

46 hours to failure a 21yr olds second attempt at bringing down the world's toughest ultramarathon by Nickademus Hollon

“Only those who will risk going too far can possibly find out how far one can go.”

T. S. Eliot

Before Failure

We all raised our hands and touched the yellow gate together. As I was just about to walk back to camp after having shown Laz the ten pages I had gathered on my third loop, he looked at me and held up five fingers with a smile on his face

“Five loops next year?” “You bet” I said in an overconfident tone.

Since the race began in 1986, only 12 runners out of about 900 have finished within the 60 hour cutoff. I wanted to be among them.

The race is nothing like any other ultra. Participants (or victims) run a ~20+ mile loop during which they must navigate through the dense and steep forests of Brushy Mountains, TN to find eleven books which the race director has placed under rocks and trees. The race pits man against nature, and as such GPS's, Altimeters and anything that helps the runners beyond a normal map and compass is strictly prohibited. In order to officially finish the race you must complete all five loops (100+ miles) in under the 60hr time limit. Most hundred milers take a good runner under 24hrs, so sounds easy right? Not.

The Barkley is the hardest ultramarathon in the world, hands down. I will argue this with anyone. It is the ultrarunner's Tour de France, the trail masochists ultimate test of their worth. The race has over 59,100 feet of climbing and more than 59,100 feet of descending, which is far more than any other Ultramarathon in the USA and world.

I promised myself from then on that I was going to train. I wanted to train harder than Brett, harder than anyone who was planning on entering the race and just go out and throw the record down in the 40's, so Laz (the race director) and everyone would barely even know what hit them.

Excuses aside, March 31st 2012, rolled around way too quick and my stupid senior year at college was really starting to get in the way of more important things in life, like running. I was graduating in May, but cared much more about the outcome of this race. I couldn't care less about college, racing and completing the Barkley this year was going to be my absolute goal.

Whether it was myself that had put it there or the tons of friends and family that looked to me for inspiration, the stakes were high for this year. I had to complete the race. I had to persevere. I had no other option. I couldn't stand letting myself down and I knew that everyone else was looking up to me to finish this race as well. I didn't want to let anyone down.

Waiting in the airport that night for my flight at 4:45am I started reflecting on my training and whether I was physically ready for this thing. I hadn't done as much elevation gain training as I had wanted too, and I hadn't ran a consistent week since before the Rocky Road 100 back in

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February where I hit a 15hr and 42min hundred miler. I was trying to be conservative though and not injure myself. I wanted to go in a bit undertrained than even the slightest bit overtrained as I knew that the result of that is devastating. I convinced myself I was good enough complete five loops of hell.

My high self-expectations and knowing that family and friends were expecting nothing short of phenomenal from me brought immense anxiety and small panic attacks on me as the race morning dragged on. It was now 7:30am and I had been awake since 5:00am because sleeping in the driver's seat of a truck was not comfortable.

The conch finally blew, I had been ready since 6:00am so there was nothing to do but eat and get a few more calories in me before commencing the 2012 Barkley. My goal was to go out hard but stay near the near front pack. I wanted to race my own race more than anything. I didn't want to be relying on anyone else's navigational skills. I knew the course or at least parts of it from last year and didn't need anyone's help in motivating myself.

Standing at the start line I noticed a variety of talented people this year. Some were in it for just completing one loop. Some were in it to try and complete a fun run. Some were in it because Laz just let them in for a good laugh. Some were standing there because they wanted to break the course record. I was standing there because I was going to run five loops. My hands were trembling, I was panicking already. Laz brought the cigarette to his lips.

Loop 1- Cocky Confidential Confidence

“Bravery and stupidity go hand and hand so I guess that makes me the bravest man”

-Modest Mouse

I started the race off listening to Bangarang by Skrillex a very heavy quick beat dubstep song. I wanted to ignore everyone and get in my own race and own world immediately. I was almost instantly ahead of the whole pack and was planning on running everything in Barkley that was 'runnable' so that meant I needed to start now. After the first two switch backs I lost visual of the rest of the runners and figured I would just be ahead of everyone...at least for this portion. I looked at my watch at the top of the mountain 24 minutes. It was a bit quick, but I wasn't tired.

Now the hard part, I knew I needed to follow the Cumberland trail for about a mile and then pass over the 'pillars of doom' after which I am supposed to make a quick right over a small hill heading north. I found and crossed the pillars of doom, those were quite obvious. Then in my rush, I completely passed the small hill and continued forward on the Cumberland trail for about another mile before I stopped and noticed that there were no hills trending north, at least according to my compass.

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I was off course already. Not a good way to start off the Barkley Marathons. I calmed myself down. This lost time didn't mean the end of me it was just one mistake. I just couldn't make too many others like this. After all getting lost is part of the race. I navigated back to the pillars where I saw some back of the pack runners approaching the hill. Apparently, I had fallen way back in the pack now. I didn't worry though, because positions don't matter in Barkley, only time does.

I went up and over the small hill and of course found a ton of upturned leaves where other runners had been through. Following the leaves I went through the pine forest and navigated through to a 'coal bench' where book 1 was located. The book was under a huge rock, lifting it up reminded me of the Death Race and the 1,500 clean lifts we had to do with 40lb rocks. I ripped out page 49, drank a bit of water and ate some food and then I was ready to get over to book 2 where at least I thought I knew the course.

I felt rushed and consequently anxious. I knew I was supposed to follow some creek that was northeast of me on the coal bench. I went east around the bench and found the first 'runnable' downhill, there were no upturned leaves on the steep 45% grade and there was no creek, but for some reason I figured I would intersect the creek eventually if I just headed northeast. I started flying down the mountain at about 10 degrees northeast. I was almost immediately cliffed out by 40-50ft cliffs. "This can't be the right route..." I navigated further east and found a way to rock climb down the cliffs and kept descending down the mountain. I was moving quick because I wanted to make up time and get to the book, but it had been a while now and still no creek. Even worse the hill was now flattening out. Which I knew from having looked at the topographic map, that I must now be off course.

Luckily I started to hear a river to the right of me. I sprinted as much as one can sprint through dense forest and briars and got to the river. It was a decent size and figured it was some tributary further up from Phillips Creek. Without thinking, consulting my map or triangulating, I decided to turn left on the river and follow it to where I thought the confluence and book no.2 was going to be. I followed the creek for about a mile and a half before it met with a much larger river and was heading due west. I knew this was absolutely wrong. I was on flat terrain, some other big river merged with my creek and was heading west. The confluence I was looking for trended Northeast and was right next to a very obvious trail.

I panicked. I quickly tried to triangulate my position based on England Mountain to the Southeast of me and what I assumed was Jury Ridge now to the Southwest of me. Judging by the westward direction of the river, I positioned myself on the map and found that I almost off the map in the very far northwest corner of the map about 2-2.5 miles from where the book was located.

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I was now really stressing. Two mistakes like this on the first loop could cost me my whole race if I am not able to find the book quickly and start making up time on the rest of the course. My overconfidence with navigating and knowing the course from last year was destroying me. I obviously had little to no clue what I was doing. I started following the creek back southeast, as from the map I had determined that this small creek was actually Phillips Creek, I was just way down river.

I came across another runner, who like me looked lost and out of place wondering around the woods near the creek. We momentarily partnered up and managed to find the confluence and book 2 within the next ten minutes. I very quickly ripped out my page, drank some water and ate some food and then started blasting off up the switchbacks towards Jury Ridge.

Already, I had lost nearly one and half hours misnavigating finding books 1 and 2.

I was now hauling up and over Jury Ridge, at a sustainable yet hard pace. I had my iPod on and my techno music blasting. I wasn't going to slow down any time soon. I passed runner after runner. They all looked surprised to see me passing them as they assumed I was somewhere way up on the course already.

When I finally caught up with Frozen Ed (an expert veteran runner and navigator), I asked him what he had done to navigate from book 1 to book 2 and he said he took a heading of 60 degrees from a definitive white pipe that was sticking out of the side of the coal bench around the east side. Wow...I felt like an idiot, I had quickly just taken a heading of 10 degrees and gone for it, definitely a beginner's mistake.

I then caught up with Jason and Joel, two guys who I had met back at camp the previous night, these were two very tough guys who competed and completed events like the World's Toughest Mudder and the Death Race, events that make parts of Barkley look easy. They were both surprised to see me, as they had assumed I was way ahead of them. I described to them my sad story as I speed walked ahead.

I was then alone for a little on the North Boundary Trail again and when the trail divided, I took a right when I reached Bald Knob, without even consulting my map, just assuming that it was the right direction. I went about a half a mile down that trail and intersected a road, when I finally turned around and realized no one was following me...“PISS!!” I had screwed up again and completely missed the right trail...

I ran back to the proper north boundary trail and took a left, Joel and Jason as well as some other runners we're now ahead of me again. They all gave me strange looks as I passed them again for the second time, “O I'm trying to get a preview of the whole region, not just the course ya know?”...I was obviously one of the poorest navigating veterans out there.

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I demolished the downhill sections on the way to garden spot and power climbed up the short switchbacks between myself and Garden Spot. Luckily, I navigated the rest of the way to Garden Spot, book number 3 without any more serious misnavigations.

I quickly ripped out my page and started heading off towards Stallion Mountain, a few hundred feet in front of some other runners I had passed up the switchbacks. Unfortunately, my confidence was back. I started to move towards Stallion Mountain quickly. "Ok when the trail makes a sharp left..." I read from the map and looked up, the trail was making a sharp left, but I didn't remember if I was supposed to go forward and off trail or stay on the trail. Without thinking or consulting my map, I decided to go forward and off trail. After half a mile of not seeing anyone's tracks...I started to get really pissed off at myself for all these stupid mistakes I was making. I ran back to the trail quickly and met up with the two runners who were now walking up the sharp left I had decided was wrong. I was a rusty veteran.

I talked to the two runners for a while to confirm an accurate description of what was next. They agreed with what I said as far as my course description. I felt confident enough to start pounding off on my own again. I successfully reached book number 3, Garden Spot and then started taking off down Stallion Mountain following a Jeep Road.

When I turned into the field, I noticed the two runners were ahead of me again, they had taken a shorter more efficient route down Stallion Mountain. I couldn't believe the amount of mistakes I was making on this loop. I remembered a quote from previous year's race report "everyone has to have a nightmare loop" and I figured having my nightmare loop be my first loop would just mean the rest of my loops were going to be easy right?

I navigated efficiently through the fields and briars on my way over to Fyke's Peak. From there it was a quick descent that I had remembered doing with Joe Decker last year. I was able to find the old trail from last year and followed that effectively down until I got to the Jeep Road. From there I couldn't remember which way to head off of the Jeep road and rather than waste time trying to find a faint trail from last year, I figured I would just start heading down, because I knew if I headed southwest generally that I would intersect New River and could correct myself from there.

I bombed down the mountain and found a section of the mountain that must have been at least a 70% grade. I had no choice and the clock was already ticking, so I started sliding down the thing bringing trees and rocks down with me, one of which banged me the knee pretty hard.

I got to where the mountain was now flat and New River was nowhere in sight. I figured I had gone too far to the right and now needed to head east in order to intersect the old downed power lines that would lead me back over to New River and the proper crossing.

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That was exactly what I did and it worked! Yay! I did something right! New River was easy to navigate to the 116 and from there I knew I had the course well memorized.

I ran up and over to book 5 at the swamp, collected my page and started heading up a road, after about a quarter of a mile, I realized I was heading on the wrong road. I quickly turned around "Nick...you're a freaking idiot..." and I began climbing the proper road up to the base of Testicle Spectacle where I could see several other runners slowly suffering their way up the brutal climb.

The trail on testicle spectacle was pretty nice this first loop, I managed to get through with far less scratches than last year and arrived at the top in under thirty minutes. I quickly grabbed a bite to eat and drank some water and then started off demolishing meth lab hill.

I caught a few more runners on the way down the hill and arrived at the steep 'neo-buttslide' which was then pretty easy to navigate from there over to Raw Dog Falls. I remember Laz had said "if you come to the road first then you are below the book, if you come to the river first then you are above the book". I hit the road first, and I hit it about half a mile off of the book, this was another navigational mistake, as a veteran, I should have been able to hit this book dead on. I quickly collected the page from book 6 and ripped down the hill to ascend pussy ridge. I didn't even want to mess with Danger Dave's climbing wall, it was just something I always skipped.

I descended down from the yellow gate and around the 'rusty barrel' everyone is required to go around. I then ascended 'trash hill' to the 116 where I intersected dead on with Pig Head Creek. Yay! I did something right!!

From here, I knew the course well and I would no longer be misnavigating. Pig head creek to rat jaw bluff is an extremely steep 400ft ascent from the creek which then continues up a Jeep Road to an old pink mining building. I navigated this section flawlessly.

As I ran the flat half a mile over to the beginning of rat jaw bluff, I couldn't help but remember how much I hated this part of the race, and how last year my legs started violently cramping towards the top of the climb. "...uh oh..." I felt my legs start to cramp... "crap!!"

I turned the corner to see a completely new beast than last year. Someone or something had shaved the whole damn climb and cut back the briars on the power lines. There were still millions of briars scattered on the ground but to my despair I saw runners climbing straight up the cut back power line hill, literally using an old power line to pull themselves up the 40% grade.

I wished there was an easier way, but I knew last year's section through the forest way now both off limits and not any easier. I started up the climb and literally had to use the power line to pull myself up a few of the steeper sections of the climb. Coming back down this I thought, was

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going to be extremely slow and dangerous. When I reached the first bench, the first thing to catch my eye were more runners on the next section of hill about 500ft above me climbing up an equally steep portion. It was extremely hot out already and this climb was killer...I couldn't step or lunge too deeply as that would provoke my cramps and I would just fall over and twitch on the ground for a bit until I could limp forward again.

Avoiding cramps, I climbed up the mountain slowly until I finally reached the bench which I knew was near the end. I automatically crossed the bench and started following last year's route, when I noticed there were no footprints or anything in the forest. Apparently everyone this year was just heading straight through the Briars.

I reached the rock climbing portion and climbed up to the next section of power line road and started off on the one shallow grade that leads up to the steep grade right before the top. Around the corner, I was able to see the radio tower. The thing looked at least a mile and a half away and the hill the runners were walking up looked steeper than anything I had yet come across in the course. There were a ton of people gathered at the top of the road though and it looked like something out of Western States 100 not the Barkley Marathons. I was confused by the big crowd.

I 'sacked up' and started pushing hard up the last climb, Derek Holden, my good friend and crew member, had hiked 3.5 miles over from camp to see me here and to get some photos of me in my pain. I grunted at him and told him it was hot and my stomach wasn't taking in much food and my legs were starting to cramp. Like a good crew member he gave me no compassion and instructed me to get going again.

I filled my water quickly, ripped out my page from the book 7 and then sat down on a log for a short while and started to try and eat a sandwich. My stomach was not enjoying solid food. Somewhere in the heat my body had decided it would stop producing saliva for me. Jerk body...

I was now near and among a pretty decent group of runners. I started recognizing people from last year. I estimated I was getting near the top ten, not that places matter at all in this race.

I started flying down the steeper part of the rat jaw bluff and when suddenly a saw briar wrapped itself around my ankle and at the speed I was going it just tore through my flesh until I broke through it. "About time I start giving blood" I thought.

I reached the bluff and started to look for the old course down to the prison and book number 8. Again the briars had been flattened and the power line hill looked terrifyingly runnable. Countless briars wrapped themselves around my ankles as I descended the hill. I had made the dumb decision to wear shorts on three accounts. One Joe Decker wore shorts last year and looked cool from all his cuts he had received. Two, I had left my tights back in Flagstaff by mistake. Three it was freaking hot and tight pants would have been a death trap. So getting

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ripped and torn to shreds by briars it was. I figured later in the race when the sleep deprivation kicks in the cutting and shredding of my flesh would keep me awake.

At the prison, I didn't even second think about maceration and getting my feet wet. They had already been soaked since I had screwed up at getting to book 2 and crossed had to cross Phillips creek a million times to find the book. I instantly jumped into the prison tunnel where a creek is almost always flowing through, immediately soaking my shoes and feet. I jogged through the dark tunnel and emerged at the other side where I rock climb up the ten foot ventilation duct to book number 8. At this point I caught up with Carl Laniak a previous year's fun run and fourth loop starter, I quickly rip out my page and catch up with him. We casually chat and he's impressed at how quickly I caught him from the downhill off of Rat Jaw Bluff.

Now for something completely different, the Bad Thing. The climb is a steep mile and a half ascent to Indian Knob. I start up the mountain with Carl and its suddenly a lot steeper than I remember. I can feel my muscles starting to cramp on me with each steep lunge I take to propel my body upwards. Just like my training for this race, I remember that mileage in Barkley isn't measured in miles it's measured in elevation gain.

Carl gets going at a strong pace and I have a difficult time keeping up with him. I decide to push myself and keep up with him, even though I knew the route enough on my own at this point. With some more struggle we reached the cap rock about a quarter mile off from the 'eye of the needle' or Indian Knob, I heard it referred to by both names during the race.

With a quick break for some nutrition and water, myself and Carl had collected book number 9 and we were now headed down my least favorite descent of Barkley, Zipline to the Beech Tree confluence.

I hated this descent more than any other part of the Barkley course. It's difficult to navigate, its full of very healthy green saw briars, full of slippery moss covered rocks and extremely steep hills with occasional rivers, waterfalls and cliffs. I'm sure all the waterfalls are beautiful when one isn't running Barkley, but I was. Nature isn't beautiful during Barkley, it's your enemy and your there to slaughter your way through it all.

Without getting too off course Carl and I navigated efficiently to the Beech tree confluence and I ran up to Book number 10 to find John (one of this year's finishers) and Tim sitting there eating and preparing for the climb up big hell. I had moved from near last place at the beginning of the loop to fifth place, not that positions mattered at all.

John, Tim, Carl and I all started up the climb together. Without consulting a map or compass, we chose a ridge slightly to the left of where I was used to going up. The ridge looked right in my rusty memory. As we kept pushing upwards, the ridge wasn't looking right. I knew that no

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matter what all the ridges join together and link up at the location of Chimney Top and Book number 11, so I stopped worrying about ascending the wrong ridge.

We came across several false summits which was starting to really confuse me. I didn't tell John or Tim though, I didn't want to seem like an idiot. I led on convinced that I would eventually recognize the cap rock. I started to veer off to the left convinced that we had somehow ended up to the right of where we were supposed to be, when Tim and John yelled out over to me that they had found Book number 11!

I had missed the cap rock by about a quarter of a mile to the left, making this the eighth navigational mistake on this loop alone.

After grabbing book 11 and ensuring that John and Tim knew the route to the Chimney Top trail, I blazed off at around a 6:45min/mile down Chimney Top trail. Runnable terrain is rare at Barkley, and runnable downhill terrain is even rarer, so I was going to take advantage of it.

Somewhere near my ascent of rough ridge, I realized it was possible for me to make a sub-9hr loop so I started hauling butt down the mountain even more kicking it down to near a 6:00min/mile. I flew through the rest of the course and ran up to Big Cove campground (the start/ finish) to touch the gate at 8:59:47.

Unlike last year, I finished this loop feeling great and full of energy, aside from the stupid mistakes I had made. I didn't let these bother me though, a 9 hour loop was plenty fast and gave me plenty of leeway for my fourth or fifth loop. I took a quick fifteen minute break in which Derek Holden helped me switch out my shoes and socks, my feet were slightly macerated but not blistered or hurting at this time. I threw down a can of ravioli, a bagel and drank half a liter of coca-cola, loaded up my headlamp and then told Laz I was out for my second loop.

Second Loop-Success!

“I live life on the edge because you can't see anything from the center”

-Kurt Vonnegut

I was feeling good but didn't have the energy I did on the first loop to run up Bird Mountain in 24 minutes and my iPod had ran out of batteries coming down chimney top.

I made it to the top of the mountain in 40 minutes. A bit slower than the first loop, but I knew how to get to book 1 and 2 now and didn't plan on screwing things up this time around.

I followed the trail along up and over England Mountain, through the pine forest and nailed book 1 dead on. From there, I followed the east bench around to the very apparent white pipe that I

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had somehow missed on the first loop and was able to easily follow people's tracks down to the confluence and book number 2.

I was already doing phenomenally better time wise on this loop than I had done on loop 1. I jogged parts of the North Boundary Trail but mostly kept to a brisk walk on my way over to Garden Spot and book number 3.

Night and day wasn't separated not by darkness and light, but rather two different kinds of centipedes. During the day flat neon orange and neon red centipedes inhabited the forest floor and rocks. During the night these centipedes were replaced by longer, rounder, larger plain gray centipedes which liked to reside on the trees. These grey centipedes were now all over the trees, which must have meant I was now entering my first night of the race.

I was using the 130 lumen headlamp that my mom had purchased me before the race and it was working great...too great. I was able to see every spider, beetle and centipede crawling all over the trail, I had never seen a forest so alive at night with insects.

Finding and getting book number 3 was easy and I went down to refill my water before heading over to book number 4. I even had time to sit and enjoy a bagel under the three quarters moon and beautiful Tennessee sky.

I ran over to book 4 at stallion mountain. However, as I started to follow some old ATV tracks towards the location of the book I lost track of the trail and somehow got entirely turned around and started heading back north to where I had come from, it all looked the same in the dark. I noticed I was in the wrong direction when I saw other runner's headlamps coming towards me. I started back towards the south of the mountain and figured I would navigate better and find the trail. Suddenly I shined my light off to my left and saw another runners headlamps off in the forest about 100ft from me, "are you at the book?" No response. "ARE YOU AT THE BOOK? HAVE YOU FOUND THE BOOK? IS THAT THE BOOK?" No response. "god..what a jerk runner" I think to myself. I then shine my light on the rest of the runner. It's not a runner at all. The deer stares back at me and continues to chew on the grass... "At least it didn't respond back to me" I think to myself as I continue on and find the proper trail over to book number 4.

I navigated from book 4 to book 5 at the base of testicle spectacle with relative ease. I followed a similar route down from Fyke's peak as the first loop. Although I knew it wasn't the most efficient, I knew how to do it, and I knew how to do it quickly.

Testicle spectacle version 2.0 wasn't as easily done as version 1.0. The briars seemed healthier this time around and I could see a runners headlamp in the distance beneath me, which made me want to move even faster, although placement means nothing at Barkley I kept telling myself.

I ran down meth lab hill and navigated perfectly to book number 6 at raw dog falls.

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From there climbing up rat jaw bluff wasn't nearly as difficult as it had been the previous day the heat was now gone and it was just a matter of getting through the climb in the cool night. I kicked and tore my leg up on a fair share of briars ascending and descending rat jaw bluff into the prison.

At the prison this time, I decided I was going to keep my feet dry and balance my way through the prison tunnel on the narrow curb that ran through the tunnel. I did this flawlessly and enjoyed climbing out through the 10ft ventilation vent on the other end. I quickly grabbed book 8 and started ascending towards Indian Knob immediately.

I purposely aimed a bit to the left of the normal ridge that everyone else ascends. I knew this section I was aiming for was steeper, but that also meant it was that much more efficient at getting me towards the top. I pushed hard going up Indian Knob and to my surprise noticed two headlamps at the cap rock headed towards the eye of the needle.

Like a cheetah to a gazelle I was after those headlamps. I caught them at book number 8, Indian knob. It was Alan Abbs and his wife Beverly Abbs. The two were looking strong and suggested that we stick together at least for the descent down to Beech tree. I agreed and Alan, suggested that I lead the way down to the confluence. I hated this portion of the course and wasn't that good at leading it, but figured I would give it a shot. And I was off without consulting my compass or map.

After several hundred briar patches, endless rocks and several river crossings, I could tell Beverly Abbs was starting to get frustrated with my poor route choice. I wasn't happy about it either, I hate briars! Before too long though, I found the old Jeep road and we were off following along the right hand side of the river over to the confluence.

At book 10 Beverly Abbs decided she would get a head start up the mountain while myself and Alan Abbs held back and threw down some needed food and water before starting up the mountain. My stomach was finally starting to take in solid food again! I just needed to feed it a ton. Alan and I ascended the correct ridge up to the top of Chimney Top at a smoking pace that was at times difficult for me to maintain. We rested briefly at book number 11 to get some more food in us before descending down to Big Cove Campground.

I mean no offense to Alan Abbs here. He is a phenomenal athlete and I more than enjoyed his company on the course. However, at this point in the course I should have left him and blasted my way down Chimney Top over to the campground. I was more than capable at the time of running 6:30's down the mountain but held back so that me and Alan could go out together again on loop 3. I should have chosen to run my own race.

Loop 2 was defeated, 10hrs and 17mins of a fairly well navigated loop.

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Alan and I stopped for a quick thirty minute break, during which I threw down about another 570 calories of Mashed Potatoes, bread and ramen that Derek had provided me. I changed my socks and shoes, took an Advil and slept for fifteen minutes before we were off on the trail again.

The long gray centipedes still covered the trees.

Loop 3-Familiar Grounds

“if its not a positive thought, then its negative and if its negative then it’s a waste of time and here at Barkley you can’t afford to waste time”- Andrew Thompson Barkley Finisher 2009

Loop three was the first reverse direction loop and I wasn’t 100% confident on my navigating skills in this direction, so I was glad to have Alan at my side even if we weren’t equally matched in strengths. Alan was a much better hill climber as I discovered on this loop and I was much better at rapidly descending. In my rush to get out of there, I made a fatal mistake and left my handheld water bottle behind at camp.

We began ascending Chimney Top slowly, our excuse was to let the food digest. As well we had the time to spare, our times on the first two loops were phenomenal and we were only gaining leeway for the fourth and fifth loop at this point. As we were ascending I noticed several of the neon orange and neon red varieties of centipedes on the forest floor, “...daytime must be near” I thought to myself.

After a short while we reached the peak of Chimney Top in 1hr and 22mins. We made it quickly over to book number 1 grabbed our page and started bombing down the mountain towards beech tree. I led this portion of the course on the downhill, hoping that my ‘luck’ or ‘skill’ or whatever it was from last year on this section would happen again. I led us down the correct ridge but ended up about 200ft off from the book which required us to go up a small ridge until we found the book. We wasted maybe about seven minutes locating the book, which was nothing major.

From beech tree we began ascending the Jeep Road, Alan was leading this portion of the course and he knew a way up Zipline that apparently avoided the majority of the nasty briars and rocks. I trusted and began following him. We got to the waterfall where we were supposed to cross the river and start ascending to the right of the river. However, myself and Alan both looked at the terrain on that side of the river: rocky, covered in briars, semi-steep and then looked at the terrain right in front of us on the left hand side of the river: no rocks, no briars and really freaking steep. Steep meant efficient, and efficient meant saving time. We started ascending to the left side of the creek without consulting our compasses or maps. We were both fun run veterans and figured we knew the course well enough (BAD MISTAKE!). We ascended endlessly steep terrain (45%+ grades at times) and seemed never to reach the cap rock. When we finally started to notice cap rock, it looked nothing at all like the cap rocks at Indian Knob and the eye of the needle was nowhere to be seen. This worried the crap out of me.

What worried me worse was the twenty minutes we had now spent checking each and every cap rock for something even remotely resembling Indian Knob. Nothing. So we ascended even higher.

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We intersected a trail...there were green markers on the tree I instantly thought we were on Bird Mountain and started to panic...Alan had run these trails before though, pulled out his map and was able to tell almost exactly where we were. It turns out the ridge we had ascended went up to a cap rock perpendicular to Indian Knob and we estimated we were currently about a mile and half off of Indian Knob.

We furiously moved south on the trail heading towards Indian Knob and passed through a campground with a hiker who gave us a very confused look. After about another twenty minutes of searching Alan finally found the backside entrance to the 'eye of the needle' and we quickly grabbed book 3, fueled up and started to head down to the prison, book number 4. I was navigating this portion dead on, until it came to deciding what and where the saddle of the ridge was that led down to the prison.

I chose one saddle too soon and we descended a nasty briar filled portion of the ridge and ended up about a quarter of a mile south of the water towers where we were supposed to have come out.

We hit the book and I climbed down the ventilation shaft while Alan went through the creek and got his feet wet, I wasn't going to do this anymore. I was sick of getting my feet wet and didn't want to deal with maceration at all on this loop. I felt ok but knew that Alan was probably going to start pulling away from me on the ascent up Rat Jaw Bluff, especially since we were starting the climb from all the way at the prison.

I managed to keep up with Alan all the way up the hill from the prison. We both cursed a few times as we slipped and were torn apart by a few briars on the way to the bench.

I was exhausted though and was having trouble with keeping down food again as the day was starting to heat up. I kept moving forward though. I wasn't quick. In fact I was moving at a box turtle's pace or even slower perhaps. I kept slipping on briars on the ascent up to the next bench which was not only infuriating me but also causing me to waste my energy and time on the climb. Alan pulled away from me on the very last section of rat jaw bluff. He had picked up a hiking stick and was using the hell out of it to ascend the mountain at a quick pace. I eventually decided to copy him and ended up picking up two sticks and felt something like a cross country skier moving my tired and foodless body up the mountain.

At the top, I was pretty exhausted so I took a five minute break and began to eat some food again as I would need the energy to ascend testicle spectacle and Fyke's Peak. I caught up with Alan again on the descent and noticed John (one of this year's finishers) now was only about thirty minutes off from us. This is another point in the course, where I should have gone ahead on my own and blasted off hard down the mountain like I was capable of instead of hanging back with Alan, as he would easily catch me on the next climb.

I ended up hanging with Alan down to pig head creek, down trash hill and then Alan to my surprise suggested, "we'd better do Danger Dave's climbing wall"...uh...I wasn't ever a fan of going up the thing, much less down the thing on loop 3. The wall is an 85% grade, it's pretty much just a straight down slope with two tree's growing out of it. We hopped off the ledge like we were skydiving and ungracefully fell through the leaves and ground litter until we rolled out at the bottom and crossed the river. "Man was that an adrenaline rush!"

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We made our way over to the next book at raw dog falls and started heading towards neo-butt slide and the ascent up meth-lab hill. This portion of the course, I could tell was going to be miserably hot. It was nearing mid-day and the hill was entirely exposed to the sun. Alan started up the climb at a very strong uphill pace. I wasn't able to keep back and immediately started to fall behind him. I told him "go on without please if I am slowing you down" and he said "there is no need for that yet". I pushed myself harder but my body wouldn't budge, I told my legs to move faster but they wouldn't, they were stuck at turtle pace and Alan was pulling away from me faster and faster.

The heat really started to get to me and I began to feel light headed, I felt like vomiting at one point up meth lab hill and my legs were beginning to feel like they were going to start cramping again. I was pretty sure I was developing at least a minor case of heat exhaustion by the time I had summited the hill. I was exhausted now and needed a break but Alan kept pushing onward at a strong pace and something in me wanted to stick with him. We decided that we would take a short ten minute break at new river, mainly to fix my heat exhaustion and get my body cooled off before heading up Fyke's peak in the reverse direction. By the time we had reached the creek, I was even more exhausted from the heat, frustrated from slipping and bleeding my way down testicle spectacle and in need of break.

I waded across the creek barefoot to avoid getting my shoes wet, but ended up slipping on the mossy rocks and fell in shoes and all. This defeated the whole purpose in taking them off. The creek felt great though and really helped calm my heat exhaustion down and get my body back under control.

Alan had been ready for a while though and I could tell he was really anxious to get going up Fyke's peak. I quickly put my shoes on and tried eating something. My stomach now felt like barbed wire was crawling around inside of it, hunger pangs were firing off left and right. The heat exhaustion had suppressed my hunger and now that the heat exhaustion was gone my body was desperately hungry. Alan was ready to go however and didn't want to waste anymore of his time waiting for me.

As much as my body wanted to stop and eat, I really wanted to stick with Alan on this section. He knew the old route that I used to know, the route that I had taken with Joe Decker and the 'Barkley boys' from last year. The route of course, was much steeper than I remembered. The climbs never ended, that was until they ended. Alan pushed onward with a very strong pace and once the Jeep road/ bench was within both his and my sight he turned to me and said "Nick you'll catch me on the downhill's near stallion mountain, I need to get going up this mountain" I couldn't have agreed more with him. I wished we had actually split off earlier in the loop, his uphill pace wasn't my pace and I should not have been trying to stick with him.

I ascended to the bench on my own and Alan was now out of my sight and getting out of my mind. When I finally reached the top of Fyke's peak I walked a bit on the small portion of flat ground that there was and managed to consume an entire turkey sandwich with some mashed potatoes. I was starting to feel energy back in me again. I ran down the north side of Fyke's peak and caught Alan at a coal pond before Stallion Mountain.

Going up Fyke's peak on the third loop was the hardest I had crashed yet during the race and Alan wasn't too confident on me making it much further. I had been like this before though in other races. I knew this kind of pain and I knew I could push far beyond it. Traditionally in any hundred miler I have one crash

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during which everyone looks at me and thinks 'damn... you look like s***' to quote Ben Hian from the Rocky Road 100.

The rest of the loop Alan and I stuck together. We experienced very few lows. I still struggled to stay with him on the uphill's and I held myself back on the downhill's. This only further supported the fact that we should have split up.

When we got to book number 10, Phillips creek we started ascending to the left of the creek that if followed correctly led exactly to the white pipe. We must have been following the creek very incorrectly. The climb seemed to take forever, endlessly and tirelessly steep. We arrived at coal bench after coal bench. None of them looked even remotely similar to the coal bench where book 11 was located. We finally noticed a pine forest about 200ft above us and decided to ascend to that. Alan and I then figured out from the topography and heading that somehow or another we were still north of the book and still needed to ascend up to get to book number 11.

Hurray! Finally it was the right coal bench! We grabbed book number 11 and estimated that we wasted about 15-20 minutes searching on the wrong coal benches for that book.

From there it was a walk-run down Bird Mountain into the Big Cove campground. In retrospect, this was another section where I should have left Alan and bombed down the mountain on my own.

At the campground we were both exhausted but looking forward to taking off on the next loop, as it would be new territory for the both of us. We completed this loop in 11hrs and 58mins just two minutes shy of the 12 hour limit I was allotting myself for a completed loop.

Alan and I took a thirty minute break. I wasn't tired at the time so I decided that I would skip sleep and try to just eat as much as possible instead (BAD MISTAKE!), switch out my shoes, load up on Vaseline and ensure that I had espresso beans and good food for the next loop. Derek did a great job fueling me, and I remembered to grab my hand held bottle for this next loop. Regretfully, I left my iPod behind.

Loop 4- A perpetual nightmare: losing my mind [32hrs to 46hrs, mile ~75 to mile ~100]

“Not a speck of light is showing so the danger must be growing, by the fires of hell are glowing. Is the grisly reaping mowing? YeS! The Danger MuSt bE GrOwiNG fOR ThE RoWeRS KeEp oN RoWiNG! AND THEIR CERTAINLY NOT SHOWING ANY SIGNS OF SLOWING!!!”

- Willy Wonka

“You got it Nick...you got it Nick...you can do five loops, you need to leave Alan though and you need to not worry about John catching you...you're a talented downhill runner and you know the course you need to know that, you need to believe that and you need to prove that!” Alan and I started the loop off walking the gentle downhill slope from the campground over to the base of Chimney Top. As we ascended up Chimney Top I noticed the grey centipede place back among the trees and I no longer saw the neon orange and red centipedes on the forest floor. This was going to be a reverse night loop.

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I had divided Chimney Top into four sections the first switchbacks, rough ridge (downhill) and then the second set of switchbacks and finally the steep bastard part. John had caught up to us at about the tenth switchback up the mountain. The three of us all pushing each other topped out the mountain at 1hr and 20mins, about five minutes faster than the previous loop. This set the false premise that we were going to do better this loop than the previous loop.

I led the way down from Chimney top again, we were descending slowly. I should have left the group at this point as I'm sure they would have caught me on the uphill. I was off from beech tree by about 200ft. We lost about five minutes searching for the book.

Then it was John's turn to lead us up his route that he had found last loop on zipline. Supposedly, he had found a briarless, rockless route that led right to the 'eye of the needle'. It sounded exactly like the miracle route I had found on my third loop last year. He was doing the exact same thing as I remembered doing last year as well. We followed the Jeep trail until it crossed the river and then started heading north towards Indian Knob at a heading of 60 degrees. John was pretty sure that this heading was exactly what we needed to be doing. The climb was steep and Alan and John were obviously much better climbers than I was as they slowly pulled ahead of me. After about thirty minutes of ascending me, John and Alan were all aghast at the fact that we had not summited the mountain yet. The two of them continued to ascend while I convinced myself that we had aimed too far to the right that they were headed to the summit of the peak not the 'eye of the needle'. I started off on my own and headed left. After about another twenty minutes of searching I found the 'eye of the needle' and yelled over to John and Alan to come and join me.

Looking back this was one of the most demotivating and worst mistakes that had been made at this year's race. We were already twenty minutes over what Alan and I were last loop when we had screwed up this same ascent.

If we were going to pull off a sub twelve hour loop we needed to move and we needed to move fast. We started heading off down the bad thing from Indian knob and again, completely botched the saddle which we were supposed to descend. We ended up descending through an extremely briar dense hill which put us about half a mile south of where the water towers were. Mistakes like these could no longer be tolerated. We didn't have the time to screw around like this if we wanted to complete five loops and I could tell everyone including myself was getting quite frustrated.

At the prison we were starting to get into the night and things were getting harder and harder to focus on as sleep deprivation was beginning to set in.

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I predicted and knew that we were all going to divide up finally on the climb up rat jaw. I had no intention of keeping up with John or Alan. They were both much better climbers than I was and I knew if I wanted too I could and would catch them on the downhill.

They pulled far off ahead of me. At the bench atop the prison hill I started to race my own race and sat down for a sandwich break. My stomach was pissed and angry. I was starting to fall asleep and starting to hallucinate. I needed energy. I ate five espresso beans and starting slogging my way up rat jaw bluff pulling my way up the mountain with the power line cable.

At the very last portion of the climb, I started to get some energy from espresso beans and was starting to feel like myself again. I wished I had my iPod as that would have brought me into an full blown screaming runners high. I scorched the final ascent to the fire tower and caught Alan before getting to the water bottles and the book. I quickly filled my water, got a bite to eat. Alan and John were both there. I didn't speak a word to them or look at them. I was racing my own race now and didn't need to be around anyone anymore. I took off down the mountain and quickly caught John on the descent down Rat Jaw. It felt wonderful to be finally racing at my own controlled pace. Why had I not done this sooner? Looking back, I think I was afraid of being alone, afraid of navigating alone, afraid of screwing up on my own and just getting hopelessly lost instead of hopefully lost like we had been getting.

At raw dog falls the espresso beans were starting to wear off and I was having a hard time concentrating on the course. I was having a hard time keeping my eyes open and walking in a straight line now wasn't something that came to me naturally anymore. I stumbled up the hill over to neo-butt slide and climbed onto meth lab hill where John quickly caught up with me. Myself and John stuck together for about five minutes before he blew on past me up the hill, the last words I remember exchanging with him in a tired, sleep deprived voice, "...hey..so what are you doing to stay awake? How are you awake?" "I don't know, I just haven't thought about it"... "haven't thought about it?" I didn't understand, that was all I could think about. I was falling over and dying, falling over and passing out...dying on the ground getting picked up by search and rescue some days later. I wanted to collapse but kept my eyes focused on the top of the hill. I was a zombie now. My feet were automatically moving forward to some mysterious goal.

At the top of the hill, the wind was raging. Fyke's peak looked like Mount Everest. My mind told my eyes that there were creatures darting in and out of the shadows, I told my mind there was nothing there, "You're seeing things". I couldn't keep my eyes open. I wanted to keep moving. I think. I really wasn't sure where I was anymore or what I was doing. I was hungry though, really freaking hungry. I laid down on the ground. I got back up and looked my watch ten minutes had gone by. I had accidently fallen asleep and was now shivering from the cold. I needed to start descending Testicle Spectacle if I was going to have a chance at completing five loops. I needed to keep moving. I had to keep going. I had to convince myself to keep going. I needed to just keep going.

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I started off down the descent and watched John's light disappear in the distance "out of sight out of mind" I thought to myself. The steeper sections of the descent were not runnable. They were covered in nothing but mud and briars. I mis-stepped and my feet slipped out from under. I hit the ground face first in a patch pull of healthy saw briars. I yelled insanely with sleep deprived tears pouring out from my eyes as I fell to the ground. I was 9hrs into the loop when I started the descent and I remember getting up from the fall and looking at my watch I was now 9hrs and 30mins into the loop. I had literally blacked out from sleep deprivation for thirty minutes.

Now I don't know if you call it bravery, if you call it stupidity, if you call it determination or just call it what everyone else does in this race. But I kept moving. I was extremely unstable, sleep deprived, delirious, and insanely angry from having blacked out. Most people I know would have quit far before now. I was on the verge of finding the boundary between exhaustion, death and finishing the Barkley, most of all finishing the Barkley. If I died somewhere along the way, at least no one could argue with me that I didn't give it my all, my friend David Goggins would be proud I thought to myself.

I knew at this rate, I had no chance of making it back to camp in under 12hrs for the loop and I knew my chances at making a sub 12hr loop for the final fifth loop were slim to none at this rate. I was falling apart and couldn't envision putting myself back together. I wasn't even running on fumes. I wasn't even running. I was passing out waking up dazed and confused, lost and wandering along to survive.

I hadn't given up yet. There was no point. I was at the furthest possible part of the course you can possibly be from the campground. The campground is the only part of the course where anyone gives a damn about your quitting. In Barkley you can quit at Testicle Spectacle like I was debating. It doesn't matter though, you still have to finish the loop in order to find anyone who cares that you quit. That is unless I wanted to pass out, die and wait for search and rescue to find me sometime on Tuesday (the thought crossed my mind once or twice).

I made it across new river and somehow managed to balance across the thin log stretched across the river. I found Alan's route that he had showed me up Fyke's peak and started ascending. The hallucinations were getting pretty awful at this point. Shadows were creatures, every freaking shadow moved. Every bush morphed and un-morphed into a shed, building or a car. I was extremely delirious and couldn't walk straight. I just needed to stay alive. I promised my mom I would stay alive. I told my friends I would stay alive. I just needed to stay alive. I kept moving up the hill. I had nothing left in me. I reached the jeep road. I fell over again face first on the ground and passed out for another twenty minutes.

I woke up. I had no idea where I was. I literally had to take off my backpack and investigate what was inside of it to understand what I was doing. It wasn't until I found the Frozen head

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state park map that I remembered I was in the Barkley and was attempting to ascend Fyke's Peak.

I somehow managed to trudge the rest of the way up to the mountain and started heading towards Stallion Mountain with my eyes half open. I was in pain. I was exhausted. I was pretty sure I was dying. I thought of David Goggins, "show no weakness" It didn't mean anything anymore.

One foot in front of the other. One foot in front of the other... "where the hell am I?" "What the hell am I doing out here?" "Oh that's Stallion Mountain...Barkley right..."

On the way over to garden spot I pulled out my map. I looked at the most efficient route back to the campground. Luckily, it wasn't efficient at all. It looked much longer than the course. I didn't care though, I wanted to be done, I wanted the pain to be over now. I couldn't handle it anymore. I could handle being called a worthless, useless a failure. I couldn't handle this course anymore though, the hallucinations, the rocks, the briars, the sleep deprivation, the wind, the centipedes, the climbs, the leaves, the very ground I was walking on was crumbling beneath me. I was losing my mind for the first time in my life. For the first time in my ultra-running career, I wasn't able to pull myself together.

"COME ON NICK! COME ON YOU PIECE OF S***! HOLD IT TOGETHER!!" my soul said to my body and mind. My mind and body said back "You're done, you're absolutely done, you are an ABSOLUTE AND COMPLETE FAILURE!!"

I made it to garden spot and collected the book. I fell over onto the ground again and passed out for another ten minutes. Once again forgot what the hell I was doing. I was sure this time that I had woken up in a lucid dream and was just wandering through the forest. I walked up a couple of switchbacks from son of bitch ditch towards bald knob and then I fell over on a patch of spiders and centipedes and tried falling out of this wicked dream. I awoke to a spider biting my leg. I brushed it off gently as I stood up and started wandering down the wrong direction of the switchback. I had no mental anything left. I thought nothing. I was nothing.

I realized after reaching son of a bitch ditch that I was going the wrong way if I wanted to go back towards camp...camp? What was camp? Camp? Is that an English word? I fell over on the ground again....

I couldn't tell reality from my dreams, from my hallucinations nothing seemed real. I didn't have a mind. I couldn't think I could barely see.

I got up to Bald knob and knew the quitters road was right around the corner. I didn't want to take it. I didn't want to descend down Jury ridge either however and I really didn't want to ascend checkmate hill and descend Bird Mountain. I wanted to fall over and wake up from this

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nightmare is what I wanted to do. I tried again. But no matter I still woke up on this damned trail...this was no dream.

I began down quitter's road. I chose this route because if I went this way, there would be no arguing with me about whether I should continue onto a fifth loop or not. No arguing whether I should try harder and push harder. "I am trying as hard as I can!!" I yelled into the forest...I didn't want to give up...

I was failure. I waste of breathe. Not worthy of being alive. My mom's going to disown me. Derek's going to take the car and leave me behind in Tennessee. My friends will never talk to me again. I'll lose my sponsors. I've lost myself already...I'm just a huge disappointment. That's all I thought about for the first two miles back on the road. That was until hunger struck and I keeled over in pain. I needed to feed myself or face passing out again.

I had never had to try so damn hard to quit a race. I lifted myself up again, and continually and accidentally kicked several more rocks on the way down quitters road...I'm a miserable excuse for an athlete...the shame was inversely proportional to the distance from the campground.

When I was finally in sight of the yellow gate, I heard applause. I wanted to yell at them all and tell them to shut up...it wouldn't have been right though...I start waving my hands in a 'you're out!' fashion that an umpire in a baseball game would do...the applause **died** down... "Congra.." before the first person can complete their sentence I look to Laz and say, "I failed Laz...you're race course beat me..."

Lessons Learned

"Far better is it to dare mighty things, to win glorious triumphs, even though checkered by failure... than to rank with those poor spirits who neither enjoy nor suffer much, because they live in a gray twilight that knows not victory nor defeat."

-Theodore Roosevelt

I failed Barkley for the following reasons:

- I did not race my own race, I spent too much time running with other people and trying to match their strengths
- I did not run or exploit my strengths enough during the course (i.e. fly down all the downhills)
- I tried moving too quick and did not refer to my map or compass nearly at all, where as last year I took a lot of bearings and was dead on with my route choices, my route choosing this year was sloppy at best
- I did not run for myself, I was running this race for my friends and family or at least the pressure I felt they placed on me

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- I left my iPod behind on too many loops, this may sound minor but I get all my runner's highs off of music, so it's actually quite a vital part of my race

Pride is a difficult pill to swallow. My crew and I joked about fixing broken arms, legs and possibly having to sew me up from cuts but we never addressed the idea of not finishing and its consequences. I never once have thought about what happens when you lose your 'mind'. To be truthful, it's probably the most devastating thing that can happen during an ultra because you cannot motivate yourself when your minds not mentally there to focus.

I'm not a loser. I'm by no means an absolute failure. I will and have learned from this race. However, I cannot let every future race serve as a litmus test to my not being able to complete Barkley. I will re-establish my pride through running because I love running and racing, not because a single race defeated me.

I want to thank Derek Holden for being such an amazing crew member, I can rely on this guy anytime for any amount of time for anything, friend's like these are rare. I want to thank Alan Abbs and John Fegyveresi, although I should not have run with you all, it was a pleasure getting to know you both. I want to thank my sponsors Injinji and Carbopro for providing the gear and nutrients needed to get as far as I did. I want to thank my mom for her continued seemingly infinite support at my running endeavors. Finally, I want to thank Laz for continuing to the hard work that ensures that this race happens again next year. I hope Barkley sticks around for a long time to come.

And yes, I will be back next year, provided Laz lets me in. Five Loops or die trying.