

Like water

The 2009 Barkley Marathons

By Andrew Thompson

“And since,
There’s no one else around,
We let our hair grow long,
And forget all we used to know.
Then our skin gets thicker,
From living out in the snow.”

--Arcade Fire

Finishing the Barkley Hundred was not at all what I expected. I didn’t well up. My heart didn’t pound uncontrollably. I didn’t hug everyone there and confess my undying love and appreciation (No seriously man, I love *you.*). And I certainly never came close to giving my best end-all be-all soapbox monologue. All the emotion and hoopla and sense of accomplishment with which I had begun Loop 5 were quickly worn down to nubs. The ‘*victory*’ lap quickly turned into survival mode. I was sick, and cold, and damn happy to be done.

Loop 1 Hot.

My top priorities for loop one/ first ½ day were to take care of my body, not only in the physical sense, but more importantly my chemistry; fluids, salts, sugars. I didn’t use anything terribly sophisticated—S! Caps for my salts, a mix of organic type fruit and nut bars, gels, Nuun drink, almonds, triscuits. My main goal was to maintain my salts at all times, while eating just enough to maintain maximum pace without ever over doing it or feeling full. I changed my pack this year from a two-bottle system to a camel system due specifically to a newish section (Fikes, spectacle) that goes a ways without good water. I did well and was able to work my way to the front of the pack by the day’s end. I caught Carl Laniak at Beech Fork, and finally the leader Byron Backer at Book 1, Loop 2. David Horton, my close friend and mentor, was there to help me pack. I gave him a run-down of how I felt, and what my intentions were for the night. A girl from a local film crew was there with her camera, and Horthy started in on her. “This guy probably has the best chance of anyone here to finish the hundred. He’s a strong athlete.” He laid it on thick with his best *keep your eye on him* advice.

“Great,” I thought, “If that isn’t the kiss of death.” But I was flattered Horty would say such things and that he had that kind of confidence in me. I still had a lot of uncertainty, and I needed to talk to myself.

Loop 2: Clear.

Byron and I made good time together. The night passed quickly and without trouble. Both of us were getting sleepy, and I was beginning to lean pretty hard toward sleeping before loop 3, instead of pushing through. Byron and I talked quite a bit including some backwoods (is there any other?) philosophizing about the hundred. I told him that I thought the key was to keep asking yourself “Am I a hundred miler?” Meaning, *am I doing what it takes to finish this thing?. Am I doing what Brian would be doing at this instant?* If you ask yourself these and you find that you’re not quite up to it, “out there” has probably already pulled ahead, and you’re out of the running for the full event. We went back and forth with this for a while and I realized the time was right to have a conference-call with the committee upstairs. We topped out on Frozen Head on an unbelievable still and calm night. Moon out, we sat for a bit before making our way out to Indian Knob. “Free mile”, I told Byron, “the only one on the course.” The committee was negotiating. “A lot of guys have the hundred in them”, I said. “It’s just a matter of deciding to do it, committing to the bad dream that lay ahead, taking out the “if” and replacing it with “how”. “I don’t”, said Byron. “We both do.” By the time I began to pull away from Byron toward the top of Big Hell, the committee had reached its decision: It was all systems go. Now is the time. I flipped the switch and never looked back.

Loop 3: Hotter.

At camp I repacked with Davy Henn’s help and attended to the needs I would have once I left camp. Then seeing what time I had remaining I slept for 50 minutes. When I woke all I needed to do was put on my shoes and pack and go. The day was going to be hot, bringing in thunder storms that evening. I felt great and ran off preparing myself for another day of caution, making sure I never got toxic and blew up. It was an oven, Rat Jaw and Spectacle especially—two sunny exposed power line cuts. I was not terribly concerned by the fact that I was hardly eating. My fluids and salts were balanced and my gut was working. My output was high and my blood sugar never dipped. There was no reason to rock the boat if nothing was wrong. As I crested Bird Mountain I remembered my little emergency whistle built into the buckle of my Inov-8 pack. I let it rip, signaling my arrival far down the mountainside to camp. I had no problems on the reverse loop and reached camp at roughly 30 hrs, 30 min. I repacked for the night with Dave. Carl Laniak was helping as well and both would be very helpful during the rest of the weekend. Then hit the tent again for 35 minutes. I left at exactly 32 hrs. I made it to book 10, Beech Fork, by dark.

.Loop 4: light fog, rain.

There is no magic bullet upon which I can explain finishing the Hundred.. I got the email a week before saying that Jim Nelson would not be competing due to heart issues. It was also doubtful whether my best friend and one-man support crew, Jon Basham, would attend. No, this was going to have to be the year I would have to do it by myself. I wouldn’t have Jim, the alumnus, to guide me

around, and I wouldn't have Jon to make my life easier between loops. I would have to show up with my running shoes and just go do it. I was secretly excited about the prospect of being my own man, even though I knew Jim and Jon would hate to miss a possible, albeit uncertain, finish. By now I had broken the loop into 4 sections: Hell, Spectacle, Fikes, and the North Section. I intended to get as far as I could before the rain really set in, and I counted each landmark I passed as a gift against time. I became sleepy once I summited Frozen Head Peak, and decided to nap once I got off the mountaintops. It was cold and windy up high. After I collected my page at the keyhole on Rat jaw, I snuggled up against the cliff, where (most of) the dripping rain wouldn't get to me. However before I could get comfortable the resident rat which lives in the rock became annoyed, so I got up and left. "Oh, well. That was enough of a break I guess." I took off again, intent on covering even more ground now, before the rain soaked the course. At the New River I forded, soaking my shoes. (Every other time I tip-toed the nearby log that spans the stream.) The Barkley gods were kind throughout the night; though the rain had soaked everything it never turned violent and the course held together well. The ten-minute naps resumed along the North Boundary Trail, finding me curled up against hollow logs and anything else that sheltered a patch of leaves from the rain, my faithful little watch beeping me back into reality each time. After my 3rd nap I woke from a particularly deep sleep in slight confusion as to which way I was supposed to go. I couldn't wait to sound my whistle. It was becoming my trademark. My time was perfect and I giggled to myself as I climbed Bird, Chirping my whistle and singing to myself, hardly containing the urge to let it rip again. Finally standing on the pass, high above camp, the whistle shrieked. Yes!

Loop 5: Cold, snow, wind.

"It's gonna be cold, maybe even some snow," said Dave. "Good." "Which way are you gonna go?" I pointed. "Why rock the boat?" I said, gesturing down the road. "Reverse loop, huh?" "It's easier" I said, rattling off a few key reasons which had me convinced. I thought maybe I saw Gary's wheels turning. He was giving me that 'oh, really' look. Crap. The cat's out of the bag now. I already felt sorry for the poor bastards who have to come back next year after Gary makes *DAMN* sure *NIETHER* direction will ever be confused with being *easy*. But things being as they were, I saw no sense in changing direction and hiking clock-wise. I obviously knew the course in reverse, and was comfortable with that direction. My chances of getting terribly lost were minimal, and my times on loops 3 and 4 were relatively fast.

The Cameraman chimed in, "Why is the reverse loop easier?" catching footage while he awaited a response. "Some hills are trailed some are bushwhacks. It depends on what you feel is easier." It was the type of question Barkley runners could debate for hours, over the camp fire, sucking on hot pieces of BBQ chicken. So I gave him the abbreviated version assuming someone would take over from there. I had bigger fish to fry. Loop 5. After I had repacked in preparation for a long (supposedly cold day. Yeah, right), I laid out my plan for the remainder of the race. "Gary, I plan to sleep until 46 hours, then go, leaving myself 14 hours to complete loop 5. Sound good?" Not a whole lot of reaction, at least not as much as I wanted. Everyone sort of stood around nodding, giving me the "I don't want to be the one to screw things up for you" look. I went on. "I sleep now, for 45 minutes, and then I wake up and run the final loop in under 14 hours. Sound good?" More nods and glassy eyes. *Geez, what's wrong*

with these people? “OK here’s the deal. I just smoked 2 loops in reverse each under 12 hours. I FEEL that this is the right thing to do! For some reason I felt like people would think I was some sort of maniac if I crawled into my tent (again!) instead of burning off on down the trail . Screw it. This is my race and I’m doing it my way. 45 minutes later Davy scratched my tent door. “You ready AT? Time for Loop 5.”

“Yep. I’m ready.”

The wet course had torn my feet up quite a bit so I taped them up pretty aggressively while sitting in the front seat of my bright shiny white rental car. The radio was playing cuts from various stand-up comics and I laughed out loud as I shored up my feet for another 20 miles. (“The lunatic is on the grass. He, he, he, he!”) Davy and Carl thought I was losing it.

A few years ago the race had procured a genuine Swiss cow bell, complete with an embroidered ornamental strap. Ringing it signifies the start of the “bell’ lap. I looked to see if Gary had remembered and there it was, tucked under his arm as he chatted and smoked his cigarette. Gary and I had been the only conscious people in camp last year when Brian set out on his (forward) loop 5. Of the three, Gary, Brian and myself, Brian was clearly the most alert and we sent him off with a hell of a racket, Gary clanging the cow bell, me whooping and yipping, falling all over ourselves like Rocky Balboa and Apollo Creed in that crazy scene where they knock each other out. Now it was my turn.

I gingerly stepped away from the gate and down the road, weeping and pumping my fists as Gary shook the rafters: Ba-clang, Ba-clang, Ba-clang!!!!!!

Oookayyy Andrew.....nice and easy now....Nothing weird....nothing weird....total control...total control.....Breathe....breeeeathe....

It could be said that I have a history of coming unglued. Mentally.

When I was young my mother made me listen to a set of tapes that dealt with test-taking strategy: How to study, what to do the night before a test and so-on. One of the things (probably the only thing) that rubbed off was a strange little mental queue. The voice on the tape said, “When you go to take a test, pause and look at your pencil. Tell your pencil, ‘ Pencil, you can only write correct answers. It is impossible for you to write incorrect answers; only the right ones.’” I looked at my shoes and my feet, tender and rebelling. I said “Feet, you can only walk the right course. You don’t know how to go off-course. Every step is true; each step is perfect and fluid. You stride through the forest like water flows downhill, with ease and grace. You waste no energy. You *flow* through the forest. You are water.” As I crested Chimney Top for the 5th time, snow began to fall.

The Barkley had turned on itself for the third time. Hot-cold, hot-cold, real-cold. Therefore race strategy had changed once again. When it’s hot you drink and don’t eat. When it’s cold you eat and don’t drink. And I hadn’t really been eating anyway. Save two amazing cups of hot turkey stew at my last two turn-a-rounds in camp. I was saying my good-byes to each major landmark on the course, knowing that (thank God) I would not have to face each steep-ass hill and each dreaded section again.

I blew on that whistle for every hill I climbed. For every briar that ripped my legs. I blew on that whistle to announce to the world, "I am coming down off of this mountain. And I am coming down with my head screwed on straight, with eleven pages in my pocket. I told myself I could do it and I did! I told my feet they were perfect and that they would not fail me, and they didn't. Everything we know says that I should not be standing in this pass, blowing my whistle, but here I am!"

Shrieeek!!!!

I exited the trail and hit the dirt road. Davy met me there to give me a hug. Davy and the Cameraman ran beside me as I strode down toward the finish. I could see the yellow gate, and all kinds of lights. I heard the people cheering. The whistle pierced the night as I ran.

Written by Andrew "Traildog" Thompson, Barkley, Class of 2009

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