

how is failure defined?

is it the act of not achieving a prescribed outcome?
if you only look at the numbers
then i have clearly failed.
yet another casualty of the perdition known as barkley.

i returned to camp with only four pages.
sixteen-plus hours of being "out there."
i think my group and i covered more distance quitting
than we officially did on the course.

but did i really fail?

for those who i did not officially meet last weekend,
i live in south louisiana.
a state full of bayous and marshland.
it is an interesting place to explore with unique wildlife,
a place where water skills are more useful than climbing skills,
and a place that knows a thing or two about partying.
but when the only "hill" you have is the mississippi river levee,
you have to get creative.

this, in turn, meant frequent stairmaster sessions
several times a week
along with weighted exercises, levee workouts, and tire-dragging.
while better than no climbing training at all,
there is no sustained outside climbing and descending.

this, in turn, meant driving two hours to mississippi
every saturday morning.
endless mile repeats of a 250-foot hill.
once you drive north out of the bayou state
the flatlands cease to be.
though nowhere near barkley-levels
it is better than nothing.

i thought i was prepared
given the environment i was in.
while the physical aspect of the race
went much better than expected,
i did not expect the complete draining
of all of my other facets of humanity.

upon arriving at the campground friday afternoon,
i felt the least qualified of anyone out there.
when you have multiple prior barkley finishers in the field,
and people with far more impressive resumes than yourself,

the lessons in humility begin.

we started at 10:43am saturday morning.
i think most of us were expecting a much earlier start
due to the late start last year.
but this is the barkley
where the only certainty is uncertainty.

i foolishly began to run up bird mountain,
a drowning victim of the sea of chaos at the start,
but i didn't care.
this opportunity may never happen again
(though i hope it does,
as i will reapply next year and every year after,
but more on that later).

after the first major descent,
i linked up with a group.
at the point we were supposed to return to candy-ass trail,
we made a wrong turn
and began to go back up bird mountain,
not realizing our mistake until we had reached the top.
but some friendly hikers who weren't part of the race
helped us adjust.
a costly error.

everything is magnified at the barkley.
though most know about the crazy distance and elevation change,
it is the increased magnitude of making a mistake that is truly gargantuan.
in a normal trail race,
you can recover and only lose a few minutes if off-course.

but this is the barkley.
you may make a wrong turn
and not even realize it for a few hours.
then it takes a few hours more
just to get back to the last known point.
one mistake can destroy any hope of finishing a loop on time.
the motto on the bib was so appropriate this year.
my dream of finishing an official loop died on that wrong turn.

at the start of the jaque mate hill descent,
my watch was on my wrist.
at the end of the jaque mate hill descent,
my watch was gone.
i had no idea at what specific point it came off
or how it was able to unclip.
but this is the barkley.

far from my only equipment casualty out there.

the overgrowth had eventually turned my left shoe into a sandal,
ripping the toebox completely open.
though i did not realize it at the time,
this specific failure would contribute to my ultimate demise.

we eventually made our way to the garden spot
and near the top of stallion mountain with the sun setting.
it was at this point
that our adventure morphed into an episode of the twilight zone.
constant going back and forth on paths,
multiple passes on the same paths,
all in a futile effort to find
the turn-off for leonard's butt-slide.

i mentioned my shoes earlier.
with the constant creek crossings,
i was getting cold water on my feet each time.
it was not so bad during the day.
but with the horrible freezing wind on stallion,
my lack of proper cold-weather gear,
and the slow pace trying to find the turn-off,
cold water directly contacting my feet
suddenly became a major issue.
my priorities had shifted.
i did not want a take-home prize of this race to be hypothermia.

at this point, two other members of our lost party
had reached the same conclusion in their mind as me,
it was time to prematurely end our adventure.
jared and gary had actually come by on their second loop,
looking like they had just started running five minutes ago,
not 12-13 hours ago.
they had offered to help the rest of the group find the turn-off.
but the three of us had made up our minds already.

we then began to look for the turn-off for coffin springs on stallion,
but we were unable to even locate that,
which led to the memorable quote:
"we can't even quit this race without getting lost!"

so we had to relocate the cumberland trail
just before the garden spot
because we knew there was an actual sign for coffin springs there.
once we were finally on the coffin springs trail itself
we were finally able to know our location.
it was as if the veil of being out there had been lifted,

as if the course knew we were finally done,
releasing us from its grip.
we then completed the firetower trail and the south old mac trail
and finally saw the sign for big cove.

after sixteen-plus hours of being out there,
we finally made it back to camp.
when we saw the yellow gate,
and laz manning his post,
waiting to roast us over our failure,
it was as if the absurdity of everything
had hit me all at once.
you could not wipe the smile off of me.
i couldn't stop laughing through our rendition of taps.
one because the absurdity of everything.
two because taps wasn't played by dave,
but by someone who hadn't touched a horn in twenty years
and it showed.
the sub-par rendition
was the perfect summary of how the night progressed for us.

so did i really fail?

if you only look at where i came from
and my nearly non-existent ultrarunning resume,
i should not have been out there at all.

i am not even sure how or why i was picked in the first place for this.
perhaps i simply wrote an interesting essay.
it could also be that the inevitable failure of a flatlander
would provide additional entertainment at the camp.
no matter the reason,
i was chosen for this task
and i was going to prep as much as possible.
i was extremely happy with my physical effort out there,
the climbing and descending didn't bother me at all.
i was fully expecting my legs to be shot
after the first major elevation change.
not bad for a flatlander.
i also felt like the simple aspect of being from louisiana
and just making it to the start line
was a small achievement in itself.
but faulty equipment
and not expecting to be taxed on every other facet of humanity
is what ultimately did me in.

the barkley is not just a physical endurance event.
it is so much more than that.

it isn't enough to just be physically ready.
you are pushed mentally, emotionally, and in terms of patience and sense of humor.

would i apply again?

absolutely.
next year, and every year after.
there is something about the barkley family.
something i can't adequately describe.
i have only met some of them last weekend
but it felt like i had known them forever.

it is the only race i know
where even those who reach the rarefied air of the fifth loop
can be hung up on the same points
as someone who couldn't finish one loop.
the auto-pilot mentality dies at the yellow gate for everyone.

this race creates a true equality between the participants.
there is no elite group and everyone else.
the probability of failure
is the same for everyone.

the hardship of being out there
and then sharing stories of our inevitable failure
creates and strengthens bonds between people,
a bond that cannot be cultivated
from any other social situation.

i want to go back.
i know i can do better.
but most of all
i want to see my new family again.

-patrick doring

...and now the obligatory thanks.

chris gkikas
i had learned about chris through a mutual friend.
we had unknowingly finished the first fall classic together,
which began a line of communication.
he helped me so much throughout the entire process.
he let me stay at his house and showed me mountain trails in asheville.
when i arrived at frozen head without a crew,
he offered to crew for me without hesitation.

though we never reached the point where a crew was needed
it did create some needed peace of mind.
though we have only met in person a few times,
i consider him one of my very good friends and am forever grateful for his help.
i think he should take up motivational speaking.
to hear him talk about barkley
is inspiring and well-worth hearing
even if you have no interest in running the race.

the running crew back home.
you made my exploits that weekend sound more legendary than they really were.
even though i didn't get very far,
your updates read as though i had slain a dragon.
the messages of support i received from you guys
were much-needed before and after the race,
a welcomed pick-up after my abrupt end.
the support of you guys is much appreciated.

my close group of friends.
you know who you are.
there are only three who i feel most comfortable with,
who i can talk to about everything and anything.
you were the first to know i was unlucky and chosen in the lottery.
having your support in my corner
helped me through some rough patches,
not just in the race itself,
but throughout the train-up and in life as a whole.
i may not have been the greatest friend at times,
but you guys still never waivered in your support.
how you guys let an idiot-in-training like myself
continue to be in your friend circle
is a feat of strength in itself.
knowing that you guys were behind me and are still with me,
even as i attempted this,
means everything to me.