

THE BARKLEY MARATHONS 2009 **RACE REPORT BY JOEL STORROW**

In the interest of full disclosure, I am not an elite ultra runner. I'm more of an ultra runner wannabe with big dreams and goals like any other mid to back of the pack distance runner. What it really boils down to for me, and I imagine most others in my class, is whether you want it bad enough to get off the couch and put in the training. That said the Barkley Marathons have always been one of those goals for my brother, Alan, and me. We never figured we'd get a shot at it, but it was so much fun to talk about. For the record, Alan has the better ultra resume, having bagged a few hundred milers, and is five years my junior. We applied this year, both hoping to get accepted and as luck would have it, I got in and Alan was exiled to the wait list, far enough down that he was unlikely to make the entry list, and he didn't. Once accepted, I trained hard off a reasonable fitness base, putting in multiple 40-50 mile weeks in January and February, including the obligatory long runs.

Alan agreed to serve as my crew, arriving at Frozen Head on the Thursday before the race, just in time for the heavy thunderstorms that night. I arrived on Friday and we checked in with Race Director Laz. We carefully read and mapped the instructions and chatted with a few of the veterans. I bought the official race T-Shirt, which had a picture of an old woman lighting her cigarette with the candles on her 100th birthday cake. Since my wife Donna works in tobacco cessation education in our local school system, I told Laz I probably wouldn't be wearing it around the house. We met Kerry Trammell, who was in the campsite next to us and full of good advice. Incidentally, Kerry got into the race at the last moment, which goes to show you should show up just in case. Hobnobbing with the Barkley brass was a delight and we gorged ourselves on the stew that evening. We passed on the chicken (David Horton's advice) and returned to the campsite, where I proceeded to organize my gear for the next day. As darkness fell, we turned in for the night. I slept soundly and I woke early the next morning around 6:30, expecting the conch shell to blow at any moment. It turned out that Laz had other plans, waiting until 9:45 or so, meaning the race started a little before the 11 o'clock hour.

The following narrative includes some advice for finishing one loop of this one of-a-kind race. I don't pretend to know what's required for multiple loops, fun runs and official finishes. With a one loop finish under my belt, I marvel at those who can claim multiple loop completions. I "get it". I can tell you that on the morning of the following Monday, as I settled in at the desk of my day job in Asheville, North Carolina, Andrew Thompson was still on the course, 45 hours into the race, battling deteriorating weather conditions, including snow no less, in the process of finishing his fifth loop, and becoming the eighth official finisher in the history of the Barkley Marathons. What a remarkable achievement. So, take the following advice for what it may or may not be worth.

Laz lit the cigarette and off we went. I immediately noticed a few of the top flight competitors running the initial short road section to beat the pack to the single track turnoff. I settled in at the tail end of the first large grouping (a dozen runners or so), including John DeWalt and a number of other veterans, a comfortable pace for me. There was a second large bunch 100 yards back or so, including Hiram Rogers and Leonard Martin, both with whom Alan and I had trained with a month earlier. Someone a few runners up remarked that there were 14 switchbacks up Bird Mountain, so I began to count. I also began drinking my 2 bottles of Clip, figuring I'd refill both at Phillips Creek. As we crested the top of Bird, the initial group got away from me a little bit and no one was close by in my run down the back side. I was careful to watch my footing and at this point was settling in, grateful that the weather (the forecast was 70s and partly sunny) seemed ideal for the task ahead. I arrived at Phillips Creek in time to

see a couple of other runners departing. After ripping page 78 (it was actually unnumbered at the end of a chapter) out of the “Finishing Well” book (great wisdom for life by the way), I stopped to refill the bottles in the creek. Then it was up Jury Ridge. Using my Steri-Pen Adventurer UV disinfection probe (excellent for backpacking and long distance running), I zapped both bottles while hiking, not too difficult. Several runners, including Hiram caught me at the top of Jury, where I stopped to add the Clip powder to the bottles.

- 1. Drink early and often to maintain hydration. I was able to drink approximately one bottle of water with CLIP each of the 11 plus hours of Loop 1. I never felt thirsty, even during the heat of the day.**

The section past Jury was completely unfamiliar to me, as Alan and I had stopped here during our earlier reconnaissance. But, being maintained trail, I encountered no difficulty and was still running solo through Rayder Creek and the subsequent ascent of Bald Mountain. The latter was actually 2 long sections of uphill hiking during which time, I began to munch on the first of two 6-inch BMT Subway sandwiches, double meat. As I neared the summit I noticed the “Trail Closed” sign and was fortunate to run into veteran Steve Durbin and his friend Bob Haugh from Paducah, Kentucky. Fortunate in that Steve was helpful in navigating some of the upcoming off trail sections including some briars and wet areas. I figured Steve for a UK hoops fan and we debated the pros and cons of the recent John Calapari hire, concluding that if the program starts winning again, all will be well in Lexington. In a short time we arrived at the second book and a logjam of maybe a half dozen runners. The book was a Sidney Sheldon novel with most of the pages we needed (including my page 78) already removed. Steve suggested taking a page at the back of the book with the title/author listed. Better safe than sorry with Laz checking the pages. Following Book 2, the trail became a little harder to follow, especially at the switchbacks where the tendency was not to make the turn. At one point it appeared that the trail continued switchbacking lower, and Steve cautioned that the route did not fall below a particular elevation (I believe it was 2400) along this section. Although I didn’t have an altimeter, I remember thinking that this information would be most helpful during Loop 2 in the dark. Bob Haugh had fallen back a bit and Steve stopped to wait for him to catch up. I caught up with Kevin Dorsey from Memphis and we chatted a bit. Up ahead, Allan Holtz came back the opposite direction in search of a water bottle he had dropped earlier. Later in the race, he told me it cost him 10 minutes, but he did find the bottle. I suppose that’s not much in the scheme of a 12-13 hour loop, but add several of those time costing blunders together and it may equal a DNF. Steve caught up with Kevin and me near SOBD and we trekked together through the Coal Ponds, which were not all what I expected. I guess I assumed they were positioned along flatter terrain, as opposed to being benched into the side of the mountain. I stopped for a minute following the Ponds to grab some chips and trail mix before heading up to the Garden Spot. The trail was more difficult to discern here, but I kept Steve and Kevin, who both had motored on ahead, in my sight. Arriving at the Garden Spot and Book 3 was a relief, if only because I now felt in familiar territory, having trained with Hiram and Leonard earlier from here on to through the Stallion Mountain section. I also felt good with my time, arriving at the Garden Spot in 3:35 versus the 3:45 target Leonard had suggested as a decent pace to finish a loop. Imagine my surprise to find a runner (it turned out to be Claudio) resting on his back with his legs stretched out against a tree. He said he was fine and was just taking a break. Off I went down the hill to the first water drop, spying Steve, John DeWalt and others filling up. It was at this point I made my first time costing blunder, having left my trekking pole at the Garden Spot. I debated leaving it, but decided to backtrack the 3-4 minutes, figuring I’d need it latter in the race. It turned out to be the right decision.

- 2. Consider carrying and using a trekking pole. It will prove quite helpful on the steep uphill sections, saving your leg strength. It was particularly helpful to me on**

the Testicle Spectacle and Rat Jaw.

By the time I returned to the water drop, the earlier group had departed and Bob had caught up to me again. Several full jugs were in the road, saving us the trouble of having to fetch them from the terrace below (thank you kind hearted veteran runners). I filled both bottles again and off we ran to Stallion Mountain. Although a virgin like me, Bob had a good sense of the course directions and we helped each other remember the turns, such as the point to leave the road to crest the first peak in the Stallion chain. We located the fourth book above the “Yellow Indian” without incident and passed down through the field and left of the marshy area, before hitting the lower soil road. There we met up with Alan Gerald, who appeared to be having his own route finding problems, turning right when it called for left. The three of us passed through the 4-wheeler circle and chose the correct road up to Fyke’s. I recall Leonard saying the final scramble to the left up the bank to the top loop road around the bowl was a certain number of paces from the ring, but it was a bit further than I remembered. Once on top, I did remember the point to drop off and the need to bear to the right of the first bench along a drainage swale. Alan and I got ahead of Bob at this point and I didn’t see him again. We struck up a conversation and I learned Alan hails from San Francisco, was to be married the next Friday and planned to honeymoon in Italy. Coupled with running the Barkley, that is a lot of living in a short period of time. I led the way down the remainder of the Stallion section, carefully picking my way through the second bench, through gap in the rock cliff and down through the iron stained area. I hit the last draw to the left of the “hump” as Hiram called it and we followed the telephone poles to the New River.

- 3. Do not underestimate the value of reconnaissance along the off trail sections of the course. Hiram Rogers, Leonard Martin and Steven Miller were kind enough to lead my brother Alan and I through the Stallion, Testicle, Raw Dog Falls and Rat Jaw (Pigs Head was off limits) sections a month before the race. In my opinion, it was the most valuable piece of my pre-race planning and essential to my staying on course and finishing a Loop.**

The river crossing was a bit deeper than a month ago and a difficult rock hop so I just blasted through it, figuring I deserved some cold water on my tired legs anyway. Alan crossed a bit downstream from me and was able to keep his feet dry. I filled up my bottles for a third time here and pressed on up and across TN 116. The small stream below the Testicle Spectacle was flowing pretty well and I decided to refill my bottles there with what I suspected was safer water than the River. Alan and I hopped up past the television crew to the fourth book and took a short break. I disinfected the water, changed into dry socks, munched some trail mix and beef jerky and shared a few stories. It was at this point I brought out the second of the two BMTs. Alan announced that he was slower than most on the uphill and I got a bit ahead of him on the Testicle as we got going again. I crested the top where another camera crew waited and Alan was still out of sight. I wouldn’t see him again until the next day when he told me the sad story of getting lost on Beech Fork with John Price. I cruised down Meth Lab, Neo-Butt Slide and trekked through the woods, arriving at Raw Dog Falls, a bit above the fifth book, but close enough that I found it quickly. Then bypassing Danger Dave’s Climbing Wall, I chose the Pussy Ridge route around and down off the road into the Pig Head drainage and up through the trashy area. I crossed TN 116 again and entered the woods again at the Pigs Head (skull on a stick). This section was a bit tricky since it had been off limits during the training weekend and no veterans were anywhere in sight for advice. I continued munching on my BMT, although I this point I was forcing it down rather than enjoying it. I went a little too far up the middle of the drainage when I should have traversed left up the hill earlier to the old dirt road. So I lost a little time here, but recovered to hit the ridge right before the jeep road around to Rat Jaw. This section was more familiar and I acknowledged the old gated mine shaft right before Rat Jaw. I ran/walked this section and arriving at Rat Jaw, I looked up and noticed a couple of

runners just within sight at the turn in the power line. I sat down on one of the stumps and finished my second BMT.

- 4. Eat like a pig. This is no secret for ultras, but is all the more important at Barkley where the time between aid stations is 10-12 hours for a mid to back of the pack runner like me, and you have to carry all your fuel. Choose a couple of meat and cheese sandwiches that you can get down and supplement with Gu, trail mix and salty snacks. Begin taking in the calories early enough that the energy will be there later.**

Up into the teeth of Rat Jaw I climbed and for the first time in the race, began to pause at intervals. I didn't feel exhausted, but the steepness was making me sluggish, even with the added help of the trekking pole. I located the sixth book in the cliff band without any trouble, noting the title was something about being a candidate for a heart attack. I chuckled, and concluded that even when you're bonking and down on your game in this race, the title of the next book will lift your spirits, or at least make you laugh. Thanks for the humor, Laz, I suppose it's the little things that make Barkley special. As I climbed above the cliff I spied what I assumed was my brother Alan at the summit below the tower, and that gave me renewed energy to plod on to the top. I was grateful for his encouragement when I arrived and he snapped some action photos of me. Rich Limacher (The Troubadour) took down my number and I headed to the water station to refill my bottles. I made the Frozen Head Tower checkpoint in around 7:10, besting Leonard's benchmark time of 7:30 for a good loop one finish pace. Feeling reasonably well at the time, I remember telling brother Alan I thought I had a Loop 2 in me. Alan assured me he'd have all the supplies for Loop 2 laid out for me when I got back to camp, and off down the jeep road I went. I took another salt tablet and added a second magnesium for good measure; The electrolytes seemed to be serving me well.

- 5. Be conscious of your electrolyte intake. I ingested one salt tablet per hour and my brother swears by occasional magnesium as well. I took 2 of the latter during the Loop. Ibuprofen for the aches and pains was also helpful.**

The section on the Chimney Top Trail over to the seventh book is a run-able section and I took advantage, still feeling strong enough to make some time. It was 7:00 P.M. by now and being the loyal Tar Heel fan that I am, I tried to dial in the Final Four games on my radio, but no luck. I thought the Westwood One affiliates would be carrying it, but the only sports broadcast I picked up was a Tennessee Lady Vols Softball game. Everything else was Country Music. Oh well, I would have to make do without the Carolina game tonight. Truth be known, I wasn't too worried that Heels wouldn't make it by Villanova. However, access to the broadcast while on the course could have/would have been a big motivator. It seemed like no time and I arrived at the Mart Fields Trail intersection. Time to start looking for "MF" painted on a rock. I found it, but immediately to the right was a cliff face, no way to summit "The Hump" in that direction. I went a little further along the trail and then backtracked, figuring I needed to leave the path earlier. That's exactly what I did and someone later told me there are actually two painted "MF" rocks. I never saw the first one, but I did make it to the top of "The Hump" without difficulty and located the seventh book. I proceeded on along the crest of the ridge and got into some briars but all in all no worries.

- 6. I wore shorts for the entire Loop until the lower part of Zip Line which chewed me up pretty good and the temperature started dropping. Since it was 60s and 70s during the day, the shorts kept me comfortable and I just tolerated the underbrush. I suppose if it was chilly and rainy, you'd have to consider pants/tights and a shell**

most of the way.

Soon after, I crossed the Mart Fields trail again and traversed around the campsite where some Boy Scouts were staying. A couple of the boys tried to steer me in a different direction, but I knew better. So much for the Scout Motto. The trail dropped to the left off the ridge, consistent with that stated in the directions and I soon arrived at the hairpin turn where the route heads off trail to Indian Knob. I found Book 8 without delay at the Needle's Eye (what a cool geologic formation) and then turned my attention to the Zip Line. This was the one section I had been fearing the most and had figured a compass bearing of 300 degrees would put me on the right course, if all else failed. I wasn't sure exactly where to begin my descent, guessing it really didn't matter. Down I plunged on the steepest descent of the day. It was around 6:45 P.M. and still light enough to find my way, although I knew without question that I would be navigating Big Hell in the dark.

7. Compass bearings are helpful and carrying a compass is essential. Since the Zip Line and Big Hell sections of the course are off limits to training, I had no clue at what to expect. Based on my compass readings from the map, I was able to gauge the proper course down Zip Line. The same would be true for Big Hell, although I got lucky (read on) and capitalized on veteran coattails.

Hiram had advised me earlier to keep "the rocks" to my right as I descended, and I tried my best to keep that in mind. It's just that the briars were pretty dense to the left and I never did figure out the path of earlier runners. I gradually veered too far to the right and got into the rocky section where the stream began to appear. I stopped to put on my nylon pants and top to deal with the briars and also to refill my water bottles. That's where I made my first of two critical errors of the loop. Not enough to prevent my finish, but in hindsight severe enough to damage my psyche and sow the seeds of doubt in my mind for a second loop attempt. In my haste to keep moving, I left my trekking pole where I filled the bottles and didn't notice until I was much farther down the slope. Too far, I thought, to return and plus I had a spare back at camp anyway. This error led to my second, and the more mentally damaging blunder. Nearing the lower section of the Zip Line, along the right side of the creek, I chose a direct route through a damp area of leaves. Without the trekking pole for balance, I slipped and fell hard, slicing my right palm open with a 2-inch gash, that bled pretty strong for a bit. I wrapped it in my bandana the best I could and proceeded on. If there was a "best blood" award for the race, I would have probably been in the running. I crossed the Beech Fork at the confluence, having stayed to the right of the stream opposite the jeep road, per the instructions. I was quite fortunate to notice a runner leaving the Beech tree high on the bank, so I assumed the book No. 9 was located there. The title "Drive The Night Away" I believe, was very appropriate since dusk had arrived and it was time to break out the headlamp. It was also at this point that Leonard Martin and Allan Holtz (of lost water bottle fame) caught me. Leonard had observed me from higher up on the Zip Line and advised me that I had ventured to close to the rocks. I was just happy to still be in the vicinity of the route and ecstatic to have a veteran chaperone for Big Hell. It was also nice to see another body or two, since I had been solo since the Fire Tower.

8. You must keep your wits about you at all times during this race. Drop your guard and risk injury, lost equipment/supplies or worst of all, you get lost. I don't think keeping your cool is that hard to do for one loop. I'll wager it gets exponentially harder but no less important on Loop 2 and beyond.

With guardian angel Leonard leading the way, we started up Big Hell. Before we got going, I had the good sense to snag a walking stick to help climb the grade. It wasn't as effective as my lost trekking pole, but it was useful. The pitch started innocently enough, but seemed to get steeper as we progressed.

Leonard announced he was going to stop once for a 20 second break before reaching the top. That sounded like a good plan to maintain some momentum. Unfortunately, he and Allan got a bit ahead of me as we ascended and I was hard pressed to keep up. Big Hell is just relentless. It gets steeper as you go and the false summits beat you down. My leg strength was fading at this point and I began stopping for 10 seconds here, 20 seconds there. So much for the Martin one stop strategy. My headlamp was burning bright as we climbed higher up the mountain, and lo and behold, I discovered a trekking pole in the leaves. An earlier runner had obviously dropped it and I scooped it up. I couldn't believe my good fortune and immediately tossed the walking stick. With a little bit of renewed energy, I made up some ground on Leonard and Allan, who periodically would shout back down at me to make sure I was OK. A short time later, I began to notice other lights higher on the mountain and someone yelled down something about a lost trekking pole. Yes, I have it, I responded and I'll return it to you in short order. It was Jason Barringer, and he thanked me at the top, promising a cold beer for my efforts. I took him up on that later, and it was the best tasting Guinness I've ever had by a long shot. In the meantime the pole got me to the top and I suppose it's a good example of The Barkley giving something back. Unfortunately, it has a tendency to take more than it gives.

- 9. Train constantly on steep hills. I believe success at Barkley demands you bring a high level of fitness to the table, but leg strength for climbing has to be at the top of the list. While I was in top physical shape to go the distance on one loop, I could have/should have trained more on steep off trail slopes. As a back of pack ultra runner, if you plan to tackle a second or third loop, you'd better include many big hills in your training plan.**

At long last I reached the top and the first capstone. There were several other runners congregated around the book, including Jason Barringer, Kevin Dorsey and Robert Andrusis. I returned the trekking pole to Jason and gratefully ripped out my page. I am certain that finding Book No. 10 in the dark would have been more difficult without the others around. It had gotten quite dark by this point and I was ready for a "Candy Ass" trail. We traversed around Chimney Top and headed down the maintained trail as a spread out group. I ran a bit and began to assess my mental and physical condition for a second loop. I began to fall behind the small pack, with the exception of Kevin, who had stayed behind a bit longer at Book 10. My hand was still throbbing and I was awfully tired of the climbing. Did I really think I could make a second loop in the dark, and likely without the veteran route finding advice I had enjoyed at fortuitous points in the first loop? I was rationalizing all these negatives as I closed in on the campground. I arrived at the yellow gate in 11:36.01. Laz checked and confirmed my pages and asked me if I cared to go out for a second Loop. I told him I'd think about it and promptly retired to the campsite, where brother Alan had everything spread out and ready for me. The beef stew and chicken soup he had prepared was delightful and I sank further and further into the chair. He checked my hand and actually extracted the end of the sharp stick that was still imbedded in the wound. He dressed it and said it probably deserved stitches to close the right way. Oh well, I'll have a scar to remind me of the 2009 Barkley. The time cushion I had to begin Loop 2 ticking away, the temperature dropping and the comfort of the camp soothing me, I made the decision to quit. I marched to the yellow gate and asked Laz to bugle me out, another DNF. I crashed quickly after that, and slept soundly.

- 10. While admitting I'm no expert on the mental fortitude it takes to start and finish anything beyond Loop 1 at Barkley, I can tell you this. Don't dawdle in camp. Refuel, rehydrate, change gear quickly and be on your way. Any stop beyond 15 minutes can be a psychological race killer. It's not only my advice, a veteran told me so before the race, and he was right on.**

Surprisingly enough the next morning, I felt reasonably rested, but depressed. This empty feeling followed me around like a cloud as I watched a couple of the Loop 2 finishers (DeWayne Satterfield, Mike Dobies) arrive. I hung around until Hiram Rogers finished his second loop and whooped it up with him. What a great guy, who is one of the unsung heroes of Barkley, having volunteered for race set-up duties the last few years. I was really happy for Hiram; he was well prepared and ran his race in 2009. I didn't see Leonard Martin finish his second loop, but I applaud him as well, a true veteran, whose good cheer on Big Hell keep me going. I realized that while my multiple loop dreams proved unrealistic, I still felt deep down I should have started up Bird Mountain and given Loop 2 a shot. So why didn't I? After weeks of reflection, I have concluded that I was mentally soft and just didn't want it bad enough. As I recall, one of David Horton's tips to finishing Barkley was "You have to want it more than anything else ever in your life" or something along those lines. I believe that now and trust my 2009 failure will fuel my drive to succeed in 2010 or whatever future year I'm lucky enough to land another chance. I accept that the only person in control of that destiny is Laz himself.

I am reminded of the old Huey Lewis tune, "I Wanna New Drug". I've found my new drug. It's called The Barkley.