

THE TRIAL AND TERROR METHOD

There's a dearth of reports this year, only seven on Matt Mahoney's site, as compared with over twenty from last year's race. This may be an effect of the weather: twenty-three starters finished a first official loop, and all but two of them started a second one, but only five of these managed to brave the rain and fog and finish the loop.

I'm posting a short account of my two-book DNF in the hope of encouraging some others to come forth with their accounts of failure. I am as much of a Barkley junkie as my age, time and pocketbook allow, and have read with interest every report I have been able to locate, because each story is unique. So far, I have not seen one that says "I just sailed through five loops without the least complication." All Barkley stories are intrinsically interesting, but the only people who will ever understand them are other Barkley participants, past or present (and possibly future), so this list is the place to record them.

Last year, in my first venture to Frozen Head, I drove all the way from Oregon because I had too much gear to take on a plane, and as a result I had to leave on Sunday before the race was over, and missed the sensational triple finish. This year, realizing that all I needed was what I could carry, I flew out and stayed to the end, which I wouldn't have missed for anything.

I was pretty well trained last year, but figured, as the oldest entrant ever, that I would also be one of the slowest, and I threw my lot in with the very veteran Stuart Gleman, who was contemplating an 18-20 hour loop and had been on the book-setting operation. As the daylight began to fade after surmounting Testicle Spectacle and negotiating the Neo-Buttslide, we wound up lacking the will to continue at Raw Dog Falls (probably the worst possible place to drop) and managed to get a ride to camp from Petros (we agreed later that it would have been better to hike up to Armes Gap and take the Tower Road and one of the Old Mac trails). I had figured, at my age (just short of my 76th birthday), to have only one shot at Barkley, but in retrospect I could see how I might have done better, so I applied again for 2013, and was surprised to be readmitted. I had expected to be well down on the weight list, but planned to come out anyway if I could manage it.

My strategy this year was to use as much speed as I could on the C-A trails to the Garden Spot, with the object of keeping up with someone who knew the course beyond there, and getting up to the Tower, if possible, with some daylight to spare. I got to Frozen Head on Tuesday and spent a couple of days hiking around to places I hadn't been. Wednesday I went up the Tower Road from Armes Gap to check out the Coal Mine Road and look up Rat Jaw (brrr!), out to Indian Knob (lots of snow), then came back on South Old Mac. My plan on Thursday was to hike out Bird Mt. and the NBT to the Garden Spot and return via Chimney Top. I ran into Rich Limacher in the morning and he had planned to climb Rat Jaw, so we did that instead. It was hard, but not as bad as I had feared (Wednesday's snow had melted), which gave me some confidence. In retrospect, however, I might have been better off locating the Garden Spot.

On Saturday, my plan for keeping up with the pack fell apart almost immediately. Stuart, Rich, and David Hughes were behind me, but everyone else was out of sight by the time we hit the single track, even though I was moving as briskly as I dared. About half way up, David caught up with me, and we stayed together all the way to Book 1. He waited for me a couple of times, and as he had caught me on the way up, I figured he would probably move ahead, which he did shortly after the book. I managed to keep him in sight briefly, then lost him going down Jaque Mate ridge (after that, I was alone for about 7 hours). I was staying north of the creek, but perhaps not far enough north, as I missed the buttslide entirely. However, there were many footprints going down, big messy ones, so I knew that someone else had preceded me (I realized much later that it was probably pigs), so I bushwhacked down and with a little maneuvering merged with Phillips Creek and the NBT. From Shannon's report, I believe she must have passed me while I was off course between Book 1 and Phillips Creek.

On the map, the NBT proceeds due east for about 3 miles (as the crow might fly if it cared to) along the northern edge of the park. By the compass, however, you're mostly traveling either north or south, and the orange boundary markers draw a skewer-like line through the numerous switchbacks, appearing on one side or the other of the ridges. The trail is well-marked with orange blazes, which peter out as the coal ponds begin, which is where Peter also petered out. I remembered the coal ponds well from last year, but must not have been paying attention to the location of the switchback trail to the Garden Spot. Near the beginning of the ponds there was a trail going upward to the right, marked with the same white tags as the Cumberland Trail before Book 1. I took this to be the new trail which the directions told us not to take. There seemed to be more water in the ponds than last year, and the "ancient mining road", if that's what it was, appeared to be under water, but I stayed on that bench until it began (as described) to swing to the north, but I could see no signs of a switchback, or of runners' tracks, anywhere. I wandered up and down here for the best part of an hour, looking for a way up, but didn't find anything. I did spot what appeared to be a landslide, extending several hundred feet up the hillside to my right (east), and it was in the right direction so I climbed up it. If Laz is looking for a variation for next year's race to make it harder, this would serve nicely!

When I got to the top, there was a road heading roughly east and west, and I went east at first, and found myself circling south and then west around a clear level area with a sleeping bag in the middle of it. There was a smell of natural gas, which seemed to be emanating from a blue tank on the side of the road. A quick check to the east led to a view of a valley with some power

lines, obviously not part of the course. A bluff about 80-100 feet high loomed over the west side of the open area, with a park boundary marker at its foot. I was fairly sure I had come too far east, but was confused by the boundary marker, as it seemed to lie to the east of where I thought the Garden Spot must be, up on the high ground. Following the road westward, I came upon an overgrown road heading upward on the bluff, and climbed up it to see if I could hit the Garden Spot trail, without any luck, so I returned to the road. At this point, so much time had gone by that I was in danger of being in the dark before even locating Book 2, so I decided to continue westward on the road, figuring that it would intersect with the Coffin Springs trail and Quitter's road.

I had only gone a few hundred yards (I believe -- my perception of distance may have been off by this time) when I spotted an intersection up ahead, and the first humans I had seen in 7 hours approaching from the west; these turned out to be Rich Limacher and David Hughes. They expressed relief to see that I was still in Frozen Head Park, and said that they were planning to drop, but were returning to the Garden Spot to scatter some of Kerry's ashes. By an amazing coincidence, I had a small amount of my late son Tom's ashes, which I had intended to scatter at some point, so we made a joint mission back to Kerry's Overlook, a very beautiful place, where David provided a brief invocation. On the way there, I finally picked up my page from Book 2, over 8 hours into the race.

After getting some water, we returned (I believe) to the Coffin Springs turnoff, where we met Shannon, Mike and Catherine, and a lengthy discussion ensued about the best way (or any way!) to get to the Buttslide and Book 3. They wound up going back the way they had come, still in some doubt about the route. Much later, I realized that that had been an opportunity to continue in the race, but having read Shannon's report, I believe the outcome wouldn't have been much different if I had.

Rich, David and I continued toward Quitter's Road, and soon saw another figure limping in our direction. This was Stuart Gleman, who was headed for the Tower, where he intended to phone a runner who was going to meet him there, to tell her that he was dropping. He had fallen several hours before, and had a bad bruise on his hip and upper thigh. After some conversation, Rich and David headed back to camp on the road, and Stu and I hiked to the Tower (about the only place on the course with a phone signal), he made his call, and we headed down North Old Mac toward the Yellow Gate. We arrived without incident (beyond a fairly large number of pig sightings) around 13 hours after the start, arriving in time for the bugle concert, and missing the worst of the rain and all of the fog.

In retrospect, I felt better about this year's effort than the number of books (only 2, compared to 6 last year) might indicate. For one thing, I was mostly self-navigated. Last year's map and directions were almost pristine when I finished; this year's are creased, torn, and covered with blood, sweat, tears, and mud. It was unsettling to be lost -- I was in Baglione country, and without the map and compass I would have been toast -- but it was rewarding to the spirit to get unlost without aid. Learning the course from veterans is part of the Barkley tradition, but realistically there are few veterans that I would be able to keep up with for a whole loop, so doing it on my own is pretty much a requirement. The problem is, that using the tools -- map, compass, and directions -- can take a lot of time, which means that my chances of finishing even one official loop are marginal, hinging on things like a really early start or ideal weather. I was also encouraged by my pre-race climb of Rat Jaw, so that with last year's ascent of the Spectacle, I have managed to get up two of the five major climbs in the clockwise direction. In this respect, I believe my training (a year-round base of 50+ miles/week and about one vertical mile a week) was adequate for a single loop.

What it boils down to, then, is solo navigation, where the main limiting factor is daylight (there is, apparently, no time limit for an unofficial loop, as long as one is known to be on the course), and the willingness to be on unknown parts of the course after dark (with possible contributing effects of weather, food supply, equipment problems, etc.). What an opportunity! I hope to see it again!

I hope to read some more accounts of others' experiences this year. Courage! You can hardly have done worse than I did!

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