

Finish #15: Travis Wildeboer, 2013, 58:41

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the bugle

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The 60-hour day

2013 Barkley Marathons race report by Travis Wildeboer

“We are like dwarfs sitting on the shoulders of giants. We see more, and things that are more distant, than they did, not because our sight is superior or because we are taller than they, but because they raise us up, and by their great stature add to ours.” – John of Salisbury

My first experience with the Barkley Marathons was in 2010 when I flew out to crew Andrew Thompson and Jonathan Basham. I have always been inspired by watching these two prepare for an event. They are extremely organized. Everything has a system—from their food down to their foot care. These two have master’s degrees in long distance foot travel. I was there to learn as much as I could.

As we drove into the park I witnessed a conversation between Andrew (2009 finisher) and J.B. (2010 finisher) about what it takes to finish the 100—both the logistical side and the mental side.

“You’re entering a tunnel Jonboy,” said Thompson, “and there is no way out other than the other side.”

I was sopping it up with a biscuit.

I have always been a culture junkie, but after meeting some of the longtime Barkley characters (Ed Furtaw, Mike Dobies, Stewart Gleman, Rich Limacher, John Dewalt, and Laz)—and then watching J.B. go on to finish the 100—I became a full on Barkley addict. The wheels started turning and I wondered how I would fair if I locked horns with this beast.

I was still really intimidated to attempt Barkley. It’s not your usual ultra. It requires multiple skill sets. It is an event where just being tough is not enough. I didn’t want to completely embarrass myself. However, after a conversation with Stewart Gleman where he said, “Travis, anything worth doing is worth doing badly the first time you try it,” I knew I would be sending an essay into Laz about why I deserved the chance to run Barkley.

After two failures (3 loops in 2011 and 2012) I still felt if I did a few things different I had the ability to complete five loops. I was also aware that a lot of people feel they have the ability to complete five loops—but this knowledge was festering inside of me and I needed to set it free on the course.

Every time a big-name runner wanted to be added to the Barkley e-mail list I was like, “F#%k man! That’s my spot.” I found myself getting EXTREMELY possessive of the limited 35 spots.

My wife and I spent Christmas of 2012 in Washington with the Bashams (Hilary and Jonathan). As we walked through Public Market Center in Seattle I knew we were supposed to be having a good time, since we were buying Christmas dinner and all. Then, J.B. showed me an e-mail he had received on his phone. It was from a big-name runner asking about the process to get into Barkley.

I could think of NOTHING else. Barkley consumed my thoughts.

I expressed these thoughts to J.B., and like a stern older brother he said, “Man, you have to just get that thing done this year.” As if it was just that easy.

J.B. was constantly goading me about the race during our two weeks in Washington. On New Year’s Day (2013) we walked down to the White River at the base of Mount Rainer, which was in his back yard. He challenged me to jump into the freezing water as proof that I had the mental ability to finish Barkley.

In his thick southern accent he said, “Come on man, how are you supposed to finish Barkley if you can’t jump in that ice cold water?”

I knew this was a test. My ability to finish Barkley had nothing to do with this challenge, but I wasn’t going to let him get the best of me—so I took the plunge. It would be a full day before I got my body temperature back to normal. An ear ache also plagued me for the next three days from the water that got into my ear. Some challenge.

It was a good thing I got away from J.B. until after Barkley or he would have thrown down ridiculous challenges constantly.

So, I was going to give Barkley one more shot this year—but this would be my last stand. I was not going to keep hogging a spot year after year. There are so many runners out there that are much faster and stronger than I am who deserve their chance.

When I received my condolences letter (aka entry into the Barkley) I wasted no time getting myself as prepared as I possibly could.

My wife, Alyssa, and I rented out our home in Winter Park, Colorado, for the winter. We planned on training for the 2013 Barkley while traveling the country in a pickup camper (while checking off items on the bucket list).

I wanted to implement something that I learned from every previous finisher during my training. I started with John Fegyverasi and how he prepared for his 2012 Barkley finish. Before our trip I printed every Barkley finisher's report I could find. I read one every night before bed. I dissected these reports as if they contained the answers on how to finish the Barkley. This kept the race on my mind constantly.

Alyssa had dreams of spending the winter training in the warm, dry desert. But, when the job we scheduled in northern Montana was not ready until the first part of January, cold rain and snow followed us wherever we went. I told Alyssa about what Jared Campbell (2012 Barkley Finisher) called “conditioned optimism,” which meant taking things that would generally be considered unfavorable and training yourself to look at them in a positive.

I used Brett Maune's (2011 and 2012 Barkley Finisher) style of training, which meant preparing for vertical gain rather than mileage (Brett gives credit to 2008 Barkley Finisher Brian Robinson for this strategy). This meant I climbed an average of 20,000 feet per week with 32,000 feet of gain during my biggest week. On all of our travels I searched for the steepest trails and power line cuts I could find (I called these Maune climbs).

The ultimate Maune climb that I found was the old cog railroad (known as The Incline) just outside Colorado Springs. It ascends just over 2000 feet in less than a mile. We camped at the base of it for 10 days, climbing it as many times as possible.

I've heard that Blake Wood (2001 Barkley Finisher) is one of the most prepared hikers out there. He carries a back-up light for his back-up light. During all of my training I tried to take the same approach by carrying everything I needed for a Barkley loop: full Gore-Tex rain gear, food, water, stocking cap, gloves and lights (although it seemed a little ridiculous when we finally did make it to the desert).

While trying to get in my weekly elevation gain, I was experiencing pain in the back of my left knee. A web search of “pain in the back of knee” and you will find results ranging from tendonitis to torn meniscus. I chose to believe the pain was just tendinitis. I continued to prepare for Barkley but I feared the training might make the condition worse.

In the sixth grade, while chasing down a pop fly during a baseball game, I stepped into a hole that was in the middle of the outfield and trashed my ankle. This has plagued me throughout my running career.

While training on the Barr Trail in Manitou Springs, Colorado, I suffered an ankle sprain—again. I thought strongly about giving up my spot to another runner. I knew if I surrendered my spot I was guaranteed an opportunity to compete in the 2014 Barkley Marathons. That meant 15 months of preparation, but that also meant another 15 months with a monkey on my back (or J.B. throwing down more ridiculous challenges).

Whether I was in a grocery store, restaurant, or out on the trail, the condition of my left knee and ankle was on my mind constantly. It was a continuous battle between training too much and not training enough.

I'm a builder so my body is my livelihood. Let's face it, the Barkley is not healthy. I was questioning what the training required to finish 5 loops would do to my body, not to mention the consequences of completing the 5 loops.

During my time in Washington I showed J.B. a not so flattering picture taken of him after he completed the Barkley in 2010. He looked at the photograph and said, “Man, that race fucks you up!” Those words stuck with me as I prepared. This is coming from a guy who set records on the Colorado Trail and the Long Trail—and Barkley did more damage.

Alyssa replied with, “I hope when the Barkley is over that you can still at least hike with me.”

Hiking steep ascents wasn't the problem. It was the descents that were telling me “Barkley is not a good idea.” In fact, I didn't run any descents until the end of February. Even then, I wouldn't call it a run. It was more of a hybrid walk that included a little running.

I had just finished a round trip up Flat Iron Peak in Arizona on March 1. It was the first training run where I didn't experience any pain. I was STOKED! As I walked the asphalt road back to my truck I let my guard down. I stopped watching my foot placement and laid my ankle over on the ledge where the asphalt meets the gravel. Snap !

Here it is, one month out from Barkley, I had read Jared Campbell had just finished 40,000 feet of vertical gain on Grandeur Peak training for Barkley, and I couldn't even put weight on my left foot. It was difficult to ignore the temptation to pass up my spot.

I'm not one to post questions to “The List,” but at one point I considered asking all the former finishers: Is it worth it? Is it worth

all the pain? Is it worth all the time training? And—the biggest question—is it worth the risk of permanent damage to your body, just to be a Barkley finisher.

When it came down to it, I decided I still wanted it. I was going to run the 2013 Barkley Marathons despite the implications. I was stupidly optimistic.

Fortunately, after a 48-hour drive from Arizona to Tennessee of doing nothing but sitting, my ankle made a mild recovery. But, I was still extremely timid about downhill running. Things looked brighter when my body finally started coming around. Three weeks before the race I turned in my biggest week of elevation gain during training.

Ted Keizer (aka CaveDog) prepared for two weeks in Frozen Head State Park prior to his 2003 Barkley finish. J.B. did the same for his 2010 finish. This method has become popular for quite a few runners. This helps one become familiar with the inner park trails and the park's extremely variable weather patterns. I spent time in the park before my previous attempts. I felt like I had a good grasp on what I was up against—even though I was only able to train in the park a couple days this year.

My wife and I then drove to Virginia so she could run Terrapin Mountain 50k. We attended David Horton's running class at Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia, the week before Fools Weekend. David Horton (Horty) finished Barkley in 2001 (along with Blake Wood) and was the second finisher of the race. He introduced us to the class and informed them about Barkley.

He also informed the class that he DID NOT think I could finish. He told me the same thing the previous year.

Horty is a good friend and I know he says things to get a rise out of you. I took it all in stride.

After the class I pulled him aside and asked, "Do you really think I can't finish?"

"Can't or won't?" he replied. "You have got to be good at slow, you have to minimize your mistakes, and you have to be out on loop 4 within 33 hours of the race—MAYBE 33 and a half hours—but no later or you will NOT have enough time to finish laps four and five."

We went on to discuss other strategies, but this advice proved to be the most valuable.

After our time in Virginia, we made our way back to Tennessee. We picked up my sister, Ashley, at the Knoxville airport on Thursday, March 28. We did our last minute shopping and made our way to Frozen Head State Park—one day before the start of Barkley.

In some of the finishers' reports I recalled quotes such as, "You have to be hell bent on five loops" or "Five loops, no compromising." As I rolled into the park I didn't feel like I was either.

I chose to focus on what was most important: I was healthy.

The campground was completely full of runners and their crews when we arrived.

I imagine it was a sight to see when Jim Nelson and Mike Tilden (both 2004 Barkley Finishers) came to the gate within three minutes of each other. After reading their account I realized I wouldn't care if I was the 40th person to the gate. I didn't look at other Barkers as competition. It was me versus the course. The more people out there on loop 4 and 5, the more humanly possible it seems. It is much easier to keep putting one foot in front of the other when the guy next to you is doing the same.

I have immense respect for any finisher who has done loop 4, the toughest loop in Barkley, completely alone.

I have a history of over thinking my race strategy, which leads to not getting much sleep the night before Barkley. A conversation with Jared Campbell about his race strategy proved to be very helpful.

"Disaster prevention," Campbell said. "In something this long all you can do is try to keep major disasters from occurring."

I slept fairly well the night before the race by keeping my strategy just as simple: disaster prevention, that's it.

Andrew Thompson's "Concepts for Success" is a must-read for anyone wanting to do well at Barkley, and it actually translates well into all walks of life. I was reading this one hour before the start of the race as Laz blew the conch.

I could not find a race report from Mark Williams; however, Mark was the first to prove that the 100 was possible.

Every year Laz (the race director) adds a little more to the course, or he makes the course a little more difficult. So, every year, one must think like Mark and believe that the next level is still possible. You can't get mentally beat before the race begins. I was confident I could finish the 2012 course but I was not sure I could keep doubt from creeping in once the new course change was released. One of the most difficult things to do is believe in something when doubt seems to be so much more logical.

Laz blew the conch at 8:04 am on Saturday, March 30, 2013. The race would begin at 9:04 am. I was anxious to get walking.

If I have seen a little further it is by standing on the shoulders of Giants." –Isaac Newton

Loop 1

The cigarette was lit (signifying the start of the race) at 9:04 am. I ran 10 steps before I came to my senses and began to hike. I wanted to stick with John Fegyveresi for as long as I could. When I saw how fast he was running—along with Jared, Alan, and Bev—I decided to ease up and just hike my own pace to the top of Bird.

I hiked up Bird next to Jon Allen, Tim England, Mike Burr, and Nick Hollon. I arrived at Book 1 in a group of seven or eight others. It felt like I lost a few minutes waiting my turn to tear out my page. Everyone arrived at the book at the same time. Everyone was anxious to tear out their page.

Confident that I remembered a good line down the first descent, I snagged my page and bolted to the far northern point. With fresh legs I bombed down Checkmate Hill. I made one glance uphill and noticed there was no one around. I ended up too low when I arrived at Phillips Creek, but quickly corrected.

The miles along Boundary Trail quickly fell behind me. The rain from the night before made it very slippery. As I climbed up to the Garden Spot, I spotted Alan and Toshi hiking downhill after they collected their pages. I collected my second page at 2 hours, 40 minutes—20 minutes faster than last year.

The new section was next.

This was the portion of the course that Laz changed. This year he removed the book at the top of Stallion. He added a book after a descent into the Barley Mouth, and another descent down Leonard's Buttslide. Then he added a 400 foot climb up the ridge back to the old course at the rim of Fykes Peak. The directions Laz provided were very clear, and I was reassured of my route selection when I caught up to John, Toshi, Alan and Bev at the top of the Barley Mouth.

After feeling hot spots on my heels, and remembering what Jared had said about disaster prevention, I pulled over for foot maintenance and taped them up.

I hit the jeep road after the Barley Mouth and ran all the way up to Bobcat Rock. When the road descended I looked over the edge and spotted the group again. They had the book in hand. It was pretty exciting as I slid down the steep descent (it was nasty) to get my third page.

I had not been with a group this big in any of my prior attempts so it felt good to pass the time with other runners. We climbed through Bobcat Rock and up around Hiram's Pool.

"There it is," said Alan as we crested the next ridge. Book 4 was sitting inside the big table-sized rock.

We completed the new section with no major screw ups. I calculated the course change added about 20 minutes. I tried not to think about the fact that 20 minutes times 5 laps is 1 hour and 40 minutes added to the course.

I had to make up time by moving faster and not making any mistakes.

The remainder of the course was the same as the previous year. Our group moved well together, running every possible spot we could. On the way down Stallion I noticed my pace on descents wasn't as fast as the rest of the pack. I caught back up when they all took turns crossing the log at the New River.

The climb up Testicle Spectacle was wet, muddy, and slippery. One step forward and two steps back the whole way up. Keeping distance between you and the person in front was a good idea. If someone's foot slipped you might get kicked in the face.

The group continued to descend faster than me down Meth lab, but I caught back up as they would stop briefly at the book near Raw Dog Falls. John asked me how I was holding up. I told him I felt fine. "Good," he said, "this is a real strong pace." I was slightly concerned I was pushing harder than I should be.

We did calculations on the way up Pig Head about what time we would arrive on top of Frozen Head. I speculated we would be there around 5 hours and 30 minutes. We made the climb up Rat Jaw and heard a huge applause when the summit came into view. There were probably 25 or 30 people at the top.

We were at the tower in 5 hours, 20 minutes—25 minutes faster than last year (and that included the additional 20 minutes for the new course change). Once again, the group pulled ahead of me on the descent down Rat Jaw. I couldn't believe how fast they could go downhill. I caught back up at the guard shack after going through the prison tunnel.

In both of my previous Barkley attempts the section known as "The Bad Thing" has given me loads of trouble in the later loops. I went slower and took meticulous notes on the landmarks and bearings since this was the only time I would see this section in the daylight before the reverse loops.

Nick caught the group at Indian Knob. Once again, I took detailed bearings on the way down Zip Line and up Big Hell. Although I wanted to run down Chimney Top Trail with the pack, I remembered “disaster prevention.” I pulled over to loosen and readjust my shoe due to pain on the top of my left foot.

I arrived at the yellow gate as the group headed to their camps. I was informed Jared Cambell was leading the race and had completed Loop 1 in an impressive 7 hours 31 minutes. The group I was running with followed.

My goal was around 9 hours for the first loop and I had made it in 8 hours, 26 minutes. I felt nauseous as I approached my camp and was concerned I may have pushed too hard on the first loop.

Loop 1: 8 hours, 26 minutes, 26 seconds

Time in camp: 18 minutes, 9 seconds

Loop 2(Started Loop 2 at 8 hours, 44 minutes, 35 seconds)

My sister Ashley did an awesome job of getting my pack refilled with food, water, batteries, etc. This allowed Alyssa to focus on cooking, shoes, and clothing.

Since my stomach wasn't accepting food (I feared I might throw up) I needed to stay moving. I told John I was headed up and that he would catch up. I was the second person to start loop 2, but I was certain the group would catch me since they could descend much faster.

I was concerned on the way up Bird due to the pain in the top of my left foot. I was kicking myself for tying my shoes too tight. It was too early in the race to start dealing with this much pain. I pulled over at Book 1 and laced my shoes so there were no laces across the top of my foot. I gingerly descended Checkmate Hill hoping the pain wouldn't get worse.

I pulled out my headlamp at the Legacy Tree. Nick passed me on the next descent.

I tore out my page at Garden Spot, 3 hours and 15 minutes into loop 2.

Nick was still at the water drop as I dropped down to fill up. He asked how I was feeling and I told him I was good. Then, he mentioned he thought we should navigate the next sections together. I agreed with his strategy and we pressed on together.

We each shared how we completed the new section and we swapped strategies for what we thought was the best line through the Barley Mouth. The rain started just before we arrived at book 3.

We took Laz's advice and took shelter in Bobcat Rock. I put my rain coat on and placed food in my hip pockets so it was quickly accessible. This kept stopping to a minimum.

As we left Bobcat Rock I looked down the coal road and did not see another light in sight. There wasn't any other runners close behind.

We made good time down Stallion but the rain started coming down even harder. This time, climbing up Spectacle was like climbing a slide with roller skates on. At one point, I slid backwards at least 10 feet.

The descent down to Raw Dog was so slick that I couldn't run. It was everything I could do to just stay on my feet. I would be slammed to the ground too many times to count on the remainder of this loop.

The famous Barkley fog rolled in on the climb up Pig Head. The rain turned into a full on downpour. I wasn't maintaining body heat, so when we reached the key hole on Rat Jaw (which got me out of the wind) I put on all my clothing: arm warmers, nylon jacket, Gore-Tex jacket, stocking cap, and rain pants.

Carrying all this clothing saved my race.

The fog was so thick it was difficult to tell if we were still on the power line cut. We just kept asking each other, “You still see cut down briars?” The cut briars confirmed we hadn't wandered into the woods and were still under the power line.

As we crested the top ledge I jokingly asked Nick, “Do you think anyone will be spectating and cheering this lap?”

“I doubt it,” he replied.

Shockingly, we got to the top and there was a female runner sitting under the table shivering and another gentlemen standing in the rain. They told us they were waiting for a ride. We quickly grabbed our pages and started down upper Rat Jaw.

Just before we started down the lower part of Rat Jaw we saw some lights moving along the coal road from Pig Head. It was John, Alan, and Bev.

When John came around the corner he said, “Man, I am not in a good place!”

His rain jacket was leaking and he wasn't maintaining his body temperature. We wished them well on their climb to the top and

we began our descent to the prison.

On our way down to the prison the fog dispersed. I noticed a light descending from Indian Knob down to the prison. Since Jared was the only runner ahead of us, he was either heading in the wrong direction or he was over 6 hours ahead of us on loop 3. I lost sight of the light and figured we would find out later.

The water in the tunnel was higher and colder this time through. This year the prison book (Book 8) was placed in the toilet of an enclosed guard shack. I felt the guard shack may be useful to get some sleep, out of the elements, in the later loops.

We warmed up on the climb up “The Bad Thing” but couldn’t see anything at the top. When we got to the top we realized we had wandered too far to the right. Then, Nick noticed the trail sign at the switchback before Marts Field Camp. We got our bearings and headed over to the Eye of the Needle without much trouble. Nick and I were working well together.

When we went into the Eye there was no book. We were wet and cold so there wasn’t much time to think about what we were going to do. We were definitely in the right spot so Nick left a note for anyone following and we moved on. Since there was two of us, we were hoping Laz would believe why we would be missing a page.

Our descent down Zipline wasn’t perfect, but we didn’t waste too much time either. There were no troubles on the climb up Big Hell. On the way down the Chimney Top Trail Nick asked what my plan was when I got to camp. My plans were 15 minutes to shower and eat, 30 minutes to sleep, and 15 minutes to get ready (a total of one hour before heading back out). His plans were the same. He then took off downhill so he could get more time in camp.

Nick was the first to finish loop 2 and I was minutes behind. Laz was aware something had happened to the Indian Knob book and informed us that Jared had not yet completed loop 2. I turned in my pages and went to my camp. This is always a low point for me—the cumulative beating really starts to take its toll. It is difficult not to think about the fact that there are still three loops remaining.

I tried not to think too much. I just showered and got in my tent. I laid down but all I did was think. The hundred felt like it was out of reach. I didn’t even want to go out for a third loop. I just wanted to stay in my tent and sleep for eight hours. I knew this thinking was self destructive so I got up and immediately started to prepare for Loop 3. I taped my feet and slipped on dry shoes. Time flies when you are in camp. I looked at my watch as I headed up to the gate to receive my next number. I couldn’t believe I had been in camp for 1 hour and 15 minutes—and didn’t sleep a wink.

Lap 2: 11 hours, 34 minutes, 50 seconds

Time in camp: 1 hour, 15 minutes

Lap 3 (Started Loop 3 at 21 hours, 34 minutes, 25 seconds)

I slowly headed out of camp in the dark morning mist. The third loop is in the reverse direction. It gives runners on loop 3 the chance to pass runners finishing loop 2 and get a glance at who is left in the race and how they look. I crossed paths with Alan and Bev just after the Ranger Station turn-off trail.

Nick caught up to me before Rough Ridge and we ran into Jared shortly after. He told us what had happened to him. His compass broke and he became disoriented on top of Indian Knob. He had been lost for seven hours. I was so impressed with how he remained in such high spirits. He really does have well-conditioned optimism. He let us know the book on Indian Knob had been placed in a hole on the opposite wall and that he put it back where it was normally supposed to be. We went in opposite directions but I knew there was still a chance he might catch up.

I put the headlamp away at the top of Chimney Top. We never saw another runner. Of the 40 starters only five runners completed loop 2 under the time limit.

The descent down to the beech tree and the climb up Zip Line were flawless. We were now at the descent down The Bad Thing. I was perked up and excited to put my notes from the earlier loops to the test on this section.

I explained to Nick the notes I had taken on lap 1: Go over two drainages and drop to a big rock. Go under a downed tree to a ball of vines. Descend to the big downed tree that John pointed out. Turn left on to Razor Ridge.

Perfect! This was the first time I had ever got this section right—3 and a half hours to the prison. We were having fun.

We picked up a couple walking sticks and found it was best to climb Rat Jaw in the briars where nobody else had climbed yet. There was far more traction in the briars. We used the sticks to dig into the ground.

We bumped into Carl Asker and Mike Burr at the top of Frozen Head. They were on loop 2 heading in the opposite direction. It was nice having conversation with these two guys as we all descended down Rat Jaw. Nick and I wished them luck as we parted ways at the coal road.

We kept walking with the sticks as we gently descended Pig Head. The overcast day was nice for keeping temperatures down. My plan was to keep using the walking sticks to transfer some weight from my legs to my arms, which might give the legs a

chance to recover.

This was great for the legs but I didn't realize we were moving so slow. We maintained our leisurely pace. It was on the climb up Stallion that I started doing calculations.

We had not been moving with a sense of urgency and had let a lot of crucial time slip away.

There would not be the time cushion I was hoping for to complete the last two loops. I estimated we would reach Garden Spot around 31 hours at the rate we were moving. The fastest I can move from Garden Spot to the gate when I am fresh is around 3 hours. It would be even more difficult after 60 miles.

This is when I remembered what David Horton said about starting Loop 4 within 33 and a half hour.

The earliest I could possibly start loop 4 was 34 hours and 15 minutes.

I explained the calculations to Nick. I told him I was probably not going to make it out on loop 4 and that he needed to leave me behind and get going. He had been moving faster than I was all day.

He took off on the descent down to Bobcat Rock.

In between Book 3 and Garden Spot I came to terms with the fact that I was going to quit after loop 3. There just wasn't enough time to complete two more loops. I was looking forward to a shower and some sleep, but then I remembered the depression that followed my last two Barkley failures. I started feeling sorry for myself and started thinking of the reasons I would tell my friends and family about why it just wasn't possible this year—but I knew Nick was going to prove that it was possible this year.

I arrived at Garden Spot at 30 hours and 45 minutes. I ate a pouch of tuna and a gluten-free muffin. I jogged down North Boundary and my legs started to warm up.

It was between Garden Spot and Coal Ponds that I did my deepest soul searching.

I thought about how much my wife had sacrificed to get me ready for five loops and what it was going to be like to tell her I wasn't going on.

Then, as Andrew Thompson said in his report, I had my "committee meeting upstairs."

I did a head to toe assessment. My feet and legs were good, even the pain in the top of my foot had gone away. My stomach was accepting food and I wasn't sleepy.

So what was the problem?

I still couldn't get over what Horty said about being out on loop 4 no later than 33 and a half hours. Since I had told myself this was my last year, I would have to settle for 3-for-3 on the Fun Run.

Barkley had become too tough.

Then, as I was hiking beneath the coal ponds, I went into this deep daydream. I was able to speak to myself as an older man. My older self let me know how much he regretted never having at least attempted loop 4. The last thing I want to do is live with regret.

The final thought I had before making the decision to push on was how nice it would be to prove Horty wrong.

I hit the single track after the coal ponds and the quit switch was officially flipped to the off position. I never thought about stopping again. I started running as fast as I could. I hadn't run that fast during any of my training. I ran everything remaining on the North Boundry.

Then there was Checkmate Hill—the demon that lurks in every Barkley runner's mind as they make their way around a reverse loop (1300 feet in a half mile). I thrashed my way up, grabbing and pulling every branch in site. I was to the book in 30 minutes from Phillips Creek.

I made quick work of the remaining miles down Bird and touched the gate at 33 hours and 45 minutes. I was informed that Nick was sleeping and hadn't left yet.

I made my turn around as fast as I could. The clock would be breathing down my neck for the remainder of the race.

Loop 3: 12 hours, 14 minutes, 23 seconds

Time in camp: 26 minutes, 12 seconds

Loop 4 (started at 34 hours, 15 minutes)

It was a special moment for me while getting ready for loop 4. I talked strategy with two previous finishers: Brett Maune and John Fegyverasi. These two guys are legends to me. It meant a lot that they took so much interest in getting me out on course

as fast as possible.

I started for the gate at the same time as Nick. As I did my last minute checklist before accepting my page (and no longer being able to receive aid) I noticed I had no page bag.

“Where’s my page bag?” I asked frantically. “Where’s my page bag?”

“It should be in there!” my wife replied as she went sprinting down to the truck to get a different one.

As I anxiously just stood at the gate watching time continue to slip away, Nick received his page and ran out of camp. Once Alyssa returned with a Ziplock bag I took my next number and left for loop four. Nick was nowhere in sight.

My pack felt like it weighed a hundred pounds on the way up Chimney Top. The sunset near the summit was the most beautiful thing I would see in the whole race. I pulled out my headlamp just before the trail became very steep. Shortly after, I noticed Nick had waited up for me. He mentioned his instinct was to race out of camp, but realized on the climb that since this was Barkley it was probably wiser that we stick together. We arrived at the Chimney Top book 15 minutes faster than we did on loop 3.

The next three sections were the most difficult to navigate, especially on the reverse night loop. It was crucial to execute this loop efficiently in order to give us enough time to complete loop 5. We were a little slower on our descent down to Big Hell, but with the colder temperatures we made up time on the climb up to Indian Knob.

Once again, The Bad Thing lurked—only this time it was dark.

The mental challenge of navigating helped to get over the drowsiness. I had to go over two drainages to the big rock. Nick was a little lower than I was when I heard him call out that he had located the big tree lying over the rock. We took our bearing and started our traverse. Then came the vine ball. We hit the rest of our landmarks with no mistakes.

It took 3 and a half hours to arrive at the prison—exactly the same time as loop 3.

We went into the guard shack, tore out our pages, and got something to eat. As we started up Rat Jaw, Nick turned to me as if he had forgotten something. He asked me if I had gone to college or had any sort of degree. I told him that I hadn’t. He stuck out his fist for a fist bump and replied, “Man, we are going to be the two dumbest guys to finish Barkley”—referring to the fact that every other finisher has some sort of college degree.

On the way up Rat Jaw things became confusing. I looked forward to riding my mountain bike on loop 5 and coasting down the descents.

“Wait,” I thought to myself, “we don’t get to ride bikes during Barkley.”

Nick said he was experiencing some confusion as well. We decided it was best to keep conversation rolling so we didn’t forget the task at hand.

We went through the key hole and rounded the corner to the spot where the summit of Frozen Head comes into sight. I could see five headlights at the top. Nick and I continued conversation all the way up.

It was refreshing to see John, Brett, Alyssa, Christine, and Ashley. It provided a brief moment back to reality. John confirmed we were ahead of his pace from the previous year and that we were moving well. This gave me hope that I may be able to lay down and get a little sleep before loop 5. I smiled as we headed back down Rat Jaw when we heard the most motivating cheer from the girls and the two former finishers.

As we hit Raw Dog Falls, Nick informed me that from this point on he was setting a new personal best. This was the point where he fell apart and quit the previous year.

It felt like we made good time down the Spectacle. We then encountered some low lying fog, which made it difficult to find the downed log used to cross the New River.

The weight of so many miles really set in while climbing up Stallion. I started my calculations again. Time went by so fast as we moved so slow.

We arrived at Garden Spot at 43 hours and 45 minutes. Even if I could run Garden Spot to camp in 3 hours and 15 minutes, there would be no extra time for sleep before loop 5. This was frustrating.

I informed Nick we were losing time fast and that we needed to move with a real sense of urgency. Nick passed me as I stopped to readjust my shoe and was quickly out of sight.

I arrived at the stream at the bottom of the switchbacks that I usually turn off to the right to go down to the coal ponds. I started down the stream but nothing looked familiar. There was no cross stream and no mound.

I went back up to make sure I had the right stream and then tried again. With all the rain, new streams had popped up all over. I

couldn't tell which one was the stream to the coal ponds. Everything was so confusing and I started to panic.

The frustration of not having enough time to sleep turned into fear of being timed out. I yelled out, "Disaster Prevention!" I knew it was a longer route but I went over the top of the ponds and then backtracked along the correct stream all the way to the Boundary Trail.

After a huge loop I made it back to the point where I originally became lost. This time I was confident I had the right stream. I made my way under the coal ponds. By the time I sorted everything out I had lost another 20 minutes. Nick was long gone.

I was once again running a break-neck pace on the Boundary trail, trying to make up as much time as possible. On the way down from the Legacy Tree it became difficult to see straight.

"Keep it together; you are almost through loop 4. Don't lose it," I said to myself.

As I was climbing Jury I couldn't remember crossing so many streams. Then I saw a headlight.

"Am I really seeing that," I asked. I stopped and stared at it. "Yep that is a light."

I had caught back up to Nick. He informed me that he was bonking and was out of food. He asked if I had anything extra. I had an extra Lara Bar and I gave it to him at Phillips Creek.

I pulled away from him on the way up Checkmate. I watched the sun rise on England Mountain for the third time without sleeping. The daylight made all the difference in the world to get rid of the tunnel vision from using a headlamp for the last 12 hours.

Nick rebounded from his bonk and busted out his downhill running skills. He flew past me on the way down Bird Mountain.

Earlier in the loop Nick and I discussed which directions we wanted to go on the last lap (runners on the last lap must go in opposite directions). Nick stated that even if I did not go out on loop 5, he wanted to go counter clockwise to get the difficult navigational areas out of the way early in the loop. This worked well for me because I wanted to go clockwise.

In my sleepless state, and the aggressive way Nick passed me on the way down Bird, I wondered if Checkmate Hill had changed his mind in his Loop 5 direction. I was confident I could do a clockwise loop in less than 12 hours, but I wasn't certain about a counter clockwise loop.

When I arrived at the gate I didn't want to take any chances in losing the clockwise direction so I prepared for the final loop without leaving the gate.

Everyone who helped me had the efficiency of a NASCAR pit crew. Brett was tying my shoes and giving me sips of coffee while John was feeding me pancakes. Alyssa put sunscreen on my ears and neck while my sister Ashley reloaded my pack.

My loop 5 turnaround was 15 minutes. I made it out of camp just a couple minutes in front of Nick in the clockwise direction. I had 12 hours and 45 minutes to complete loop 5.

Loop 4: 12 hours, 40 minutes, 54 seconds Time in camp: 14 minutes, 6 seconds

Loop 5(started at 47 hours, 10 minutes)

Ca-Blang Ca-Blang Ca-Blang

The giant Swiss cowbell, symbolizing a runner heading out on Loop 5, rang out. This is it. My loop 5. The hallowed territory.

"How's that bell sound Trav?" yelled John.

I was in such a hurry I almost ran off without really registering it.

I made good time climbing Bird to Book 1. I was at Phillips in an 1 hour and 20 minutes. I was a little slow, but was I was alright with it.

I grooved to some music along the North Boundary. I stopped to relieve myself in the middle of the trail on the way down Jury Ridge. I was startled when I looked ahead and saw Alan and Bev hiking at me.

"Woah, sorry guys," I said as I quickly turned the other direction. I finished my business and then turned back around. There was nobody was there. They seemed so real.

I made it back to Garden Spot in 3 hours and 28 minutes. I ran everything that I could. I was in such a hurry that I skipped over the water drop.

It started to get warm as I descended Stallion, and then the sun really started cooking on the open power line cuts.

I hadn't given much thought to where I would see Nick, but was surprised when we crossed paths at the top of the Spectacle. He had completed the Beech Fork area without any mistakes and was moving well. I wished him good luck on the rest of his

hike. I was pretty sure he would make it back to the yellow gate before me.

I was only concerned about getting timed out. I looked at my watch every five minutes the rest of the way to the tower.

John, Brett, Alyssa, Ashley, and Mindy Campbell had hiked up to the tower again. They were also up there with Ranger Jacob Ingram. When I arrived I was parched and completely out of water. It was nice to see people, even if it was for a moment.

John informed me that I was an hour ahead of him from the previous year. I left the tower with exactly six hours to complete the rest of the loop. I still didn't feel like I had enough time to coast.

I still had three big descents and two big climbs along with the trickiest part of the course to navigate. I had no room for error.

On the way down Rat Jaw I slipped onto my back and popped my hydration bladder. When I stood up I could feel all the water gushing down my legs. I debated on going back up to the tower to fill my water bottle.

I yelled up and told everyone what had happened. Brett yelled back, "Just drink out of the streams."

"What the heck," I thought. "If I get Giardia at least it will be after I have finished."

I continued down to the prison.

My feet had held up well for four and a half laps, but they were quickly falling apart.

As I entered the tunnel I had no idea what I was about to experience. The darkness took over the daylight as I made my way under the heart of the prison. There were holes on the side of the tunnel where water had been gushing out during the earlier loops.

As I looked at the first hole, a prisoner with dark circles around his eyes and tattoos on his forehead stuck his head out. He just stared at me as I passed by. Instantly, every hair on my body stood straight up. I quickly looked away fearing he may get mad if I kept staring.

Up to this point I knew every other strange thing I saw was just my sleepless mind playing tricks on me, but this was different.

Then there was another hole. This time a different prisoner stuck his head out. This occurred the entire way through the tunnel. A different prisoner presented himself in every drain hole.

They never said a word. They just curiously watched me pass.

My hair felt like it was going to push my hat off into the water. I couldn't get to the other side fast enough. When I finally reached the end of the tunnel, I never looked back. A chill shot through my body as I stepped back into the sun and an uncontrollable shiver went across me. I shook like a wet dog trying to dry off.

Yikes! That was weird.

Water squished out of my shoes as I ran around the prison. I opened the door to the guard shack and there was no book, only two pages. Fortunately, one had my number on it. I briefly wondered who the other page was for, but I didn't have the brain space to give it too much thought.

On the climb up The Bad Thing I could not remember it ever being so steep. It felt completely vertical. I hit all the landmarks as I slogged upwards. I crested the summit right at the Eye of the Needle.

One more tricky descent, get the Zip Line right, and I am home free.

I got out my compass and monitored it closely as I dropped into the Beech Fork. Every step was now agony. I would have walked on my hands if it was possible.

I could hear the streams closing in on each side of me. I looked ahead and saw something that was bright red. I couldn't tell if it was real or just another mind trick, but it wasn't moving as I got closer. It looked the same color as the nylon jacket I had been carrying. Upon closer inspection I realized it was my jacket. I had dropped it over 24 hours earlier on loop 4. Slowly, I put the pieces together.

If my jacket is here that meant I was here before. I never chose a bad route up Zip Line so I must be on course. Shortly thereafter I found the old jeep road confirming I knew where I was located. I looked at my watch and I still had three hours remaining. This was the exact moment that it hit me. After three attempts, three years of training, and 57 hours of racing—I was going to finish The Barkley.

I made my way up Big Hell for the last time. I thought about what John said to me at the tower and paused for a moment as I grabbed my last page.

All that remained was a descent down Chimney Top Trail. I ran as much as I could, trying not to drag out the remaining miles.

I popped out of the woods to an empty parking lot. I hiked the flat fork walking trail and started up the road to the campground.

For years, I tried to picture what it would feel like to run into Big Cove Campground on loop 5 with all 11 pages in my pocket. It was a feeling like no other, but I still couldn't resist the urge to walk. I told myself I would run to the finish once someone recognized that it was me.

As the gate came into view I could see Nick had already finished. I was impressed he had completed a reverse loop so quickly.

Mindy was the first to spot me. Her cheer alerted everyone in camp that I was on my way up. Everyone who stuck around started to whistle and clap.

The pain briefly subsided and I mustered up all I had left to run up to the gate.

As I ran the final stretch of the road I thought about the question I wanted to ask the 12 finishers: Was it worth it? Was it worth all the pain, suffering, and time spent training—all to be a conqueror of the Barkley Marathons.

Although I would love to hear their answers, after touching that gate, handing 11 pages to Laz, and becoming the 14th Finisher of the Barkley Marathons I knew.

There was no doubt about it.

Loop 5: 11 hours, 31 minutes, 45 seconds

Total: 58:41:45