

## Stranger than paradise

What takes Gary Cantrell? Saturday morning at six am he get's up. Two hours and eleven minutes later he blows a conch shell. Sixty minutes later he lites a cigarette, though he's not a real smoker. Rituals.

Nearby a Yellow Gate at Big Cove campground in Frozen Head State Park, Tennessee, 35 nervous runners know what it means for them when the cigarette is lit: The start of the Barkley Marathons. The Barkley is a footrace which will go on for the next sixty hours, in which some of the participants run about a hundred new world miles and gain about 60.000 feet elevation. A foot is not a meter, but it's anyhow a lot of elevation. The race is hard and not every year the Barkley has a finisher, however this year brings a new Barkley record of three finishers. 'That was because of the perfect weather situation', Gary grins.

What makes the Barkley such a hard race? Maybe the best answer on this brilliant question is: Gary's brain. This race director is very interested in the physical and mental limits of modern ultra runners. He sends runners five times out on a twenty miles loop. There's some discussion about the real distance, but that's a discussion about details. The facilities for the runners are minimal: On the course, drinkable water is at two points available and back at the de campground, a runner can try to refresh with the content of his trunk. The route is pointed out on a mastermap near the Yellow Gate, and runners trace this route the Friday before the start. To 'ease' navigation Gary wrote a detailed route description. For most non-English native speakers it's advisable not to use this written course description: for them it's a 95% guarantee to get lost!

The terrain is evenenomed. Half the course consists of trails, the rest is bloody nature. Exotic nature, with rattlesnakes, copperheads, tics, poison ivy and briars. The Barkley is one of these footraces where you better wear leather gloves.

Gary stays, like the three finishers, sixty hours awake. That gives them very interesting hallucinations. Not only for people that run the race, the Barkley is a war of attrition...

The Barkley is pure. A trailrace without trails, a course without flashing banners of sponsors, a challenge without GPS, altimeters, or other superfluous gadgets. During sixty hours, people around the bonfires besides the Yellow Gate grill chicken and bake beans in big containers.

Veterans and others tell truthful lies and encourage the athletes who pass the gate on their way to a new loop. It's not always clear if the encouragements are meant to support the runners, or for the pleasure of seeing this runners suffer when, hours later, they return to the Yellow Gate. The Barkley is intense. For the runners who quit or are disqualified because they pass the time limits, Gary plays a short funeral march on a bugle. Some runners undergo this moment with a smile, others are in tears... The race and cut off times are grim. The Barkley is a lesson in humility. The race breaks strong ego's and makes small ego's tall.

It's quite hot when we start. After several hours of running, Frozen Ed gets severe cramps in his quadriceps. The cramps are very painful, this looks like the suffering

everyone and everything talks about, referring to the Barkley. We are on our way to book three in the First Loop of five. Frozen Ed, first finisher of the Barkley in 1988 and writer of Barkley bible 'Tales from Out There', suffers again from a painful attack of leg cramps later on at neo-Buttslide. In this bizarre steep descent, where most runners use their hand, feet and butt, Ed loses control and screams like a skinny pig. He falls down to the left and turns several times deeper into the void. Happily, from my higher point of view, it looks more dramatic than Ed experiences it. After the cramps stop, Ed gets up again, picks up some 'terrorist vegetation' from his hair and shirt and goes on. No time to loose.

We are 'Out There', in Barkley jargon. Out There is there where one suffers, away from the comfortable campground. To control the runners Out There, runners have to tear pages from eleven hidden books on the course. Gary gives each runner a new number at the start of each loop, and the runner takes out the pages that correspond with this race number. An ingenious control mechanism, though for a writer it's a special sensation to tear pages from a book. The book titles are in Barkley style: 'Sweet suffering', 'Darkness at noon', 'The idiot'...

Twelve hours later. On my left, an orange half moon, with a tiny belly. On my right, higher on the mountain slope, the spooky sound of ohw-ohw-ohw-ing owls (that's how they sound in Dutch). For the second time in 24 hours I'm on my way to Garden Spot. It doesn't look like yesterday morning at all. Ahead of me runs Frozen Ed, whom I found back after book two. Behind me Julian. Ed doesn't suffer from his cramps anymore and looks like resurrected from the dead. Julian suffers in silence. Even though he's not speaking, I feel he's very sympathetic. I feel myself like I'm somewhere in between the past and the future, in both cases the Yellow Gate. I strongly wish for a strong double Italian espresso and a grilled chicken, or maybe even better a grilled steak with gorgonzola sauce, mmmmm. I start to detest the snickers and nut mix in my backpack. A runner needs decent food and drinks at this time of night.

The race seems to be built on a Darwinian principle. Survival of the fittest. It seems to be a matter of not collapsing before the end of Loop Five, in theory a simple formula. But after Loop One, about half of the entrants quit the race. Most of them 'refuse to continue', as Gary points it out in his racers list. The Barkley engulfed them. My first Loop takes me more than twelve hours. And to finish this First Loop in twelve hours I had to do my best...

Most runners surrender before even finishing three of the five loops. This is more or less considered as finishing the Funrun, however, it's not clear if the Funrun is a kind of official finish. Most things in the Barkley are not very clear, but who cares? Time flies, when having fun. I think the hardest challenges of the Barkley are the force of nature (running no trails), the elevation (in metric system: 1 km elevation for every 10 km distance), route finding, specially at night, and the tentations of the campground in between two loops.

On the top of Mount Stallion in Loop Two, Julian decides to quit. He has to throw up again en is done. Next hours, Ed and I get lost several times, between book four and five, at the slopes of Crazy Stallion. Even the old master Frozen Ed is not able to tame 'good old Stallion'. Gary must have fun hearing this.

The fatigue is playing with us. It's long after midnight and we run for about twenty hours. Ed's machinery seems to be at perfect operating temperature at this point, old diesel engines start slowly. We calculate that we will meet the first Third Loop runners who run counter clockwise at 8.30 am, somewhere between Pighead Creek and Lookout Tower, somewhere at Rat Jaw in the brairs.

When we reach New River we get lost again ('I hear the New River, we have to go right here'... 'Right? Eh, well in Loop One we went left at New River'... 'But you see this cable? It surely does not cross the stream twice. That's impossible... Let's try right...'..... 'Right! It was left in the end, you were right, let's go left. 'Right?' 'Ok left')

We find the log to cross the stream, but my mind is in a serious dip, at once I feel exhausted. It was the price I had to pay for twenty hours of total Barkley destruction. My legs are bleeding, but I don't feel it anymore. My muscles are painful, but I don't notice it anymore.

Even the fatigue is a kind of unnoticeable and has become a 'Mental State of Nothingness'. It's simple. There's uphill dense forest and there's downhill dense forest. And if you run flat for more than some minutes, you're lost.

I take a caffeine pill. Maybe it's doping, no idea, but in the US it's easy to purchase these pills in a supermarket (mostly not far from the riffle section). It feels like eating an American Breakfast. Today no waffle at Wafflehouse (my **favorite** by far), or pancakes with fried bacon, but electrolytes and coffee in a pill.

As a matter of fact, after twelve hours I was done with this race. My feet were rotten, my head was banging and I was demolished. At book eleven in the First Loop I decided to quit. But when I came back to the campground, Nicole gave me hot chicken soup and a strong illegal porter beer (I drank some excellent brews in the the States) and I forgot my good intention to quit. Nicole helped me to stock my backpack and I went to the Yellow Gate to ask for a new race number. Gary was laughing in his specific way, a combination between compassion, sympathy and surprise. It must have been curious for him, another 'Lowlander' in his backyard. Two minutes later I was on my way to Bird Mountain. I was on my own then, and night seemed darker than ever before in my life...

A description of a footrace like the Barkley asks for one specific word. Respect. Respect for Gary, who takes place at a chair close to the Yellow Gate, to watch his runners pass by, and to count the bookpages after each loop. From Sunday on, also Gary gets his hallucinations, like the other runners still in the race.

Respect for the power of nature.

Respect for the runners who are foolish enough to start this race, and deep deep respect for the runners who stay for fifty to sixty hours Out There to accomplish unimaginable results in quite basic circumstances.

Barkley is more than a trail race. Barkley is a feeling. Not a determined nice feeling, but anyhow a feeling that matters.

After my breakfast with electrolytes and caffeine pills, I feel that any notion of speed is gone. Not that there was a lot of speed before breakfast, but after New River I feel the end of my first Barkley performance getting closer. I try to find some energy

climbing Testicle Spectacle, but I'm not able to stay close to Frozen Ed, my battery is low. We take a break at sunrise, and we see valleys exhale fog from our high position. I ran almost 23 hours and I know it's over. After neo-Buttslide for the second time, it's a torture to climb Rat Jaw to book seven. There I quit and run directly to the campground, to announce my failure, to whom is interested. I'm tapped out, and hear the bugle with mixed feelings....

It took me 25 hours to accomplish the more or less official 20 miles. Nothing to be proud of. Still I am. I was about 24 hours in the Barkley and I'm pretty sure this race will be the rest of my life inside me.

Brett Maune finishes in a new record of 52 hours and some minutes. Don Juan Jared Campbell is the second finisher in about 56 hours and John Fegyveresi is back at the Yellow Gate just before the sixty hours cut off, and is the third finisher. Hats off!