

"Nope, that's all yours. I don't ever need to do that one."

Beverley Anderson-Abbs, 2009 as Alan was telling her he didn't want her doing the Barkley.

So how did I end up "out there" with Alan, and some of the strongest Barkley runners ever, in 2012? I've made this statement twice before in my athletic career: the first time as an adventure racer watching Eco-Challenge in early 1999, in 2000 I found myself on a team racing same in Borneo; the next, after completing my first 50 miler on my 40th birthday in 2004, when I was asked by Greg Soderland if I wanted to race Western States 100. My response was slightly different but effectively the same (Why would anyone want to run 100 miles?), 2005 found me on the start in Squaw Valley. So it only stands to reason that having made this statement once again, this time associated with the Barkley, that I would find myself "out there". One would think I would have learned to keep my mouth shut.

Alan had gone to the Barkley the past two years, 2010 and 2011, with me joining him to crew at the latter. It was during that time that I started to think I'd like to give it a shot. Having had knee surgery in 2010, I was still struggling with downhill running in 2011 but started being able to run pretty consistently by mid-year, and was able to do some hard training from that point on.

As a blessing, or curse, both Alan and I received condolences shortly after Christmas, meaning we could work together out there as long as possible, but would have no one to help us out as a crew. We hoped we would be able to recruit someone at camp. We arrived on Thursday, set up our tent with Paul Melzer, and went to stay in the motel in town for Thursday night to get one final good night sleep. Friday was spent doing a bit of hiking, prepping maps, final gear, and food. In 2011, the conch had blown shortly after midnight so we went to bed early to make sure we got a decent night's sleep just in case. We awoke about 7:00am and did some preparation that amounted to moving things around and second guessing previous choices, impatiently awaiting the conch which finally sounded at 8:11. Final foot prep, last minute checks of gear and we were waiting at the yellow gate around 9:05.

I am typically bad about starting with the fastest people, and this was no different. Once Laz lit the cigarette, a handful of folks started jogging up the road, with me right there. Nick took off like a shot up the hill, the rest of us settled into a fast hike with Jon and Jared up ahead about 20 yards, then me, Brett, Alan, and a few others. We reached the top of Bird Mountain in about 35 minutes and jogged out along the ridge. Hopped over the pillars of death, and headed out to Fangorn forest, book 1, and down check mate hill. I wouldn't get to experience the true joy of that one until much later.

At book 1, there was a bit of a scramble for pages, and then everyone crashed down the hill. Brett, Jared, Alan, and I traveled along the bench a little ways and descended quickly together. We arrived at book 2 first, got our pages and were leaving just as the next group arrived. This had taken about an hour. The four of us headed off hiking the climbs along NBT, and jogging the down hills. I started taking on a role I had become familiar with during adventure racing, checking with everyone to make sure they were eating, drinking, taking electrolytes etc. It was only later that I truly realized this was not the same as an adventure race; it was every man, or woman, for themselves.

Travel along the candy-ass trails went pretty smooth and we were fairly quickly at book 3 and the water stop. Easy travel to book 4 at Yellow Indian then the fun began on "what?" trail down hills. It became apparent very quickly that I was not able to move as quickly as the guys on the off trail stuff but I was absolutely not going to lose contact now. The three would pull ahead and I would struggle to catch up when they paused to navigate some section or discuss something. It was a huge slinky effect, but while they were getting small breaks, I was constantly chasing.

Book 5 found us at the bottom of the first major hill and ready to climb testicle spectacle (ovary spectacle?). I was still able to keep up reasonably well on the climbs but was pushing my limits over and over again. We got to the top and dashed down Meth Lab on the other side, again with me falling behind and rushing to catch up once at the bottom. Book 6 at Raw Dog Falls then Danger Dave's ahead. Climbs continued to get longer and more painful with the abundance of saw briars having had a nice early growing season. And a special addition was beginning to show up in some areas with nice shiny poison ivy popping up all over the place. It was around this time that I started to doubt my choice to try to stay with this group of guys and kept hoping they would get so far ahead on a descent that I couldn't see them and feel the obligation to catch, then and try to hang on again.

Alan helped me get up Danger Dave's; we struggled up Pig Head creek and on up Rat Jaw. I had heard stories of Rat Jaw but none do it justice. I was not looking forward to climbing that all the way from the bottom on loop 3. By now the climbs were starting to stress my left Achilles, which I'd been fighting some tendonitis in, and I was changing how I climbed to more of a side step on the really steep sections. Brett and Jared made good time on the climb, Alan and I slowed a little and we re-grouped at the top. Jared put on leg guards for the descent, in retrospect a very good idea, and he and Brett began running very quickly down Rat Jaw, I told Alan to go with them, and I would manage on my own. Miraculously, as I thought I had completely lost them, I arrived at the bottom and there they were. We were back together to go through the storm drain and climb the bad thing.

I was really starting to suffer on the climbs by now and held on as best I could. This climb gave me a bit of a reprieve as navigating to hit the correct capstone kept the guys moving a little slower. Indian Knob and book 9 were almost upon us then the last off trail descent, zipline, for the loop. This was a little slower and I was able to keep up until we got onto the jeep trail near the bottom. We found the beech tree, got our pages, and started immediately heading up big hell. I was shot. I had so little left I could barely keep moving up the climb. All three guys slowed a little, and as we neared the top Alan told them he needed to dial back a bit. I was dying, but apparently he was struggling a little also. We got the pages at Chimney top together and we waited to let Brett and Jared get a little ahead so we weren't trying to chase, and they didn't feel any obligation to wait.

The final downhill on candy-ass trail rejuvenated me somewhat and Alan and I touched the yellow gate only 3 minutes behind Brett and Jared in 7 hours and 44 minutes.

We went back to our camp site hoping Dale would be there to help us but he was nowhere to be found. We ate and drank what we could but had hoped for hot water to have cup-a-soup, I switched to a larger pack to hold more clothes for night travel, and cleaned, dried, and re-lubed feet before putting on fresh socks. After about 25 minutes Alan and I were ready to go and headed back to the Yellow Gate, as we approached, Dave Horton ran over with a chocolate milkshake and gave it to us telling us to get as much as we could down before we touched that gate. It was amazing! I sucked down what I could, got a hug and kiss from Horty, and touched the gate.

The climb up bird mountain was a little slower this time, but I had a trekking pole which helped a lot. The plan was to use the pole on climbs and candy-ass trails and stow it for the off trail descents where I would need hands to grab trees etc.

Loop 2 proceeded about like loop 1, albeit slower, until we came off Fyke's Folly in the dark and were not where we expected. A brief panic, then collecting our wits and figuring out what we needed to do, got us back on track with about 25 minutes lost. The steep climbs were really starting to get to me. My

heart was racing and I was doing everything I could to not slow down too much. I kept repeating “get comfortable with being uncomfortable” to myself but the level of uncomfortable kept getting worse. My Achilles was now screaming on the climbs and my patella was starting to shift and catch on the descents as the fluid under it increased.

At the top of Rat Jaw, I put on a light pair of pants to provide a little protection from the briars on the descent and headed down as fast as I could. We struggled a little locating the correct capstone at Indian knob, and because it was dark, our lights provided a beacon for Nick to follow up the hill. He caught us at the book and we agreed to continue together. Down zipline to beech fork and on up big hell. Nick stopped to eat and I started heading up, knowing they would catch me as I steadily moved slower. Alan and Nick caught and passed me, but waited a few minutes at the book to make sure I was comfortable getting back myself.

I arrived back at Yellow Gate, so badly wanting to say I was done, but knowing I wouldn't. Checked in and shuffled over to camp. Dale had some hot water and made me a cup-a-soup, providing a much needed load of salt and carbohydrates. I ate everything I could get my hands on, sandwich, soup, ensure, mocha, and started feeling a little better. Alan was ready to go and I said I would wait until the next person came in and see if we could join up, not being very comfortable navigating the course backwards on my own. Unfortunately, Jon came in only about 10 minutes later and told Dale he was going to head as quickly as possible. Not knowing who else might be coming and how far back they might be, I pulled myself together, packed my smaller pack, taking just an emergency rain poncho instead of the big rain jacket, and met Jon at the gate.

We trotted down the road and up the trail until it started climbing, then we set into a hike. Over Rough Ridge,(really, why didn't I notice that before?), then up the big climb to Chimney Top. We passed Travis and Tim on their way down and reached the top just as it was getting light. We had been talking about how bad going down big hell could be in the dark and were thankful we had timed things well. Regardless, we drifted too far to the right near the bottom of big hell and ended up coming down the wrong ridge. I was pretty confident we needed to go up stream to the confluence; Jon was not and ran across the creek looking for landmarks as I hiked back up the jeep road. We arrived at the confluence at the same time, climbed up to the tree, retrieved our pages, and headed up zip line.

The number of people traveling down zipline had left several pretty distinct trails to follow up the hill and we made short work of the climb. Near the top, we could see the correct capstone and headed straight to it. The bad thing was pretty bad but we stumbled down, got to the prison and headed back up rat jaw. Rat jaw from down here was going to be huge and my head was working against me. I was again struggling on the climbs, but I didn't want to lose Jon, at the same time I didn't want to slow him down too much.

The climb to the fire tower seemed to take forever but I finally arrived. We filled up water systems and headed back down. Once again I had to use everything in me to keep contact with Jon. I at least needed to hang on to Stallion Mountain, although I felt I could navigate it on my own, it would be huge for me to have the help to that point. Everything began to blur together we got down Pig Head creek, and headed over to Danger Dave's where we chose the pussy trail. As we came out of the trail there was a blond girl in pink pants there. I thought for a moment I was hallucinating when I realized she had a camera and was with the documentary. Raw dog falls, meth lab, testicle spectacle, and the New River crossing. We crossed the river in a section where we could wash down our legs a little, a much needed luxury, but as I continued the crossing, I slipped and fell in the river. I wanted so badly to sit there and

cry but got up quickly and said “I’m good” and looked at my watch. It was completely blank. I don’t know if it had gone blank when it hit the water (so much for a water proof timex) or had been blank earlier. I was horrified, realizing that I now had no way to gage my movement for the rest of the loop. I also had no way of knowing when I should take electrolytes etc. Oh well, can’t worry about that now, Jon was on the move and I had no clue where we had crossed the river. Jon did this section very differently than we had done it on loops 1 and 2 so I was at his mercy until we got near the top of the hill. He tried to explain his landmarks in case I ended up on my own on the next loop, with me politely saying “oh, okay, got it” and all the while, I’m thinking, “f--- this, I’ll go the way we went on loops 1 and 2”.

I asked him to please get me up Stallion Mountain if he could, apologized several times for going so slow (or maybe that was in my head, I’m no longer sure), and I was pretty sure I could make it back from there. We climbed, he pulling away, but checking back to make sure I could see the route he took. Finally he went up over the edge at Fykes’ and by the time I got there, he was gone.

Okay, now I’m on my own, I can do this. I have a good memory for landmarks and started using it. I traveled around Fyke’s down the road to the fire ring and up the next road. I climbed the next hill a little too soon and immediately knew I was not where I was familiar with the route. I went back down the hill and headed left a little ways, found the climb I recognized and easily got to Yellow Indian. The stretch to the water stop and Garden spot were also easy for me and I figured I had it in the bag. I was moving slowly but I was hitting exactly what I wanted.

I headed down for the coal ponds and tried to remember how Alan had navigated up the hill. I started going down and became completely lost just as the thunder storm hit. I pulled out my little emergency poncho, put it on, and tried to figure out what I had done. I was heading in exactly the wrong direction. I tried just following my compass the direction I need to go, to no avail. I was starting to panic, it was still storming, my little poncho wasn’t holding up to the thorns very well, and I started screaming. I half hoped someone was close enough to hear me and come to my rescue. After a few seconds, I felt a little calmer, realized no one was going to save me, and decided to head back to the trail where I’d come off and try again. I got to the trail and began thinking I would just give up, take the trail around the ponds and head in down quitters road when I got to a little creek crossing and there, just off to my right were the coal ponds I wanted, with the clearly visible little trail made by a hundred or so feet over the last day.

I was thrilled! I gave a little victory shout, headed to the little trail and was back on track. This is when I felt around to get some food and realized I had only 2 little snack baggies of food...oh my god, a bunch of stuff must have fallen out pockets when I fell in the river, or at one of my many other falls. Again, I panicked...these 2 little baggies did not represent very many calories and I was already behind on caloric intake. I had a choice of eating a large amount at once and getting a little boost, knowing I would completely run out before I finished the loop, or ration what I had and never really pull out of the deficit. Again, I hoped that someone would come behind me and have a little extra to share. I ate a little granola with nuts, dried fruit, and m&ms and kept moving. I felt like I was moving through mud. The climbs were becoming horrifyingly long and, although I wanted desperately to run the descents, I would start running and gradually slow to a trudge. I could feel my knee getting worse on each run attempt and didn’t want to cause more damage. If I landed just right, it felt okay, so I went for perfect placement of my feet and minimized the number of gut wrenching nerve jolts to about one every 100 or so steps.

I finally got to “wilderness” ridge and yelped in joy, down one more hill, up to Jury ridge, down to Phillips Creek, then...Check mate hill. I slowly retrieved my page from the Phillips creek book, only one more to go...I looked up the hill, looked around again, looked up the hill again. Hated the thought of heading up that hill but checked my map and compass, set a bearing a little to the right of where I was heading and set off. This was, by far the worst hill yet. Whether it actually was or if it was magnified by the horror stories, lack of food, incredible aloneness I felt, or what, I'll never know. I slipped and slid my way up, grabbing roots and trees, using my pole and moving...very very slowly. Everything that touched my flayed legs hurt badly and many brought screaming curses to my lips. After what seemed forever, I looked up to see a row of capstones above me?!? Where the hell was I? There were no capstones when we came down. I took a deep breath, yelled at myself about something, and headed to the left under the capstones, as soon as I could go up again, I did. I climbed forever, always looking up to see if I could catch a glimpse of the fir trees. Finally, fir trees? Yes! I could see them and kept going up. I ended up on the bench at exactly the location we had been going down the previous two loops. I turned right and barely managed a trot around the bench to the big rock where the book was now perched beside. I sat on the rock, took several deep breaths, ate the last of my meager food, pulled my page, and headed back towards the Cumberland trail.

Somewhere on the way back to the trail, I saw two people who looked at me and carried on. After a pause the guy in front turned and said, “Is that you, Bev?” “Yes” I replied, and they whooped and hollered about how great I was doing. I should have asked them what time it was so I would have a clue how I was doing, but I didn't have the where-with-all to do so. I kept moving. Crossing the pillars scared the crap out of me this time as they seemed like they had gotten smaller and moved further apart over the course of a day and half. I gingerly stepped across, using my pole to stabilize my step and kept moving. As I approached the top of the descent from Bird Mountain, I realized I had no watch to help me track my descent. After a few seconds I recalled that laz's instructions said there were 14 switchbacks so I decided to count switchbacks to keep track.

At the apex of each switchback I would give what to me seemed like a pretty decent little leap and would call out the switchback number, gaining a little enthusiasm as I reached the double digits. I was just doing my little leap and calling out 14 when I noticed the camera at the corner. Oh my god, I'm going to look like a dork. Oh well, I'm down. My Achilles was huge by this time, my patella was catching and didn't feel right and I was bonking badly, but I was here. I mustered up a hobbling jog down the road to the Yellow Gate and touched it in 34 hours 18min.

Mentally, although I was bonking, I felt good and wanted to go out again, I thought about what it would take to get to Chimney Top, get the 1st book and come back if I felt I needed to, this would mean tearing up my Achilles on that huge climb and turning around and causing further damage to my knee, which was already swollen badly. I asked to be tapped out and slunk back to camp.