

Checkmate, Part V

Holdaway, 2016 Barkley Marathons Race Report



Ty, Jason, and I were about half way up Jaque Mate Ridge on Loop Three when the 40 hour Fun Run time limit expired. The Barkley made its final move, and the match was over. There was nowhere left to maneuver in order to survive. 40 hours had elapsed--no sleep, no significant pauses in movement, 38 pages collected, and just a few painful feet to climb to collect the 39th and final page and make the downhill cruise to Big Cove Campground and success at the Yellow Gate. 5.20833%. Two hours and five minutes. That's how much over the Fun Run time limit we were when we arrived at the Yellow Gate with our 39 pages. Although the result was more than 5 hours better than my previous year's result, the reality was that this year's weather was better, my navigation was, although not flawless, lacking any of the major time-draining mistakes that riddled my prior attempt, and I had significantly reduced my inter-loop turnaround times. With no glaring problems to point to, the obvious conclusion seemed to be that I was not capable of completing a Fun Run no matter what. The result of the prior two days was an exhausted, empty, and unfortunately familiar feeling of tremendous disappointment. Checkmate. Again.

My training leading up to Fool's Weekend had gone acceptably well. I had suffered major ankle and knee injuries during the preceding year, but I felt that I had managed to just fit things back into the box in time enough to have a sporting chance for at least a Fun Run finish. In the weeks prior to the race, I had also maintained a focus on getting down to race weight. Occasionally hefting one of my wife's 5 pound exercise barbells reminded me just how heavy only 5 pounds really was and provided me with the motivation to shed a few excess pounds before the race, and I was close to

my weight for previous years. I continued to train with repeat climbs of about 285 feet in the stairwell of my São Paulo apartment building while carrying a pack loaded with a few kilos of beans and rice to simulate the pack weight I would carry during the race. I eased up on the downward elements of these repeats since I had injured both my ankle and knee by recklessly running down the stairs. A lack of post run soreness and feeling strong on the tough Barkley climbs once again validated to me that my stairwell training had served me well in preparing for the Barkley. In fact, as my time in Brazil comes to conclusion over the next couple of years and I contemplate moving back to Michigan, I am really not sure how I could train effectively without my beloved 285 foot friend. We've definitely spent many solitary hours together throughout my time here.

Prior to the race, I enjoyed catching up with Barkley and Vol State acquaintances and meeting some of the new and former Barkley runners whom I didn't know. Eric and his daughter, Madeline, drove down from Michigan to crew for me, and it was really great to see them. Eric and I have enjoyed annual ultrarunning adventures each year that I have been living in Brazil, and so this kept our streak alive, although I am sure that Eric would have preferred to have been Out There as well. Eric saved me from an equipment failure when, during my final preparations, my CamelBak bladder sprung a leak and he graciously loaned me one of his, saving me from a stressful last minute Friday evening trip to hunt down a replacement. Niki also took the time to patiently explain to me the futility of pursuing the impossible. From the dull look on my face, I obviously didn't get it.



It was frustrating waiting around for Conch to blow. Although I felt like I had rested well the night before, I felt that the late start last year had wreaked havoc on my Loop Two and Loop Three. At the lighting of the

cigarette, the entire field literally took off at a brisk run up the road toward the Bird Mountain Trail. I succumbed to the peer pressure and ran as well, all the while thinking how absolutely absurd and unjustifiable the excess energy expenditure was. But this was an opportunity to feel in control of one's own destiny for a few brief moments, and that was worth whatever the cost was since I could safely assume that as the clock marched on, my destiny was going to feel increasingly out of my own control. And it did.

As we ascended Bird Mountain I curiously observed that I seemed to be in about 31st place since I could count nine runners behind me on the switchbacks below. In past years I had been firmly in the upper half of the field during this early stage. But I knew my effort and pace were similar to previous years so I assumed that either this year's field was extremely fit, a distinct possibility given the recent increased visibility of and interest in the race, or that many extremely insane runners were headed for spectacular blow-ups. I guessed it was probably a combination of the two factors.

It was on the ascent back to the Candy trail from Book Two that I began to ever so slowly creep past a few other runners. This was the first real Barkley climb of the course, and I was relieved to find that although I didn't feel like I was killing it, I didn't feel like it was killing me. From there, I stayed more or less near to Brad B., who seemed to be moving strongly, to the Garden Spot. At the descent to Barley Mouth Branch I saw John and assumed that he must have had some route finding difficulties in order for us to be anywhere near each other. John then quickly disappeared moving in his characteristically strong style. On the jeep road to Bobcat Rock, I found a deer antler lying in the road, which I learned later in the loop in talking with Erik, he had found and placed there. I tucked the antler in the back of my pack realizing that since I would never receive a belt buckle or finisher's medal at the Barkley, I would have to find my own award if I wanted one. At least I would leave Frozen Head with something, and I knew my son would enjoy the antler if the Brazilian customs agents were not paying attention, and as usual, they were not.



The rest of Loop One progressed fairly uneventfully as I kept to the habit of meticulously noting my time splits at each collected page so that I could compare my paces to last year and in future loops of this race I could benchmark my paces as well (a practice I learned from watching Frozen Ed previously). Shortly after crossing the New River and finding the book in the new location, I hiked for a while with Erik, Ty, and Jason. Erik's shorts were soaked in blood due to a deep cut he had sustained in a fall, but he and the others were all hiking very strongly. I kept plodding ahead, focusing on one book at a time, and noticed that my Loop One splits were almost identical to last year, which I considered a good sign since my previous Loop One had been a strong one for me. I cruised into Big Cove Campground at about the same time as Michiel, and unlike prior years, I was planning on a very quick turnaround to preserve maximum time for being Out There. Feeling slightly dehydrated and with my stomach slightly on edge, I managed a 24 minute turnaround, about half of the time I took the previous year after Loop One.

As I left into the darkness of the night on Loop Two, I was happy to see a headlamp just ahead near the entrance to the Bird Mountain Trail. It was Michiel. We were both glad for the company given the nighttime, and we set off together. After a couple of pages I began to feel that we were moving too slowly, but at the same time I kind of felt that if I pushed the pace too much I might not be able to take calories in, so we kept moving although I was increasingly worried that the clock was draining too quickly. I knew that a solid Loop Two was necessary for a Fun Run finish. I had to hang on and make it through the night without getting too cold, too lost, too tired, or moving too slowly. All seemed to be alright except for the part about moving too slowly, and that proved to be my Loop Two Achilles heel.

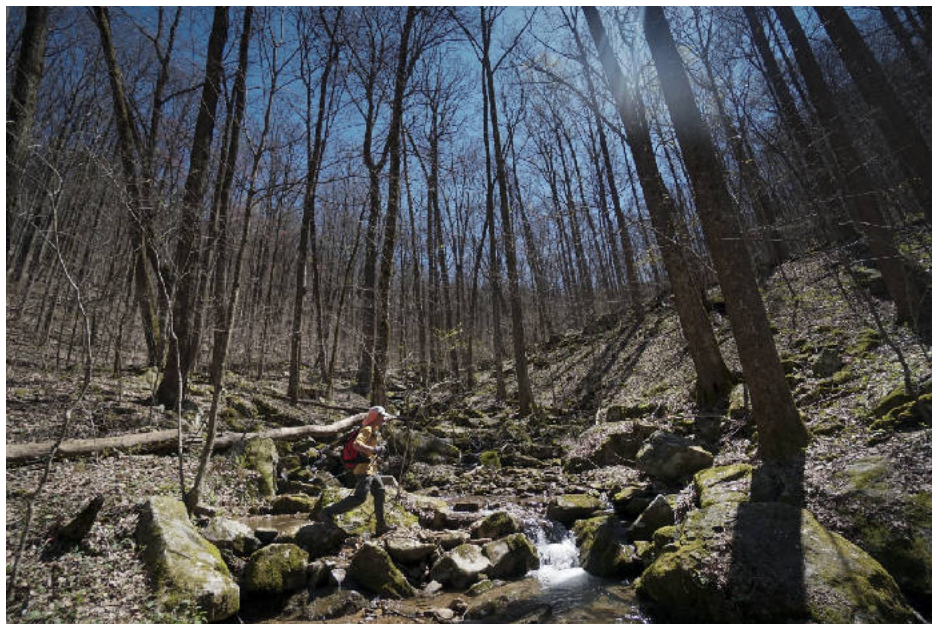
Just after crossing the New River and collecting the next book, we noticed three headlamps ahead of us. It was Brad C., Kimberly, and Starchy looking for the book on their Loop One. Michiel pointed them in the right direction and we continued on our way. I really can't remember much more from Loop Two but at this point I really started to work through the Fun Run math, and I knew that, just like the prior year, this loop had cost me dearly in terms of the clock. Everything had taken a lot of time, even though I never stopped moving and did not make any large navigational mistakes. Counter to my perceptions, I was just moving very slowly. Maybe I went out too hard on Loop One. Maybe the late start contributed again. I had consciously regulated my effort for some of the loop to preserve my stomach—perhaps that was too conservative of an approach and would cost me my race. Loop Two had taken me about 14:40 since departure from the Yellow Gate, about 4 hours more than Loop One. I knew by the time that I arrived at the Yellow Gate that Loop Three had to be faster than Loop Two if

I was to have a Fun Run. But I also knew that I would have close to fourteen and a half hours if I could pull a quick turn around. It still seemed definitely doable if I didn't slow down anymore and could navigate the backwards direction without any major problems.

I swapped CamelBak bladders, restocked my food, grabbed a handful of Subway sandwich, and collected my new race bib. An 11 minute turnaround, that was a good start and a new personal benchmark.



I was guardedly optimistic and relieved to walk on the Candy trails for a while. I was the fourth runner to start Loop Three, but I was still slightly behind my previous year's pace. Dan, the photographer from the Chattanooga Times Free Press, hiked with me all the way to Chimney Top, snapping photos occasionally along the way, including the one below.



It was nice to have some company and we talked about his entry into trail running. He was training for his first 50K and the day prior had completed a 20 mile/4.5 hour trail run. It should have registered to me as a red flag that he was so easily keeping up with me, but I don't think I was capable of very complicated analytics at this point. Soon after I began the loop it was great to see Ty, Jason, Jennilyn, and Michiel finishing their Loop Twos, and I hoped that they would all soon catch me so that we could work together for a Fun Run finish.

In spite of trying to follow a good bearing down Big Hell, just like last year I bungled the line of descent and had to track back up stream to the correct confluence, losing several minutes. Shortly after collecting my book, I saw Brad C., Kimberly, and Starchy off in the distance and I called to Brad. They were soldiering on towards the completion of Loop One. I was amazed and inspired by their persistence and determination. As I began to ascend the Zip Line, I became confused and wasn't really sure where to ascend. I spotted Jason and Ty somewhat above me and we made our way together to the top, where Ty located the Eye. We began to work from book to book, occasionally discussing and speculating about whether we had enough time to complete the Fun Run and if so, what we had to do in order to do it. We were more or less together until the top of the Fire Tower, where I began to lag behind. I could feel that I had large blisters on the sides of my heels and there was also a fair amount of pain and discomfort under my big toes. After collecting my Braille page and starting down Rat Jaw, I could see that Ty and Jason were completely out of sight. I expected that I had seen them for the last time.

I continued moving, but the descents were increasingly painful and the ascents were amazingly steep and interminable. I was using both of my trekking poles to the max, and I was glad that I had them. Both Brad B. and Jason had suffered broken trekking poles and I was praying that the same would not happen to me because I was using them so heavily. I finally made it to the road near Armes Gap and found Ty and Jason waiting for me, a surprise for which I was very grateful. We continued on, ruminating intermittently on the math as we crossed the New River and ascended Stallion Mountain, now in the darkness of our second night in the race. According to my calculations, we seemed to have enough time if only we could keep moving. We finally made it to the Garden Spot with about 4 and a half hours left for a Fun Run finish. Compared to our Loop One splits, it appeared that we had an extra hour. However, in hindsight and as now seems so obvious, I realize that I should have been comparing the remaining time to my Loop Two split, which would have indicated that we were about an hour behind schedule. As we continued on, we hit the creek

on the descent to Book Two well to the west of the confluence and after considerable bushwhacking, boulder hopping, and precious lost minutes we finally made it to the book.

It was here that Jason verbalized what my mind was incapable of calculating—that there was no way we were going to finish in 40 hours given the rate at which we were moving. We had two hours left, but Jason said it would probably take us 4 hours to get back to the campground. How could that be? I had made it all the way to the Garden Spot in just over three hours in Loop One. Two hours was such a long time, wasn't it? That's enough time for many people to easily run a half-marathon or more. But the reality was that we had two big, hairy, off-trail, true-Barkley ascents and two Candy trail descents to make. Even in my foggy state of mind I could work out that 2 hours would never be sufficient to do that. And there it was. Again. After 38 hours of constant, unceasing exertion and physically and mentally demanding and punishing effort, the possibility for a Fun Run finish had evaporated in a mere moment. That possibility and promise had been with me for 38 hours and then it was gone in an instant. Unbelievable. But it was real, it had happened, and that is what it was. Once again, I felt doomed to failure at the Barkley, although this time I came tantalizingly close to a success that was still seemingly unattainable.

Given now certain failure, discussion of a range of possible alternatives ensued. A brief nap was suggested, attractive for sure given that I hadn't slept at all, and I don't believe that Ty or Jason had either. Another suggestion was to scrap collection of the final page and take the Candy trails back to the campground—what was the point of the last book now? Jason's clear thinking prevailed as he declared he would only leave the mountain with the last page in hand. So we resumed our efforts with Ty climbing like a mad man, far above Jason and myself for most of the climbs. I marveled at his climbing strength at this point in the Barkley. The ascents of both Jury Ridge and Jaque Mate Ridge blew my mind—we seemed to climb endlessly almost straight up, with hands and arms used as much or more than feet and legs. I then realized that the true challenge of the Barkley will probably never be captured in photographic imagery, both because photographers will probably never make it any of those many climbs that fellow Barkers know I am referring to, and also because, if they did, somehow the true relief and gradients of those climbs would never really be adequately portrayed in pictures.

We were about half way up Jaque Mate Ridge, the final big climb on Loop Three, when the 40 hour Fun Run time limit expired. The Barkley made its final move, and the match was over. There was nowhere left to maneuver in order to survive. 40 hours had elapsed--no sleep, no

significant pauses in movement, 38 pages collected, and just a few painful feet to climb to collect the 39th and final page and make the downhill cruise to Big Cove Campground and success at the Yellow Gate. 5.20833%. Two hours and five minutes. That's how much over the Fun Run time limit we were when we arrived at the Yellow Gate with our 39 pages. Checkmate. Again.



So why the smile given the result? First, because it was over. There is always an overwhelming sense of relief when the Barkley is over, no matter what the outcome. I had spent almost an entire three loops believing that I would achieve a Fun Run finish, and then for the last few hours when it became apparent that that would not happen, I pondered the idea that this would be my last attempt. No big mistakes I thought, I just couldn't do it. But by the time I arrived at the Yellow Gate it was enough for me to enjoy what the course had given me. Although less than I wanted, I was satisfied that I had fought a good fight and given a good effort. An effort of which, although not satisfied, I was proud.

Over the days following the race, as I have reflected on the outcome, I have identified a myriad of things that I could have done differently or better: flavor of hydration drink, types of food, lighting, navigational improvements, and training, pacing, and overall sense of urgency on Loops Two and Three--easily things with both the possibility and even the probability of yielding a 5% or greater improvement. I would still like my mother to have the joy and satisfaction of having her son be at least a Fun Run finisher, but unsurprisingly #noshocktotheworld she will have to continue waiting, for how long no one knows but many might imagine. . .