

Finish #10: Brett Maune, 2011, 57:13:33

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Barkley: 4/5 Pure Joy 1/5 Pure Hell

2011 Race Report

By Brett Maune

Introduction

Prior to Barkley, my only real 'ultra' experience to speak of was my breaking of the JohnMuir Trail (JMT) speed record in 2009—a record that had been broken repeatedly in recent years by people calling themselves "ultra runners". This is how I was introduced to the world of ultra running. After the JMT run, I investigated the backgrounds of the ultrarunners associated with the earlier JMT records and devoured all information I could find on the internet about things called "ultra marathons". I was shocked to learn that people were running in organized 100 mile events and that I could live on this planet for so long and not be aware of this sport. I had been doing ultra-length hikes and mountaineering adventures ever since moving out to California for school. In some ways I lived in a parallel universe to the world of ultra running but somehow there had never been an intersection.

I proceeded to investigate the various 100 milers to see if any in particular piqued my interest. The two that towered among all others were the "hardest" ones: Hardrock and Barkley. I applied for Barkley's entry in 2010, which Laz promptly rejected. I applied again in 2011—with nothing on my thin "ultra resume" but the original JMT run—and was very thankful to be accepted and given the opportunity to attempt the run. Upon getting the acceptance "condolences" from Laz I responded:

Laz, My deepest thanks! It is ON!

...and it was ON! I had been anticipating acceptance and had already begun training months prior.

Preparation

The mission was to complete 5 loops. There would be no compromises in this. Period. Beyond the usual difficulties encountered by people trying to achieve this, as a virgin course navigation would be a major additional obstacle. I knew I would need help from a veteran to learn as much about the course as I could. To facilitate this I tried constructing a list of veterans who had 5 loop aspirations. Unfortunately Laz was not cooperative in this endeavor and as a rule does not divulge the participant list. He leaves that choice up to the participants themselves. By race day I only had two prospects: Carl Laniac and Blake Wood. A mutual friend had suggested Carl and we exchanged numerous emails concerning run strategy before the race. In the end, Carl became the source of most of my second-hand Barkley knowledge and I am incredibly indebted to him for this.

My dependence on following a veteran influenced various strategy elements. Essentially, during a loop there could be nothing that I did that was slower than a veteran because that would create the possibility of losing contact with him, which would severely jeopardize a successful run. Therefore, for instance, I could not use a hydration bladder since whenever it needed filling, doing so would take longer than someone simply filling bottles. Another goal I had by necessity was to be more fit than any veteran so that I could not be dropped (not that veterans have been known to drop virgins or anything!). Furthermore, I wanted to be sufficiently fit such that I would not struggle to maintain the usual loop 1 race pace so I could concentrate on learning course navigation to the greatest extent possible.

Blowing of the Conch

"F*%#, I'm not completing the Barkley." I thought to myself. There was no mistaking the first blast of conch shell. Gary had done exactly what some had suggested and blew it shortly after midnight. Ever since arriving at Frozen Head I had been getting horrible sleep. Two nights before I even slept in a motel to try and get a decent night's rest but still failed. Friday night I tried sleeping early but tossed and turned with eyes wide open when the conch blew. I had gotten zero sleep and would be starting the Barkley sleep deprived and knew the ominous implications of this for a successful completion. My inability to sleep had occurred the night before my planned 2009 JMT run as well, which I subsequently delayed a day for this reason. Of course here I did not have the luxury of choosing a starting time and had to face the consequences. My restlessness before such events stems from their significance—between work, family, and insufficient sleep, Barkley training consumed ~100% of my 'free time' for months and created an enormous amount of personal stress, which culminated with a bout of exhaustion just three weeks before the race. How could I be relaxed on the eve of the race? This was a huge deal! Regarding whether the early start was advantageous or not, if one's goal were 5 loops then the early start meant finishing before the peak heat on Monday, but I believe this was far outweighed by the 4 words: solitary nighttime loop 5. The majority of loop 5 would need to be done in darkness, alone, when one is most tired and likely to screw up navigation—which I did—multiple times.

Loop 1: Initiation

As T0 approached I vacillated over which pack to take. It was cold at the time and I couldn't decide whether to be conservative and take a larger pack to store more coldweather gear or risk a smaller one. I mentioned my dilemma to Carl and he recommended the smaller one as we would soon be warm when ascending Bird. I eventually concurred with a couple minutes to spare and used the small pack for the entire race.

Everything happened so fast when I ran to the gate. Before I knew it, the cigarette was lit and the 2011 Barkley Marathons officially had begun! Most started power walking up towards Bird with only a few running. Being the scared virgin I was, I tried staying close to Carl. Soon though Blake started pulling ahead and I decided to follow. Before the race, I always envisioned Carl, Blake, and I—all with 5 loop intentions—to run together for a large chunk of the race so I didn't think much of the early split from Carl. Besides, the first several miles were on good trails so I would never really lose contact with Carl. Early in the descent down from Bird, Blake suggested I pass as he would likely be slow on the descent. I said I didn't mind but he insisted and so I went. Now I was in front of both the veterans, which was definitely not part of the plan. Apparently Blake then dropped a trekking pole and fell further behind. The next and only time I would ever see him again would be when Alan and I were descending Big Hell on loop 3 as he was coming up during loop 2. This was unfortunate as I was looking forward to talking with such an experienced Barkley/Hardrock runner. In any case, when I arrived at the Phillips Creek book I waited a couple minutes and then proceeded slowly up towards Jury Ridge until Carl caught me.

A group of ~5 of us runners made good time to the Garden Spot all the while the distant rumble of thunder steadily approached. When we got to Fyke's Peak the intense thunderstorm was upon us, which proceeded to pound us with a downpour of pea-sized hail. There were numerous lightning bolts that struck very close with no discernible delay between the flash and the bang. After only about five minutes the storm left as quickly as it had arrived and we again had a nice cloudless starry sky.

I was now part of the lead group which I believe consisted of Alan, Byron, Henry, with Carl masterfully guiding us down the south side of Stallion in darkness. We soon were at the book at the base of Testicle Spectacle. After everyone got their page the group decided to take a short food/water break before attacking the first briar infested climb. I chose to go ahead so I would have some extra time to deal with my first briar patch in case I needed it. I started up the power line cut carefully pushing each briar out of my path and making slow progress. The group quickly caught me about halfway up and right about the time I chose a poor path through the briars and found myself retreating through a nasty patch. During this retreat, my right thigh got multiple simultaneous deep slashes from a single bloodthirsty briar. After a string of curses I yelled (mostly) in jest "More! More! I want more!" to the delight of the others. This was my initiation into the true nature of the Barkley.

The briars continued causing me problems for the remainder of the loop. Descending Lower Rat Jaw, where they were particularly bad, I again started falling behind the others. This wasn't in the plan. Fortunately, my learning curve for traveling through briar patches was quick and I drastically improved my technique and efficiency by the end. At Testicle Spectacle I was grabbing individual briars to move them out of the way, which was exceedingly slow. By the end I was outright ignoring many of the small briars and just walked through them and endured the pain and cuts. My original leg armor (spandex legs) also had some deficiencies which included the annoying habit of regularly slipping down and exposing my thighs and knees to the briars. After loop 1 I told JB that "my armor sucks" and he graciously offered some of his protective pants, which worked much better when I needed to wear them.

The rest of loop 1 was uneventful and I was happy when we reached the last book at Chimney Top. I didn't feel that stressed after loop 1 and while jogging back to camp I commented to Carl that I could see 5 loops being "doable".

While in camp during the pit stop I immediately saw the value of having good support. "What do you want to eat? Take off your shoes. What do you want in your bottles?" fired off JB. Had I not been the target of this rapid fire questioning and needing to consider responses, I would have stared back slack-jawed in amazement. Between him and Elise, I was in good hands. These two knew what they were doing.

Loop 2: Growing Confidence

Carl, Alan, and I arrived at camp together after loop 1 and agreed to leave for loop 2 in about 20 min. When the time arrived Carl was still not ready and he told Alan and I to go ahead and he would catch up to us. Alan and I held back our pace while ascending Bird and we could see Carl several switchbacks below us, but he never caught us for the rest of the race. I was now dependent on Alan for navigation, which was not part of "the plan" but I wasn't concerned. During loop 1 Carl and Alan frequently consulted each other on navigational issues and I got the impression Alan was an extremely competent navigator who knew the course quite well, with the exception of Stallion. As we walked towards Stallion from the Garden Spot he informed me of this and I told him I knew the way down pretty well (Carl had given me a tour of Stallion before the race). I admit I felt a sense of pride at this point taking charge—albeit briefly—of navigation with a veteran. I was very excited when I nailed the descent from Stallion, but this would not be the case later in the race.

The rest of loop 2 was pretty uneventful and I took every opportunity I could to ask Alan about the tricky navigational points in the course as we encountered them and to absorb as much of his knowledge as possible. Loop 2 was more enjoyable than the first. I was getting closer to becoming independent, which I knew must happen at some point for a 5 loop completion.

Loop 3: Loyalty

Thanks to the early blowing of the conch, the first reverse loop (3) started in darkness. I knew at the beginning of the race that I would need to stick with a veteran through at least the first half of loop 3. I thought going solo before this point would be unnecessarily risky. This requirement could have created a problem though if I followed someone who couldn't maintain a 5 loop pace. Fortunately, this hadn't been an issue for the first 2 loops, but this was soon to change.

Loop 3 started with one of the toughest navigational challenges—descending Big Hell in darkness. Alan totally nailed this despite my interference. After doing much of the descent, he realized we had missed the usual turning point for the final approach to the Beech tree. He compensated for this and calculated the new bearing, which ended up being spot on. Of course all this took time and I began suggesting we should just head straight down and then backtrack upon reaching the stream. He eventually convinced me that he was confident with his calculations and moments after we headed in the new direction we encountered a group climbing from the direction of the Beech tree on their loop 2, which confirmed Alan was right. We then steadily made progress up Zipline, Rat Jaw, and then Meth Lab Hill. I believe I first noticed Alan begin to struggle during the Upper Rat Jaw ascent, which became much more pronounced on Meth Lab Hill. At this point I became really concerned with our pace and knew unless Alan experienced a miraculous recovery I would need to leave him.

I knew the slow pace we were making would eventually jeopardize a 5 loop finish but even before that it would prevent me from breaking Brian's course record—a secondary goal which had started to emerge in my mind during loop 2.

Regarding the Barkley record, given how the Barkley course routinely is made more difficult (not to mention the massive variance in race conditions from year to year), one could argue the value and relevance of even having a record for such an event. When I first became interested in running the Barkley (and was clueless about its nature), my original goals were to both complete it and to break the record on the first attempt. I knew achieving both would be highly improbable, but they were the initial goals nonetheless. Reading Frozen Ed's book about the history of the race though convinced me that pursuing the record was far beyond "impractical" and so the record faded into the back of my mind...until loop 2. I was surprised at how good I was feeling after the second loop and began thinking I had a shot to break Brian's record. I knew loop 3 would be a critical test of this pursuit.

So we were at the top of Testicle Spectacle and I knew I needed to pull ahead, but I didn't know when I should do it. I was incredibly appreciative of Alan (and earlier Carl) for successfully navigating the course and teaching me all they knew. I would have had no chance of completing 5 loops without their earlier help and therefore owed them an enormous debt. Since Alan was sketchy on navigating Stallion (especially at night) I decided that regardless of the time penalty I would get him safely up Stallion. At that point he could follow trails all the way back to camp.

The ascent of Stallion was painfully slow and I incessantly looked at the clock. To top it off, I botched the ascent too. At the time I didn't recognize a lot of the terrain and didn't know exactly where we were but in hindsight I don't think we were ever far from the optimal route. The darkness and sleep deprivation just made it harder to see terrain features and realize that we were fine. Eventually we got to the summit and I ripped out our pages.

After delivering Alan safely to Stallion and achieving my objective, I immediately started hammering towards Garden Spot and sought to salvage as much time as possible for the loop. I ran every downhill all the way back to camp and was shocked to make it back a couple minutes shy of 12:00 running time. Given all that happened on the loop and the fact it was the first reverse and nighttime loop, breaking Brian's record—and not completing 5 loops—became my top goal. I waited another loop before I divulged this to anyone.

Loop 4: Going Solo

Being a virgin, I was forced to follow veterans around the course until I felt sufficiently comfortable with navigation. The early conch blowing meant the first reverse loop (3) would be at night, which virtually meant I had to stick with veterans at least through the tricky navigation parts of that loop—which is essentially what happened. Fortunately when the time came to break out on my own I felt comfortable doing so. Upon preparing to leave I told JB that I was going to do loop 4 in 10 hours. He seemed a bit surprised at this. I assured him I still felt really good and that I didn't think I was slowing down anymore. I wanted loop 4 done in 10 hours because that would give me 12 hours, including rest time between loops, to break Brian's record. Given all that happened on loop 3 and the fact it still took only 12 hours, I felt I would have no trouble breaking the record if given 12 hours to do so on loop 5.

And so I was off. I pushed hard up the Chimney Top trail. Navigation down Big Hell went very well given it was the first time I had done it alone. I zigzagged somewhat during the descent to help verify I was on the correct ridge and had to bushwhack a bit as I approached the book, but in the end I nailed the book and did not have to backtrack. For the ascent up Zipline I initially started going far to the right but soon realized the mistake and contoured to the left and eventually got to the ridge within 50 ft of the book. I had minor navigation hiccups on Lower Rat Jaw but then flew up Upper Rat Jaw and arrived at the tower 4:15 from camp. I was feeling very good at this point and thought that my camp-to-tower time corresponded to about a 9 hour loop pace. Given the improved terrain for the last third of the loop, I thought if I could still hammer I might be able to do loop 4 in 8:30. Needless to say, I was pumped.

I flew down Rat Jaw, Pig Head Creek, and up Meth Lab Hill. Ascending Meth Lab Hill was a solar oven. The afternoon sun shown directly on the steep power line cut and it was hot—by far the hottest yet for the 2011 Barkley. I was dripping sweat from

my arms and that bill and the sweat was causing the briar cuts to sting. I probably should have slowed down due to the heat but it was hard for me to go slower than I thought I could sustain. I think I was pretty dehydrated by the end of the race and the dehydration likely started on loop 4. In the previous three loops I drank entirely from the two water drops and carried at most ~52 ounces with me. On loop 4 I filled at least a 20 ounce bottle at every reasonably clean stream crossing and probably drank as much during loop 4 than the previous 3 loops combined.

The heat combined with the relentless pushing finally took their toll during the ascent up Stallion and my stomach rebelled. I dramatically slowed to prevent throwing up and alternated between walking at a slow and moderate pace most of the way back to camp. Even so, I finished in 10 hours—somehow right on target.

Loop 5: Paranoia

As instructed JB “woke” me after a 30 minute rest (I was too jacked up to sleep and was still wide awake) and then I let the secret of my intentions out. “What is Brian’s record?” I thought it was 55:42 but felt I should confirm that just to be sure. Amidst packing the news of the fire on Fodderstack was divulged to me and that Laz was currently discussing what to do about it with the ranger. The original plan was for me to take a cell phone and to call the ranger from Stallion. At that point I would learn what I could or could not do. As I was preparing to leave it sounded like the course change decision would be made soon and I decided to wait a few minutes. Losing a few minutes was well worth the certainty of knowing what the new course would become. Laz came by the van and proceeded to tell me the decision. After descending Stallion to the New River, I would get the book at the base of Testicle Spectacle but then retrace my steps to highway 116, which I would follow to Armes Gap. Then I would head up the jeep road into the park and descend to Pig Head Creek. At that point the regular course resumed. I did not like it and immediately saw the implications. The straight lines of Testicle Spectacle and Meth Lab Hill were replaced by a curvy highway and a curvy jeep road, followed by the descent to Pig Head Creek, which was orthogonal to both roads. I knew this would take considerably longer than the original course and that I was probably facing the end of my pursuit of the record. Laz knew I was not happy (which I’m sure made him happy). I knew everyone was doing the best they could under tough and rapidly changing circumstances and felt my pursuit of the record had no place in the discussion. I wanted Laz to do what he thought was best to maintain the integrity of the Barkley.

As I approached the gate to leave on loop 5 Carl arrived from what I thought was a successful loop 4. I was so focused on getting my number and starting loop 5 though that I failed to confirm this and to discuss his intentions for rest etc. I realized this only after I began walking away from the gate and knew of the “no aid” policy once one starts walking. I didn’t know what, if anything was permitted under this policy so I decided to keep going rather than face disqualification by returning to the gate and asking for info about Carl. This lack of info about Carl turned out to be significant. When I got my number from Gary I declared I was choosing to run CW and he commented that due to the fire and course change I did not have a choice. At the time I did not see why the course change prohibited a CCW loop but since it didn’t matter I didn’t ask for clarification. As a result I thought Carl would also be doing a CW loop. In other words, we could do the loop together like Wood and Horton many years prior—something that was no longer supposed to be possible. I got really excited about this possibility as I ascended Bird. Physically I still felt pretty good and I was confident about my ability to complete the loop (sleep deprivation was my most serious concern). Therefore, I slowed down and walked at a moderate pace up Bird and the NBT. I reasoned Carl would want to have a quick turnaround in camp to catch me so we could do the loop together. I thought even if he didn’t catch me I would still see his light at times and would then wait for him if necessary. I got to the Coal Ponds and never saw a light. I ascended to the road below Garden Spot and looked again for any sign of light below and still saw nothing. I waited for a couple minutes and eventually was forced to turn around and resume the loop. I could not spend more time waiting given I didn’t even know for sure whether Carl was doing loop 5.

I looked at my watch and immediately became paranoid that I just squandered too much time and that my loop 5 was now in jeopardy. Completion of a loop is not something that can ever be taken for granted at the Barkley. This is especially true for a nighttime loop 5. For the remainder of the loop I experienced massive paranoia that I was either not moving fast enough or that I would experience some calamity that would prevent my completion under 60 hours. As a result, a proverbial fire was lit under my ass. I ran from Garden Spot to Stallion. Where I couldn’t run I power walked as fast as I could. I bombed the descent down from Stallion. And then the calamity struck. As I descended the last part of Stallion I noticed the terrain was not nearly as steep as it should have been. I knew I was off course but figured I would quickly resolve it once I got to the New River. When I finally got to flat ground near the river I was shocked at what I saw. Large tree trunks and brush piled in a tangled mess as far as my headlamp would illuminate. I guess this was the accumulated product of many years of floods of the New River. I eventually navigated through the mess and got to the river but saw nothing to indicate where I was. I had no idea where I was. The paranoia I was experiencing took a quantum leap at this point. I did not want to have the dubious distinction of being the person to blow a loop 5 with the most time in the bank, and now that possibility just became much more likely.

I felt like a caged animal amidst all the debris and then promptly started acting like one. I aggressively hopped over the low trunks, ducked under the high ones, and plowed straight through the brush. I first went about 100 yards downstream and passed a cliff on the far side of the bank and still had no indication as to where I was. I then headed away from the river to try and intercept the jeep road—if it were even there at this point along the river. I never came across one and headed back to the river. I then headed several hundred yards along the river upstream but the surroundings still gave no indication as to my location. As desperation began to sink in I pulled out the map—the first time I needed to consult it all race for navigation purposes. I checked

the map to see if highway 116 was always on the far side of the New River. That appeared to be the case unless it happened to be really far of course downstream. My plan was to cross the river and then climb until I met the highway, which seemed at the time guaranteed to work. I had to search for an easy place to cross the river and was relieved once I was finally on the other side. I then proceeded to climb up a steep hill 50 ft, then 100 ft with still no sign of the road. At 150 ft I thought there was no possibility that the road could have been any higher. Fortunately I kept going a little further and soon came upon the road about 200 ft above the river. Had I turned around before meeting the highway I was going to be forced to implement the “nuclear option”—reclimb Stallion until a known point was reached and then try the descent again. All of this exertion and excitement was exhausting. I was soaked with sweat and the briar cuts on my limbs were now burning from the perspiration.

Now that I reached the highway I wasn't entirely sure which way I needed to go. There was enough uncertainty in the altimeter to not make the decision obvious. I was probably above where I needed to be and so I began running downhill. After rounding a few bends I saw a couple of headlamps up ahead, which I took to be a good sign. They belonged to JB and Travis. What a relief it was to see them! Gary sent them to inform me that I was now supposed to pick up a bandanna on the Pig skull marking the creek to replace the bypassed Raw Dog Falls book. I grabbed the book at the base of Testicle Spectacle, returned to the highway, and power walked as fast as I could towards Armes Gap. Although the highway was definitely easier “terrain”, this ascent took much longer than Testicle as expected due to the increased length. The jeep road into the park that followed was of similar grade to the highway—much less than the typical Barkley grade. All of the time spent on these super “candy ass” trails caused my legs and knees to stiffen and they strongly protested once I resumed the regular steep Barkley course. Eventually after some doubt I finally encountered the old jeep road junction where I began the descent towards Pig Head Creek. This descent somehow never caused any problems in loops 3 and 4 but it was a nightmare this time around. I don't know why but there must be at least 10 old jeep roads in that area constantly diverging, merging, and spontaneously ending. I would descend one road for a while only to have it disappear. I'd backtrack and try again and the same would happen. I had no idea which road to take and not even a way to determine it other than explicitly trying all of them. Keeping track of this maze and which roads I tried was quite a challenge with the mounting sleep deprivation. After the third or fourth attempt I had had enough and yelled something to the effect, “This is bullshit! I'm not even supposed to be doing this!” It was bullshit too. Avoiding this descent was one of the reasons why I wanted to do the 5th loop CW in the first place. Although I was doing the loop CW I needed to do this descent to backtrack and get the bandanna from the pig's skull. Eventually I found the right road and quickly made the descent to the highway and got the bandanna. JB and Travis were waiting to confirm this and let out the most motivational bout of redneck hollering that I have ever heard as I turned to resume my ascent towards Rat Jaw.

The ascent of Rat Jaw was uneventful but the Bad Thing turned out to be really bad. The extreme sleep deprivation (1 hour of sleep in about ~68 hours) had made staying awake very difficult. I did most of the ascent towards Indian Knob with my eyes closed and had such difficulty staying on my feet that I thought I was going to collapse and sleep through the 60 hour cut-off. I began thinking about my custom license plate I had made for the entry, which in part was “BM X”. “BM” for either my initials or Barkley Marathons. “X” either for failure or the 10th finisher. At the time I decided to get the plate I thought having it on my car would not bother me if the “X” stood for failure. Now I was definitely regretting it. To fail so close to the end in this manner and to be constantly reminded of it every time I walked toward my car would have really sucked. I popped caffeine pills but they had no effect. Slowly but surely I ascended the Bad Thing and eventually arrived at the capstones. Something was wrong though. There was earth on top of all the capstones whereas the capstone that had the book (The Eye of the Needle) was exposed. “Here we go again...” I thought. The mishaps earlier in the loop combined with the sleep deprivation left me completely mentally exhausted by this point. The loop had become an emotional roller coaster and I felt I was about to snap. I explored the area a little but knew it was futile given there weren't any exposed capstones. Due to the sleep deprivation I felt I lacked the mental capacity to do anything more sophisticated and certainly didn't want to do anything stupid that would jeopardize the entire run. So I decided to ascend to the top of the ridge and wait for the morning twilight which was now just a few minutes away. I sat on the ridge facing the wind so when I inevitably fell asleep I figured the frequent wind gusts would awaken me. I was horrified at the thought of going to sleep since I could easily burn through all of my time without even knowing it but I had little choice. I sat there on the ground for 10-15 min and got several bouts of micro sleep before there was sufficient light to try and determine my location. Once there was enough light I whipped out my compass for the first time (I had been heavily relying upon veterans and my altimeter the entire race) and map and proceeded to try and triangulate my position based on the prison water tower that I could barely see far below on one side of the hill and a peak on the other side. This handiwork implied I was on the peak to the northwest of where the book was located, but this did not agree with what I was seeing. The one time I used the compass I screwed it up. I'll blame the sleep deprivation... I then walked along the ridge for about a hundred yards and could see what I thought were exposed capstones in the distance to the north. Jackpot! Within a few minutes I was at the book and started my descent down Zipline.

At the beginning of the descent I ate my ~20th Clif bar or so, but immediately gagged. Fortunately I was able to keep the precious calories down but my stomach had now completely revolted and refused all food for the remainder of the race. The descent down Zipline was uneventful and I nailed the fork perfectly. I then slowly but steadily ascended Big Hell and was relieved to reach the last book. I savored the moment of ripping the last page out of a book and just sat for a couple minutes. There was now no rush. I had many hours to hike out the last few mostly downhill miles on trail. Coincidentally I noticed the passage of Brian's record time occurred while I was at the Chimney Top book. I then leisurely hiked all the way back to the yellow gate.

Epilogue

On the flight back to California I had time to reflect on my Barkley experience. Going into the race I felt that I was sufficiently fit such that I could theoretically do 5 loops but that the margin of error was small and that I would likely fail due to problems and inefficiencies associated with my virginity. In reality, my fitness gave me a larger than expected margin of error and I was even able to contend Brian's record. In other words, my results exceeded my wildest expectations (the near perfect weather certainly helped). Even so, I couldn't help but feel that I had partly blown the run. I could have broken the record and yet I didn't. Many things happened in the run—both voluntary and involuntary—that I could arbitrarily assign as the reason for this failure. If I had the opportunity to do it all over again though, I wouldn't change a thing. For example: Getting totally lost Out There after descending Stallion on loop 5 was truly priceless. I got to experience firsthand the horror of being lost on the course at night and the corresponding elation when "found". This is the canonical Barkley experience! I wouldn't even change the last minute course modification. Yeah it sucked and I definitely did not like it at the time, but now I view it as one final last-minute challenge thrown in my way that needed to be overcome. Having this unplanned obstacle was consistent with the spirit of the Barkley.

Participating in the Barkley has definitely been one of the most enjoyable and fulfilling experiences of my life. I thoroughly enjoyed the race and actually had fun on the first 4 loops (the 5th was total hell). I never expected to consider doing the Barkley loops and charging through briars as "fun" but it definitely was for me. In the beginning I was simply relieved to be able to hang with Carl and Alan and to survive the first loop. As the 2nd and 3rd loops unfolded I was increasingly energized as I felt the transformation from scared virgin to someone who could confidently run the course solo become complete. The solo loop 4 was the emotional culmination of this transformation and really was pure joy. Lastly, what made Barkley really special was meeting many wonderful people during the event and in camp. The ultra community is quite a diverse and exceptionally supportive group of people. Although I discovered the sport and community "relatively late", I am forever grateful that I did. Being part of this community has made my life richer and I treasure the numerous friendships that I have already made within it.