

The 2018 Barkley Marathons

AB

It's the Monday before Barkley. The skies above Frozen Head are split wide open by flashes of cold, bright electric light. Thunder cracks like a whip before tumbling off across the tops of the hills and spilling down into the valleys. In those valleys raindrops like marbles bounce off the tarmac and the creeks are furious and foaming. Somewhere amongst it all, a scared wee boy lies ensconced in his \$35 Walmart sleeping bag. Staring wide eyed at the ceiling of his tent, he wonders what he's let himself in for.

48 hours later the skies are unloading on Frozen Head once again. This time the creeks stay down as the ground swells upwards, a duvet of white softening the edges of the rocks and the fallen trees. In the campground a family's holiday is caved in by the weight of the snow, torn canvas hanging limply from fractured poles like a dead bird on the highway. The scared wee boy has added a second sleeping bag inside the first and lies on his back, kicking the roof of the tent.

Shhhhhwhump.

The accumulated snow slides from the flysheet and falls to the ground. This is all getting a little silly.

In his 2010 race report, Jon Basham writes about the weeks he spent in the park before the race, crawling from his tent on miserable day after miserable day to train in the cold, wet woods. For Jon, this was a process of becoming comfortable with the conditions, hardening himself for race day. Others have taken a similar approach. *If you can't make it through this, you'll never make it through Barkley.*

Smothered by kilos of bargain camping gear, I wonder whether this thinking can be applied to everyone. What if some people can only take so much discomfort? What if I have a reservoir of forbearance which, once drained, takes time to refill? What if, rather than toughening me up, my time in Big Cove is wearing me down? Waiting for my stove to boil, hands in fists, fists in armpits, I do lunges to keep warm.

On Friday night I'm in bed at half past eight, intent on getting a full nights sleep. I spend a restless, fitful twelve hours in my tent. Contour lines drift tantalisingly before my eyes, meaningless phrases come and go.

. . .two trees twenty feet apart. . .

. . .a large flat rock. . .

. . .don't go this way. . .

Unsurprisingly, sleep is elusive. When I drag myself from the tent in the morning I've been unconscious for no more than an hour. I yawn, stretch and freeze, hands overhead, as a great honk rushes through the campground. It's like he'd been waiting for me.

The beginning of loop one is calm then frantic, fast then slow. The snaking camaraderie of the first climb, the impatient wait in the scrum at the first book, then the scattershot mayhem of the first descent. We concertina through the first few hills, stretching out on the descents, coming back together at the books and on the climbs, each time losing a runner or two. We're ten then eight then seven then six. By the first water drop at the Garden Spot we're down to five; Gary, Guillaume, James, Jamil and me.

It's all going swimmingly. Gary is the consummate tour guide, talking about bearings and waving poles towards distinctive trees while we nod along and pretend it makes sense. Jamil is homing in on books like a sniffer dog trained to find third rate paperback fiction.

Chugging along through the drizzle, we tick off landmarks with names I know - Leonard's Butt Slide, Bobcat Rock, Hiram's Pool and Spa. I've been reading about these places for years, to find myself surrounded by them now is enchanting. It's like walking through the world of your favourite children's book. Stallion Mountain is my Narnia, slag heaps, contaminated water and all.

We continue on, putting tick after tick on the list of a Barkley sightseer's MustDos, matching reality with the pictures we've built in our heads after years of pouring over plain text PDF race reports.

Testicle Spectacle is a slippery mess.

Danger Dave's climbing wall is a slippery, precipitous mess.

We don't see Pussy Ridge, and pour scorn on those who do.

Below the highway, we pick our way through abandoned car parts and broken glass, past the discarded household furnishings and bits of decomposing animal carcass which pass for course markers at the Barkley. The fog moves in, for all its ephemerality an immovable pillar of the Barkley edifice. The trunks of the blowdowns drift into view like the leaning masts of ships gone aground in the mist. We crawl beneath them, swimming through briars like the first rushes

of water across their decks as they founder. Me and Guillaume share a bemused smile. *Well, what did we expect?*

By the bottom of Rat Jaw the thickening fog has rendered the edges of the clearcut indistinct. We toil upwards through the boundless murk. The mud makes the steepest sections almost impassable. We grab hold of the downed power lines and haul ourselves onwards.

As we approach the top, a bank of darker grey describes the final steepening. It looks higher than it should, as if a wall has been built across the side of the road. This is not entirely wrong. A shoulder to shoulder blockade of crew, supporters and media line the top of Rat Jaw, a Gore-Tex rampart in the drizzle, smart phones aimed downwards like archers defending a castle.

Aside from a few cameras on Testicle Spectacle and John Kelly's impression of an Anthony Gormley installation, we've been alone since we left Big Cove. Over the course of 6 hours in the woods we've settled into each other's company, steadily getting on with the task at hand without much in the way of outside distractions. In contrast to this tranquility, topping out on Rat Jaw is like walking into the Colosseum. It's overwhelming. Under the watchful eyes of crew and cameras my hands feel swollen and clumsy as I fiddle with bottles, pages and ziploc bags. The Fire Tower gives you something you don't experience anywhere else on the course; external pressure.

Leaving the table I pick Dale Holdaway out of the throng. Excruciatingly close to the top of the Weight List, Dale was staying in the campsite opposite mine. Along with Bill and Eric he'd been enormously helpful, sharing maps and instructions from previous years and plying me with food. Finding one familiar face in the mass of bodies and hearing one voice wishing me luck over the general hubbub changes my perception. Arriving at the Fire Tower had been intimidating, but I leave feeling elevated, carrying that boost all the way down to the prison.

Even in the middle of the afternoon, much of the tunnel is pitch black. The muted *click-clack* of poles on underwater concrete punctuates the background rush of the water. The gentle ripping sound of rubber slipping on concrete, a splash and a *Fuck* as each of us in turn stumbles from the high-wire, soaking our feet.

In the sights of the ghost rifles of the Frozen Head Penitentiary watch towers, Guillaume wrestles the book from its duct tape cocoon. One more Barkley icon checked off the list.

This way, says Gary.

Are you sure? Guillaume asks.

Yes.

Not up there, by the water tower?

No, it's this way.

But Gary. . .that's a bush.

We crawl through the bush.

The remaining books of loop 1 one are almost perfect. Gary takes us from gully to drainage to ridge to capstone with aplomb. Me and Guillaume follow along, equal parts attentive and perplexed, repeating Gary's words back to him in an attempt to both commit them to memory and make them make sense.

After hours of bushwacking the runnable trail down Chimney Top is a joy.

Gary gets his pages counted first and, with his RV parked close to the gate, is the first to start loop 2. Leaving camp with Guillaume is a thrill; the thrill of the chase, then, with Gary nowhere in sight, the tingly excitement of a couple of virgins heading into the woods alone as nighttime beckons. We're of one mind regarding strategy; go slow to go fast. Compasses out, we pick our way down Big Hell, drawing lines from needle to rock to tree, keeping whoever leads skewered all the while. As darkness descends, we hear an owl hoot. An owl with a Canadian accent. A Canadian accent, a ginger beard and two broken head lamps.

I feel for Gary. Loop 1 began with a broken pole, loop 2 is getting off to a similarly shitty start. Without a working light he's drifted off course and as we extricate ourselves from a maze of blow downs you can hear the frustration in his voice. Still, I feel relieved that the gang is back together, though with just a morsel of regret that the newbies won't get to Go It Alone.

Then it rains. Holy shit does it rain.

Already saturated, we stop in the lee of a capstone to don our extra layers. Minutes later, we're sodden again. All around the beeches are wrapped in a glistening film of water, flashing in the light of our torches as it falls, a soft, laminar waterfall encircling the trunk of every tree. The prison high-wire is gone, replaced by the unbroken roar of a foaming,

tumultuous bastard the full width of the tunnel. Conditions underfoot go from bad to baddest. Fell shoes are meaningless. You could be wearing crampons and the top layer of leaves would still carry your feet off downhill. On the steeper sections it's unusual for twenty seconds to go by without one of us falling. Look away, look back, and someone is gone, only a left-behind pole and a dark streak down the fall line to tell you what happened.

On top of all that, we're getting stupid. We've ticked off some classic Barkley climbs, now we're making classic Barkley mistakes. *Where the fuck is Indian Knob?* has been the weary refrain of waylaid Idiots since Time Immemorial. Three soggy baritones join the chorus.

We go the wrong way on Rat Jaw. We spend 20 minutes crag fast trying to get to Bobcat Rock. We thrash about at the top of Hiram's Vertical Smile looking for the trail, having crossed it, and remarked upon it, moments before. We ignore reflective signs on blazed park trails. There's just a pervasive *wrongness* in everything we do. Whatever spidey sense got us through loop 1 so well is now blunted. Every bearing is off, every line choice fractionally left or right of where it ought to be. We make mistakes, backtrack, and make them again. *Go slow to go fast* is long forgotten.

By the time daylight arrives on the North Boundary section I feel defeated. The scale of our time loss is now evident. There's no way we can get 5 loops. Gary takes off, his determination heroically undiminished, leaving me and Guillaume to trudge through the remaining climbs and descents together.

Squelching through Fanghorn Forest, the futility of it all weighs heavy. I'd wanted the whole thing. Now that possibility is gone. We've been out on loop 2 for almost 15 hours, yet the realisation feels sudden. I don't know what to do. Quit? We still have 16 hours to finish the Fun Run. With a fast turnaround we could even be out on loop 3 before the 5 loop cut-off. None of that seems particularly important. Had I been alone at this point I may well have quit in camp.

Oh well. I guess it's the Fun Run now, says Guillaume.

Hearing this said aloud, it suddenly seems so obvious. *Oh. Yeah. Of course it is.* Especially hearing it aloud in an irrepressibly cheerful french accent. We arrive in camp and Jon and Melodi towel me down and kick me out after a begrudgingly rapid turnaround. We leave minutes ahead of the 24 hour cut-off.

Loop 3 is the most oddly polarised hour of running I've ever known. Resting on my poles every couple of switchbacks, I can't understand how Guillaume is suddenly so slow. I feel fresh enough and strong enough to run the entire climb. Then on the downhills I'm reduced to an asymmetric lurch, my left leg swinging out wide like it's in a full length cast. Every footfall brings a sharp pain in the outside of my knee. I stop waiting for Guillaume. Our relative weaknesses cancel each other out as we swap places towards the top of the hill.

It's strange. I'd always imagined that when I eventually got to Barkley I would either finish or be timed out. Like so many other unimaginative Idiots, I couldn't picture what it would take to make me give up. In the end, the decision to quit felt like no decision at all. My knee was getting worse. Even on candy ass trails my pace was too slow to finish the Fun Run. The prospect of a 100 mile finish was long gone. And really that was all I cared about.

Fifty metres into the descent of Big Hell I sat down.