

Barkley 2016

John Kelly

Pre-race

I arrived at Frozen Head two days before the race with a great deal of optimism. The weather looked perfect, I had trained well, and I knew that a solid group of veterans would be there including Jared Campbell. I also felt great about course navigation. I could visualize in my head the route to almost every book. The descent to book 2 was a little hazy for me, but I would assuredly still be with a group during that portion on the first loop. Otherwise I felt I could lead or go it alone if necessary, something I was never quite confident enough to do the previous year. I wanted 5 loops, and I felt good about my chances.

I also had the good fortune of having Julian Jamison come down to crew for me. It was an enormous boost of confidence just having him there and it was also a huge relief for my wife Jessi, who had done so much during training and now had one less thing to worry about at the race. Julian and I had already discussed the strategy; everything was laid out and as soon as the race started he would switch into the drill sergeant that I would need. There would be no quitting in camp, not this year. My extremely supportive family would be there again, but Julian's experience and willingness to do what needs to be done would be invaluable.

Most of us expected an early start after last year's 11:22 AM start. I was able to get everything done and get into bed shortly after 8, knowing the conch could sound in just a few hours. Unlike last year I was not rushing at the last minute to prepare things, I was not freezing cold all night, and I didn't have any cramping muscles or anxiousness arising from fearfully awaiting the unknowns of Barkley. No, I felt good. I just couldn't sleep. I periodically dozed off for short segments throughout the night, interrupted by commotion in camp and by my own anticipation of the conch. When it finally sounded at around 9:43 AM, I had been in bed for over 12 hours and estimated I had gotten maybe 3 hours of sleep. For most races I wouldn't worry much about the night before the race, but given that I planned on being out there for close to 60 hours I would have really liked to have started with a better night's sleep.

Loop 1

The Innocent Beginning

I took off with Jared up Bird Mountain. Jared is a bit of a hero of mine, and a huge inspiration for me in taking up ultrarunning. I had been looking forward to the opportunity to spend a couple of days with him nearly as much as the race itself. We made great time up Bird, arriving at the Cumberland Trail intersection in just under half an hour. I believe we were in a group of six at the time: Jared, myself, AT, Gary, Adam, and Dom.

After book 1 Jared actually asked if he could follow me down Checkmate. I eagerly agreed, grabbed a bearing, and took off down the hill. I nailed that descent as well as any descent can be nailed at Barkley, passing right through the Flume of Doom and arriving at the corner of the park at the bottom. With a burst of confidence, I continued leading up Jury Ridge. My plan had been to follow at least until book 2, but I felt great and forged ahead.

I led us off of Jury Ridge and down Hiram's Vertical Smile. At some point I cut a bit lower than the group to go around a downed tree. They were still right next to me, though, and I took a line that would put me back with the group just a little further down the hill. At some point as I sped along my path I looked over to check my progress. As soon as I did, it happened. Something that will forever live in my nightmares as The Barkley Garrote.

The Barkley Garrote

A giant briar reached out and grabbed me right across the neck. I yelled in pain as I was flung violently to the ground. It took me a second to realize what had happened. Even as I write this now, I can feel my heart beginning to race. I struggled to free myself from the vine, and by the time I got back to my feet there was no one in sight. Blood oozed down my neck as I assessed the situation. I thought I had been on a good line, but was I? The confusion and doubt set in as I decided to make a sharp left turn to find the exact path the rest of the group had taken. I came to the spur I believed them to have been on and started back down, hoping to catch them as they stopped at the book for their pages.



*My neck more than 4 days
after The Barkley Garrote*

As I arrived at the bottom, nothing looked familiar. I couldn't hear the creek, and I didn't even see the gas well that would normally serve as an indicator that I had come too far north. Maybe I hadn't gone far enough left and had somehow arrived at a small flat spot before the actual bottom of the descent. I veered left again and after just a little while I could hear the creek. I rushed over to it, expecting to be able to follow it shortly to the book.

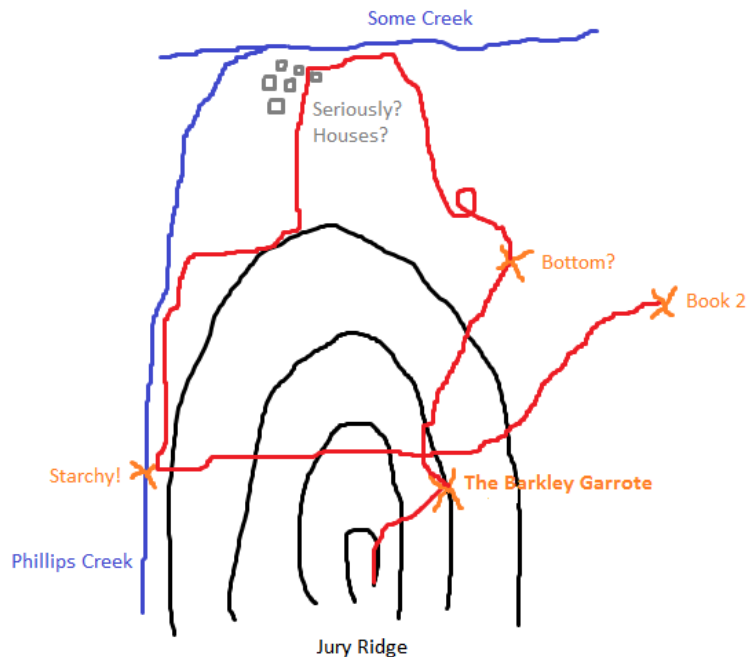
When I came to the creek, nothing was right. I saw a power line on the other side and a dirt road. Neither of these belonged. I turned around and found myself standing next to what seemed to be an abandoned settlement. Foundations of old houses were scattered through the forest. Panic began to sink in. Had all of my training and preparation come down to this? Was my pursuit of 5 loops over after just a single book?

Deep inside I knew that this was an integral part of the Barkley experience: being lost, alone, and panic-stricken. I had avoided it the previous year and it just now happened to be my time. I would make it through this, and would be better for it. I collected myself and tried to take a bearing. But I had absolutely no idea which way the book was! I felt pretty confident it wasn't north, but otherwise I was clueless. I decided to head back south towards the mountain and follow the base of it until I came to something I recognized.

Eventually I heard the roar of another creek. That must be it! I ran that way and started heading up the creek looking for familiar terrain. Finally, I saw another runner and my spirits soared knowing I must be close. It was Starchy Grant, the savior of my race. I eagerly ran up to him asking if he was looking for book

2. The response was not what I wanted to hear: he had gone the wrong way down Checkmate and had not started up Jury Ridge yet. This was Phillips Creek.

I felt a pang of panic sharply strike me again. There was no time to dwell on it, though. I finally had a point of reference thanks to Starchy and I bolted back up what I knew to be Jury Ridge. My legs worked furiously as I went up and over the top. I rejoined Hiram's Vertical Smile and took a perfect line back down. There I was, standing at book 2 over an hour after I should have gotten my page. Jared and the lead group were surely past the Garden Spot and heading out Stallion Mountain by now.



Artist's rendition of my path to book 2. Best viewed while humming The Benny Hill Theme to yourself.

The Recovery

I started up Hillpocalypse with a steely resolve. Others before me had gotten lost for longer. I could still do this. I flew up the hill, rejoined the Boundary Trail, and set off for book 3. I'm continually working my way up through the field as I do. "Got lost going to book 2, need to catch up, sorry gotta go, good luck." I took a less than an optimal line coming back down from book 3, but at this point my focus was on moving forward and moving forward quickly.

I went in and out of the Garden Spot with an assist from Brad Bishop, grabbed some much-needed water, and took off down Stallion Mountain. As I started down Leonard's Buttslide I met John Fegyveresi on his way back up. Seeing him was a tremendous boost, as I knew now that I was not completely out of it. My Rat Jaw partner from the previous year, Georg Kunzfeld, was also on his way back up with a small group.

I grabbed my Stallion pages and headed down towards the New River crossing. I came down slightly too far west, but found a downed tree to cross the river and kept steadily moving. Then I came to the new book, which replaced last year's new book. At least I came to where I thought it would be. "A dead tree about 3/4 of the way up the hill." Thanks laz, that really narrows it down. After a bit of searching, another group caught up to me. At Georg's suggestion we switched our search to a different ridge, and after checking another half dozen or so dead trees I finally found the right one about 20 minutes after my search began. I shouted the location to the group and then took off back along the course.

Finally, I reached my favorite part of the course: Rat Jaw. I knew exactly where I was going and exactly how to get there. My legs began driving steadily up the hill, up the three tough initial pitches, around the bend, and then up through the high wall. As I approached the top Fegy passed me again on his way back down, offering some words of encouragement as he flew by. I passed one more runner at the top and got the long-awaited shot of energy from my friends and family who had been waiting.



Final pitch on Rat Jaw. Photo: John Price

It was not where I wanted to be, but I was still in it. I found out that Fegy was the only remaining runner between me and the lead group and I was hardly an hour behind. After the garrote and my ensuing debacle, I had actually been slowly gaining time back. I shot down Rat Jaw and caught Fegy at the prison. We traversed the tunnel together, shared some much needed conversation, and started up The Bad Thing.

When we hit Razor Ridge I again began to push. I nailed Indian Knob, took a good line down Zipline, and pressed on up Chimney Top. Mentally, I really wanted to finish the loop in under 9 hours. I touched the yellow gate in 8:58.

Loop 2

The transition to loop 2 was smooth and efficient. I ate well, Julian assured me I was still alright on time, and after some minor foot taping I was headed back to the gate as the sun began to go down. I started up Bird Mountain knowing that a finish was still within my grasp. I just couldn't afford any more big mistakes. My navigation on loop 1 had not only cost me an enormous amount of time, it had cost me a significant amount of energy in covering the extra terrain and trying to catch up.

I reached book 1 in good time, took a good but not perfect line down Checkmate, and soon found myself standing at the descent to book 2. This time I moved steadily forward, periodically checking my bearings and was able to remain focused on finding the book rather than trying to reconnect with a group. Despite the careful steady progress things were still a bit off when I arrived at the bottom. Anxiousness momentarily came over me, but after a little bit of looking around I saw the road to the gas well and knew

exactly where I was. I made my way over to the book, having lost a decent chunk of time but avoiding the disaster of the previous loop.

As I started up Hillpocalypse a headlamp shown from my right and I heard a voice yelling out to me. Strongly empathetic with their plight, I waited a moment for the headlamp to make its way over to me. It was AT, still looking for book 2. I was still not far from it and I pointed him down in the right direction before continuing up the hill. Near the top I came across Rhonda, a legally blind runner, who had just completed the remarkable achievement of making it down Checkmate and Hiram's Vertical Smile and back up Hillpocalypse. The thought of navigating that treacherous terrain with no sight, even with a guide runner, was something I could not even comprehend. To boot, she probably did better going down Hiram's than I had on loop 1.

I continued along past Garden Spot and out Stallion Mountain without incident. Although I had originally planned to stay with Jared as long as possible and I realized the extraordinary difficulties of going it alone, I was also enjoying the experience. It was just me and the course at night in the beautiful mountains of Frozen Head. I hadn't been worrying about anyone or anything but myself and the clock. I was completely in control of my own race. If I wanted to stop and tighten my shoes, I could. If I wanted to take my time crossing a stream to avoid wet feet, I could. Ultimately I could do anything I felt would be beneficial to my own race without having to worry about getting separated from or affecting the race of anyone else.

As I started down Leonard's Buttslide I saw a few headlamps near the bottom. Surely I had not managed to catch the lead group had I? I made my way down and found Starchy, Brad, and Kim on loop 1 looking for the book. I led them right past it, too far down the hill, and then turned back up to find the book. I shouted to them hoping that they could hear me over the roar of the New River in the distance, but I had to continue on. They did find it and continued on as well, showing unbelievable determination in finishing their loop and coming away from the race with the type of pure achievement that everyone should strive for in sports.

I forged ahead, making it up and down Stallion, over the New River (with wet feet this time), to the new book, past the Rusty Barrel, up and down Rat Jaw, and up to Indian Knob all without incident. My confidence was at a high point, my body felt great, and I was still eating well. My path was slightly off going down Zipline, but nothing too major.

The entire time going up to Chimney Top and then back down the other side I kept expecting Jared and Gary to pass me at any moment coming in the opposite direction on their loop 3. I crested Rough Ridge, though, and they were still nowhere in sight. Halfway down to camp we finally passed each other. I was still gaining and wasn't all that far behind! I hurried down to the gate, touching it in just under 11 hours as the new day began. It was definitely slower than I had hoped for, but my hopes of a finish still lived.

Loop 3

Julian and my family quickly got me back out for my first reverse loop. I quickly made my way up to Chimney Top and headed back down. This was a dangerous descent, as getting on the wrong spur could result in arriving at the bottom extremely far off course. I decided to play it safe and erred on the side of



Getting ready for loop 3. Photo: Tyler Landrum

hitting the creek too far upstream so that I could follow the spur next to it the rest of the way down. Fortunately I was not too far off, and grabbed the Beech Tree page without losing much time.

My ascent up Zipline was a bit irregular, crossing the creek in the wrong place before zig zagging up the hill a bit to find the correct route. It was quite comforting when I crossed paths with Dale Holdaway on his way down. He was actually the only loop 2 runner that I saw the entire time. On the way down from Indian Knob I completely missed Razor Ridge. This wasn't a huge problem, as almost any route down puts you out somewhere near the prison, but it was yet another small mistake. Small mistakes can greatly add up over the course of 5 loops.

I mostly proceeded without incident for the next few hours. I made a strong push on my first full ascent of Rat Jaw, took a good but not great line up Stallion, followed the wrong creek up from the Jeep road after Leonard's Buttslide but corrected myself fairly quickly, and arrived at Garden Spot in what I thought was a fairly decent time. I felt pretty good about the remaining books, but it wasn't long until I found myself headed up the wrong hill towards book 3. I had left the boundary trail too soon and ended up on the wrong side of Emory Gap, near Squire (Square) Knob. I realized my mistake and lamented the extra elevation I would have to do as a result. By the time I made it over to the book I had lost a significant chunk of time and was thankful I had just again avoided the full catastrophe of loop 1. As laz has frequently remarked, knowing the general terrain and layout of the park had saved me from a much bigger mistake.

I continued on, finally nailing book 2. As I remembered from last year, going up Checkmate was awful. This time when I made it to the top, though, I was still feeling pretty good (all things considered). I had continued to eat well from the usual items plus a buffet of homemade snacks made by Jessi, my mom, and my aunt. I had adopted a strategy of forcing myself to eat off of a timer on my watch, and each time eating the least appealing item that I could. I wanted to save the better options for when they were the only tolerable items left.

I headed down to camp and touched the yellow gate in about 12 hours. It was much slower than I had hoped for, due to a few navigational mistakes combined with a slightly slower pace. I had wanted to get back to camp, out quickly and up Zipline during daylight. That was no longer possible, but Julian and Fegy assured me I still had time for a finish. I propped my feet up and rested for a bit, but did not have the luxury of sleeping like Jared and Gary were when I arrived in camp. Despite my navigational blunders, I had still been keeping pace with them since my journey following the garrote. In hindsight I probably should have moved more quickly and gotten back to the gate to head out with them. It would have likely saved me some further costly navigational mistakes.

At the time, though, a little bit of rest seemed valuable. My body was starting to get some significant aches and pains and my stomach was not responding to many of my usual food options. Fortunately Fegy flashed a pair of Nutty Bars in front of me and I think I reacted the way a starving dog would to a steak. Another pair of those went in my pack as I made my way back to the gate to go where I had not been before.



Heading off into the unknown of Loop 4. Photo: Leon Lutz

Loop 4

I was going past 36 hours without sleep as I started loop 4, and closer to 60 hours since an actual solid night's sleep. Still, though, I felt alert. I had not taken any caffeine yet and I felt it would have taken me too long to fall asleep between loops to get anything worthwhile out of it. I started towards Chimney Top, working out some of my soreness as I looked for Jared and Gary's headlamps up above. I'm still not sure if I ever saw them. The mountains are so steep and so dark in most places that it's difficult to tell whether a light up above is a headlamp or a star in the sky.

Rather than trust my own judgement and compass going down to the Beech Tree I decided to rely on what seemed to be a good distinguishable path from previous loops. As I approached the bottom, though, I realized that it was headed in the worst direction possible: too far south and away from the creek. I quickly corrected my course and headed towards the creek, but at this point I was already past the Beech Tree. It was incredibly dark, and there were few visible landmarks to go by. I again relied on my knowledge of the terrain and began heading in a direction that I knew would at least lead me to something that I would recognize. Eventually, I came to one of the two creeks that flow to the Beech Tree and followed it back down. I had again averted a major disaster, but the clock was ticking as mistakes kept chipping away at my time buffer.

Unfortunately, my night-time reverse loop had just begun. I headed up Zipline on what I knew was the correct path. At some point, though, I realized that I had gone too far and should have already crossed the creek. I ran back down, but still couldn't locate the correct spot for the creek crossing. Back up I went, frantically scanning the creek with my headlamp. I couldn't make out any landmarks on the other side. I went back down, and decided to cross at a point that I thought was close to the spot I was searching for.

Once I crossed, though, I found myself on a spur with sides that were too steep to efficiently traverse. I couldn't travel next to the creek as I had hoped, so I went the only direction that seemed feasible: up. As I went up I realized my bearing was way off. I checked my map and concluded I was on the wrong spur. I didn't have time to go down and start over, though, and the side of the spur was still too steep to effectively move parallel to the contours. I decided I would press forward. My bearing may not be pointed towards Indian Knob, but if there's one direction I knew Indian Knob was it was up. I charged forward and figured I would sort things out once I reached the ridge.

I'll take a timeout here for a quick side story. My family has lived on the same piece of land near Beech Fork for over 200 years. One of the mountains stretching to the southern edge of Frozen Head is named after them. When I got into Barkley in 2015 and began looking at maps, though, I realized it was spelled Kelley Mountain. Not one to easily let things like that go, I went to the trouble of gathering all the evidence and community support necessary to submit the spelling correction to the USGS. After many months, we finally found success. The current set of paper maps still shows Kelley Mountain, but the USGS database has the correction along with a note about our family history. The change should be printed on the next set of maps.

Now let's return to my situation on loop 4: I was standing on top of a ridgeline after taking a horrible ascent up the general Zipline area. I briefly admired the nighttime panoramic view that stretched out before me, and despairingly laughed to myself as I looked at my map. I stood on top of Kelly Mountain. Some might call it ironic; I just called it another bad mistake as I felt one more nail get hammered into the coffin for my hopes of finishing 5 loops.

Desperation can produce monumental achievements, though, and I had no thoughts of giving up. I at least knew exactly which direction I needed to go. I took off up the ridge and after my detour I finally arrived at Indian Knob. I grabbed my page and headed down towards the prison. Unfortunately I made the same mistake I had made on loop 3 and lost another chunk of time.

I was still feeling strong at least, and I headed up Rat Jaw. As usual I made good time, but it came at a price. I had put my toboggan in my pocket, the one that had been my favorite for 12 years and one of only two I owned that fit all the way over my unreasonably large head to fully cover my ears. At some point, a briar reached out and stole it from me. And there it still sits, a tragic, innocent casualty to the horrors of Barkley.

At the top I was met by the much-needed sight of Julian. He was actually the first person I had seen at the tower since loop 1. He assured me I still had time, but could not afford any more mistakes. The 20 minute gap to Jared and Gary I had left camp with had ballooned back to an hour due to my sojourn to my ancestral mountain. I was still alert, though, and had not even resorted to caffeine yet.

I went back down to the coal road, and although I was moving well I had a little bit of confusion finding the right road to go down to reach Pighead Creek. A few minutes here, a few more there, and the clock moved mercilessly towards 48 hours. When I reached the bottom of the highway I crossed over and towards the rusty barrel. In the dark, though, it took me a while to spot it. Tick-tock.

I began to rush, and headed up from the barrel. After a significant climb I realized I was somehow on the wrong side of the creek. Due to a highwall there was no choice but to head back down to cross. Precious time continued to slip away. Eventually I made my way to the dead tree and out to the highway. This was it. A night-time ascent with no margin for error of my arch-nemesis from the previous year: Stallion Mountain.

I crossed the river and worked my way towards my starting point. Up I went, managing to avoid the dense thickets of mountain laurel near the bottom of Stallion. I steadily continued, looking for landmarks along the way. Somehow, each time I thought I should be coming up on a landmark, there it was! I charted my route up the mountain from point to point perfectly, arriving at the top just 45 minutes after leaving the highway. The very climb that had crushed me last year had completely renewed my hopes. I still had around 5 hours left and what I thought should be the most navigable portion of the course.

I once again messed up ascending from the Jeep Road after Leonard's Buttslide. I know that I started at the right creek this time, but I somehow drifted too far to the right and came up a few minutes off from where I should have been. After the Garden Spot the small mistakes continued to pile up. I missed the turn off from the coal ponds and had a bit of trouble finding the route down the highwall on Hillpocalypse.

To make matters worse, my sleep deprivation had finally begun to kick in. I had been trying caffeine pills for a few books now, but they did absolutely nothing. I don't drink coffee at all, so their lack of effect is still rather confusing to me. I had also begun to have trouble eating. Few things sounded appealing and I had unfortunately run out of the one thing that still did: my aunt Brenda's cookies.

The rest of the loop is honestly a bit of a blur to me. I don't know where the time went and I'm not sure at what point I went from thinking I had time to nap before loop 5 to thinking I may not finish loop 4. I do remember starting a hazy, stumbling descent down Bird Mountain without much time on the clock. At

some point I passed Jared and slurred something about not having time left. He told me I could get a quick turnaround and get back out, headed in the same direction as him.

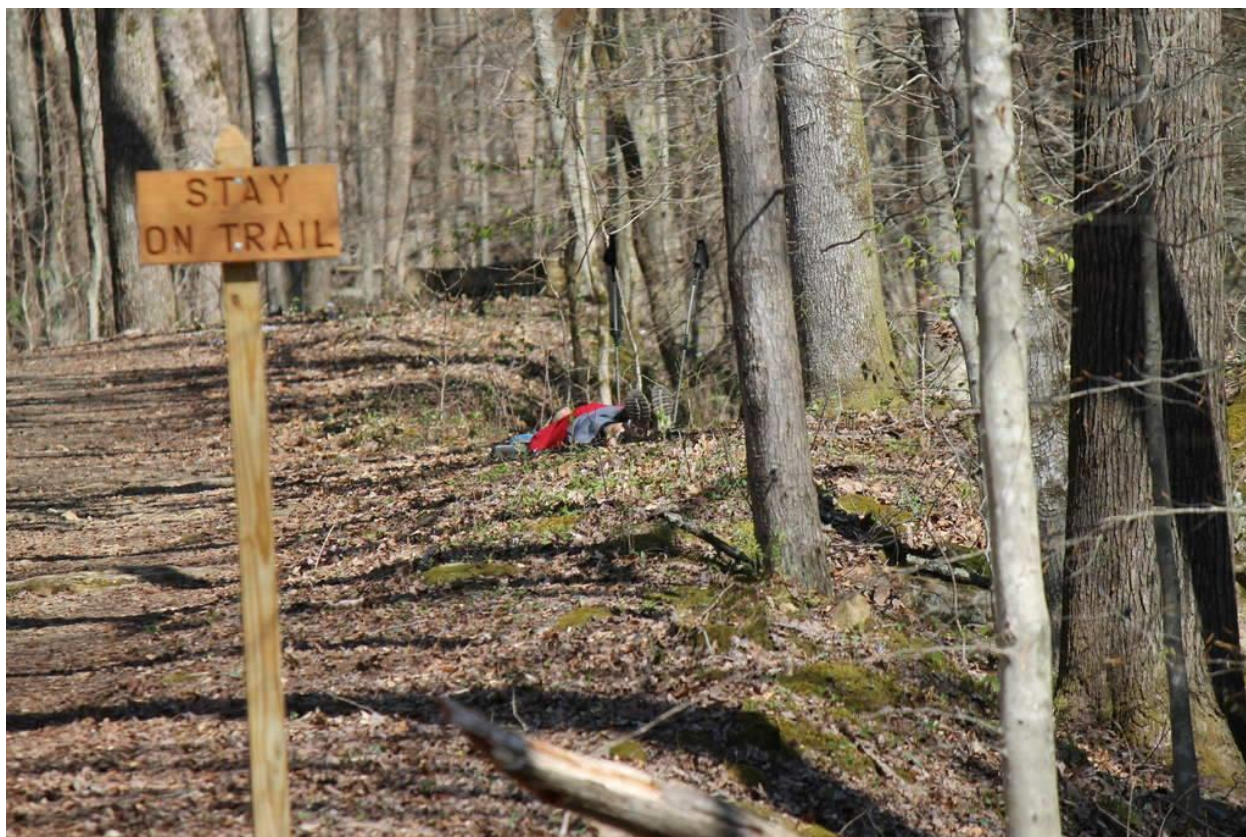
I approached the gate half asleep, dragging my poles and speaking unintelligibly. As soon as I touched, with around 12 minutes to spare, Julian and my newly expanded crew that now included Fegy and AT sprang into action to get me changed over in time. In just a few minutes they had me in appropriate clothes and with a newly packed pack, ready to head out on loop 5. Julian cruelly and effectively repeated my own words back to me, "No quitting in camp."



Getting ready for loop 5. Photo: Leon Lutz

Loop 5

They put me back on my feet and I headed back out. As I moved forward all I could think about was one thing: where to sleep. "Oh those logs over there look lovely and could get me out of sight of the gate. Might be a bit too sunny, though. How about those rocks over there? I don't know, that looks a bit far." In the end I think I just said screw it and laid down on my pack a hundred yards or so from the gate. Apparently laz dubbed this spot Upper Kelly Camp. I would not recommend making any reservations until they deal with the chigger infestation, which became apparent to me a few days later.



Upper Kelly Camp. Photo: John Price

I think I slept off and on for 30 minutes or so, although honestly I don't remember. When I got up, I turned and headed up the mountain. It never came into my head that there was a choice to be made when I got up. That was simply the direction I needed to go. As I stumbled up the trail, my resolve and my energy were slowly renewed. I could do this. All I needed to do was an 11 hour clockwise daytime loop. Barring big errors, this was entirely doable. I picked up the pace and made it up Bird in good time, far faster than what I needed to maintain for the loop.

As I grabbed my first page, though, the unimaginable sleepiness overcame me again. I somehow made my way over to Checkmate, and stared out from the top of it. I could not make myself go down. I sat down against a tree to ponder my situation. It was a gorgeous view, and a perfect sunny day with a pleasant breeze. I sat in the shade of a pine grove, lulled gently to sleep like a child by the treacherous, fear-inspiring Barkley.

Then, I was awake. I had lost time, but with a perfect loop and no more naps I could finish. I stared back down the mountain. Deep inside I knew that if I went down, there was a good chance I wouldn't be able to get myself back up. I could potentially walk all the way out to Goby and hitch back to camp, but that was not a possibility I was willing to consider. I had gotten myself into that situation, and I was going to get myself out under my own power.

The decision was made, and I will never have to doubt that it was the right one. I ate what I could and started moving back towards camp. I may have made it a few hundred yards before I found myself asleep

again, this time lying face up on the ground. I managed to get back up, but I had completely lost my grip on reality.

I began putting one foot in front of the other, but I had no idea if I was actually doing it. Was I still asleep? Was this all a dream? Why was I here anyway? Is this Barkley? No, Barkley hasn't happened yet. Has it? Surely I haven't failed again. All of this was a dream. I'm going to finish 5 loops this year.

My confused thoughts were what occupied me until I rejoined the trail and started back down Bird. Near the top, there was a lovely strip of shade cast over the trail by a tree trunk. I laid down in it. If this is real, someone will come across me here.

I awoke with the shade having shifted completely off of me. Fortunately Jessi had forced sunscreen on me before the loop (despite my protests). Otherwise my face would have been boiling. I slowly returned to my feet and started back down the trail. My mind kept insisting that I was imagining all of this. None of it was actually happening. I kept insisting back to my mind that if the whole thing was my imagination, let's go ahead and imagine we're back at the bottom of this trail.

At some point I came across two people hiking. I think. Whether real or in my head, I believe that one of them was Joe Kowalski and that he officially and mercifully ended my race by giving me water. Eventually I did find myself stumbling back into camp. It had taken me about an hour to get to the first page, and about 4 hours to get back down. I sat at the gate, painfully realizing that my race was in fact over and relating the same story to onlookers that I have tried to convey here.

Post-race

I finally spent some time in camp, ate some Barkley chicken and pizza, and then napped waiting for Jared's arrival. I had heard that Gary did not make it, making us the only two people at the time who had ever started a loop 5 but never finished. So we did come away from the race as the 15th and 16th best runners in Barkley's history, but in the end we're still not finishers. When Jared did arrive for his historic 3rd finish I managed to squeeze my way through the media circus to shake his hand, but unfortunately was not able to get further than that. I needed to get home and to sleep, as I'm sure he did as well.

Less than two days after being passed out on the side of the mountain looking like I'd been mauled by a bobcat, I was back in DC in a suit. Once I got home I also finally got around to watching The Martian, and I couldn't help but laugh at the same repetitive sequence of events he faced while lost and alone: an insurmountable problem, followed by a triumphant solution, followed by a disaster and an expletive, then rinse and repeat. That's essentially how my race went. I got to experience more by riding that roller coaster, but unfortunately it just didn't quite get me to the finish line. I was also able to more fully take in and appreciate the wonders of Frozen Head, a place with a treacherous surface covering a remarkable beauty in the heart of the mountains that will always be home sweet home to me.

I spent those first few days after the race in what I can only describe as a euphoric sadness. I was proud of my accomplishment and was glad that so many had found my race inspirational, but still, I fell short of my goal. The never-ending what-ifs began playing in my head. I calculated that I had cost myself over 4 hours in navigational mistakes. Even a small reduction in those would have given me enough time for proper sleep.

Or, the elimination of the first mistake would have allowed me to stay with Jared and Gary, completely changing my race. It was a remarkable experience to be completely alone for all but about the first hour of the race. It was entirely different than last year and there is a great deal of satisfaction in knowing that I did it on my own. I would be lying, though, if I said I wouldn't have rather not done it on my own and then finished.

Success isn't measured by how well actual events are correlated with plans, but at the same time it isn't measured arbitrarily either. Obstacles might change the route to a goal, but they shouldn't change the goal itself. I may have exhausted all possible paths to book 2 by now, but I have not exhausted all possible paths to the end goal. I know how the larger cycle goes: my disappointment will turn to anger, which will lead to determination and another shot towards the top, either reaching slightly closer to the pinnacle before falling back down to repeat, or finally achieving ultimate success. That's part of the beauty of Barkley. It might seem like a cruel race but it's actually an amazing opportunity to see just how far you can possibly reach if you aim too high.

It would also be an incredible oversight on my part to not realize what a huge part other people can play in taking those shots towards the top. My wife Jessi was a superhuman support while I trained, taking care of essentially everything for me and our family other than my job and the actual training itself. Julian took an extended weekend and came all the way down to TN to crew for me. My dad, my cousin Joe, and the rest of my family and friends in Morgan County made sure the race itself went smoothly and that everything other than the running was taken care of. My mom's and my aunt Brenda's cookies powered me along when I couldn't eat anything else, and of course I can't forget Starchy Grant, whose encounter on loop 1 got me back on course just in time to squeak by that 4 loop cutoff time.