would not be able to push it aside again.

I stumbled down Bird Mountain, desperately just wanting to reach camp before dark (because again, taking something out of my pack like my headlamp somehow seemed like way too much effort). I approached the yellow gate in shambles. The cheers were amazing, but they belied the fact that I did not think I could go on. Once that thought enters your head at camp it is extremely difficult to drive it back out. People sprang into action, doing everything they could to help me get my energy back. I could not eat, so I tried to sleep. After I slept, I still could not eat. My legs had strength left, but I was completely out of fuel and my stomach was unwilling to accept any more. By that point Jamil had started loop 4 and the clock was quickly ticking towards 36 hours.



End of Loop 3

I probably could have started the loop to see if my body would recover some. I may have even gotten a few pages. All I could tell myself at the time, though, was that there was no way I could continue on a 5 loop pace. To me doing a partial loop 4 was not worth it. If I had absolutely no chance at 5 I saw no point in continuing. I slowly made my way back to the gate where I was tapped out in defeat.

Post-race

I went home and after a few hours of sleep my appetite was restored. I went to the kitchen and ate everything in sight. After another nap I went back to the park to wait on Jamil to return. I was happy and disappointed at the same time. I could not believe that I had quit with time on the clock, but I realistically knew that I had made the right choice and I was proud of my accomplishment. My legs were fine and I even went for a short run, but my fueling strategy had doomed me from the start. I did not have the ultra experience to know that you can't live off of bars and gels for that long.



Tapping out Dale and Toshi. Photo: Jessi Kelly

It was great to talk to the people still in camp as we waited. I even got to tap a few people out. I really enjoyed the Barkley community and can honestly say that the entire experience was incredibly fun and rewarding. It fully met my expectations of being the ultimate challenge: something that allowed me to find, test, and expand my limits. What I was not completely expecting, though, was how fulfilling the actual race itself was. At other races the fulfillment comes from finishing, getting a certain time, winning prizes, etc. At Barkley there was no finish, there were no prizes, and I honestly can't even tell you what my time was at when I DNF'd. Granted I haven't done any other ultras or even any other trail races so I can't make many fair comparisons, but I got so much more out of Barkley than any other race I've done.

I've seen a lot of people say that they go to Barkley to be crushed, humiliated, etc. I did not go to Barkley for any of those things. Sure I realized that I might end up broken and beat, but I knew that I would give it my best and I would come out with a better measure of who I am and what I'm capable of. There is nothing humiliating about that to me at all. I'm proud of putting it all out there, even though in the end that wasn't enough.

Just spending the time out in the mountains was incredible (with the exception of Stallion Mountain). I feel like I used to take the area for granted and I never fully appreciated its beauty and its unique character until I left. Even though I go back to the area often, it was being "out there" that really made me feel like I was home. Something about running through the woods without knowing exactly what lay ahead or what conditions might be encountered just felt completely natural. It was the way that running should feel, as opposed to going through the motions of running a precisely prescribed asphalt route where everything is known in advance.

I came to the Barkley expecting a challenge, which I clearly got, but it ended up being much more about the experience than the result. I had an enormous amount of fun and I learned more than I ever thought I would. Obviously I learned a lot about running ultras but there were also many broader lessons: always break seemingly insurmountable tasks up into small manageable ones, don't focus so much on major obstacles that you get derailed by small ones, always set stretch goals, and the list goes on. Above all, when my son inevitably decides one day that he wants to live off of candy bars I'll be able to confidently say, "No that doesn't work. I tried it once."

I am extremely grateful for all of my friends and family who helped me so much. In particular, my wife Jessi was absolutely unbelievable in supporting me as I trained for the race and my dad was a tremendous help in preparing. I also owe a thank you to all the veterans who gave me so much advice and guidance before, during, and after the race, including Ed Furtaw, Jodi Isenor, Julian Jameson, John Fegyveresi, Alan and Bev Abbs, and Jamil Coury.