

The Barkley:

A 160 k footrace

Every year in the first days of april, Frozen Head State Park in Tennessee, in the US of A, is the crimespot for a footrace called the Barkley Marathons. It's been said that this competition over 160 k is the toughest ultramarathon in the world. Not because of the distance: some ultras cover even longer distances. Barkley's challenge is the number of meters (over 16,000) that runners have to climb and descend during this 100 miles, and the fact that a big part of this race is straight across the bush and rivers. Typical for this race are some peculiar habits...

Strange fellows, these Americans

I arrive in Knoxville on Thursday night, after a long flight from Amsterdam. I rent a car and drive to a motel. So far nothing special. The motel is a typical American story, the kind of motel you see in these cheap B-movies. Before going to bed I ask the Indian manager of the motel where I can find a beer. He explains me how to get to a nearby gas station with a small shop. When I want to pay for my beers I have to show my ID. I ask the man at the desk if he doesn't believe I'm 16 years old. "It's not your age I want to know, it is the law in this state that makes me ask you. So please show me your ID. And furthermore: you have to be 21 years old to buy a beer, not 16." Imagine: you can drive a car at 16 years old in this part of the World. But obtaining a beer when you are 44 years old is a problem... The use of alcohol and tobacco in Tennessee is like the use of cannabis in The Netherlands: It's allowed, under strict regulations...

Just like in the movies

Friday morning I try to find a place to have breakfast. By foot. Being a pedestrian is a special experience in this country. Everyone is using cars for transport, and I didn't notice a sidewalk in the neighbourhood of my motel. As a lost European I find my way to a place called 'Waffle House,' scrambling through parking lots and small flower gardens. It's all like in the movies. A lot of enormous signs of McDonalds, KFCs, Wendys, and Starbucks, and great oversized trucks. I feel like a tiny gnome in a huge man's world. Almost all the examples of the human species I encounter are big and fat. Voluminous. I mean: really supersized!!

They balance from their giant cars with their giant bodies to the Waffle House and hoist themselves on barstools. It's fascinating to register. In the restaurant, enormous breakfasts are engulfed. My brain is working overtime to interpret all I see. I'm getting dizzy from all the information: hashbrowns, fried eggs, bacon, sausages, steaks, giant waffles, and respectable pancakes. Next to me an elephant-like human creature, about 12 years old, is stored. It does it's best to get the whole foodprogramme into her stomach.

No toasts or muesli in this place. No oranges, apples, or yogurt. I order a tea-like coffee and a waffle and try my best to devour it, but I have to give up halfway. I'm not a trained breakfast eater... My neighbour is not at all impressed...

Time to mention some positive notes about the Americans I met so far: they are as nice and enthusiastic as they are voluminous, at least here in Knoxville: “Are you from Europe, wow! My grandmother is from France.... Je parle un peu Français.” (pronounced with a very funny accent: 'Zjai parle own pow Fráanzay').

I have to get used to the accent in Tennessee. It's quite different from the UK-English, but within a couple of hours the singing kind of talking is pleasant to listen to. And it sounds so much better than German!

Gruesome heavy

After breakfast it's time to head for Frozen Head Park. In the afternoon I arrive in the big forest where it's all going to happen in the next days. 35 runners and their supporting friends or family are gathered close to a yellow gate, the start and finish of the Barkley. I see tents pitched at several camp spots, the park is well organised and the nature so far is already overwhelming.

I meet people I know from e-mail contacts. As if I meet old friends. The atmosphere is open and cozy. Race director Laz is roasting deep frozen chicken on a campfire. The Barkley is the name of a farmer who offers a large quantity of frozen chicken legs to the race. The quality of the roast at the Barkley is a subject for discussions in a lot of Barkley-related articles, but I think it was ok. Anyway, a Barkley without a chicken BBQ is unimaginable.

The race was first held in 1986. In recent years it consisted of 5 loops of about 20 miles (35 k) each. So far the official story. The real distance is probably a bit longer, but no one cares. Details! That's part of the Barkley story. First two loops are run clockwise, next two loops anti-clockwise and the few heroes who stay in the race after four loops can choose their preferred direction on the last loop. The biggest part of the race crosses bush and brier fields. The exact route is not indicated by markers. Navigation is done by the runners. A lousy map, a compass, an altimeter and some pages with a typed explanation by Laz himself are the only tools allowed in this navigation process. Steep and long climbs and descents, dense vegetation, and getting lost result in a gruesomely hard race for the runners.

Lighting a cigarette

The start of the race takes place one hour after the race director blows on a conch shell. Normally this signal can be heard some moment around breakfast, but this year I hear the strange sound just after midnight. Runners get up in a hurry, drink a coffee, and do the last pre-race preparations. After this, everyone gets to the yellow gate, where everyone is waiting for Laz lighting a cigarette, the signal for the start. The Barkley doesn't like health freaks.

A few minutes after one o'clock Laz sets fire to his tobacco, and all runners are gone! Then for a visitor like me it's the beginning of a long waiting time. Next

morning after more than 9 hours, the first runners finish loop 1. Their faces and legs bear signs of fatigue, stripes of the briars and other vegetation, and are covered with salt of dried sweat. It's obvious getting through this first loop was not at all a piece of cake.

Anyhow, Laz asks them to proof him if they had passed the ten books he had hidden at indicated spots on the trail. Runners have to tear out the pages with the numbers corresponding to their race number, which changes every loop. After a short stop, fresh socks, coffee and a sandwich with peanut butter, they continue the race. They go out again in the forest for a second loop. All they eat outside the camp they take in a small rucksack, and at two places the runners find drinkable water on the road (well there's no road, but...)

After loop one quite a number of runners stop the race. Only nine people manage to finish 3 rounds (60 miles, which is about 100k!) within the 40 hours time limit. They are not regarded as real finishers of the Barkley, but they are seen as finishers of the 'Fun Run' (imagine how much fun it must be to go on for 40 hours through brier fields...)

All DNF's (Did Not Finish) are "tapped out." This means that Laz or his son play a death march on his bugle, a small kind of trumpet. It sounds macabre.

Wood fire

Just three runners finish the first three loops in 36 hours. They are allowed to start loop four. Two of them continue. They decide to take a nap before they start again.

Carl Laniak is the first of these runners to end his fourth loop. When he gets back at the campsite it's clear he's done. He didn't manage to get to all books for a fourth time. DNF! When he's tapped out, it sounds very dramatic. The giant redhaired, Viking-like, very sympathetic Carl had to surrender. He was so close to get into the last loop...

Brett Maune is writing history when he is getting to the yellow gate to finish his last loop after 56 hours. He is the tenth finisher in the history of Barkley. Not every year this race welcomes a finisher. And this year it was close to a not-finish. Park rangers wanted to stop Brett after his fourth loop, because there was a woodfire in a part of the wood the race goes through. Happily the race was saved by a small surgical intervention.

I have never been at a 'tarmac' marathon. A lot of respect for people who run within four or three hours this 26 miles, or even faster. But these 56 hours from Brett Maune at the Barkley were at a different level in another dimension. I think this finish will be forever 'fixed on my retina' (which means: I will remember it forever)....

-End-

[side text]

Meth lab

In general a race director of a 100-mile race, in Europe or America, will try to pamper the athletes, lower the finishing times, and to get as many finishers as possible. Normally. But in the Barkley everything is different. Every time a runner manages to get to the finish, the loop is adapted, made more extreme. Another game Laz is playing is the starting time. By putting it at night last race, runners had to find their way at night time, which makes orientation in the first loop already difficult.

Barkley gives typical names to different spots where the runners pass by: Zip Line, Big Hell, Rat Jaw, Testicle Spectacle, MethLab, Raw Dog Falls, Leonard's Buttslide and Bad Thing are some of the names of these locations 'Out There,' the respectful indication of the woods, when people are at relative comfort at the campsite...