

Barkley Marathons 100 – the elite ultra marathon trail race that “eats its young”

(As published in The Oak Ridger’s Historically Speaking column on April 13, 2010)

Oak Ridge is fortunate to have some of the most exclusive and unique surroundings. Some are historic record setting venues for physical sports. We have the Clinch River that provides a one-mile rowing course that is sought out by all who know of it for its exceptional characteristics making it one of the very best competitive courses in the world. We are becoming known as a great bicycle racing venue.

And, of course, we have the unique history of the Manhattan Project and the enormous scientific legacy of medical isotopes, solid state circuits, and much of what we know today as advanced scientific technology. And we are rightly proud of that scientific research and application history. We are even closely associated with the most recent scientific advance – the discovery of a new element, number 117.

In addition to these things unique to Oak Ridge, right in the back yard of this scientific community are also some of the most uniquely remote and isolated terrains imaginable. The *Barkley Marathons 100* is maybe THE most unusual and unique of them all. It began with James Earl Ray’s escape (if you can call it that) from Brushy Mountain Federal Penitentiary on June 10, 1977. You will recall that James Earl Ray was convicted of the murder of Martin Luther King, Jr. - a charge to which he confessed and later denied.

Ray and six other prisoners managed to escape the remote Brushy Mountain prison and headed north up Brushy Mountain...a mistake for sure. After three days, actually 55 hours, Ray was found hiding under some leaves less than eight miles from his starting point. Imagine that! There might just be some rough terrain and steep slopes he was trying to climb. He appeared to his captors to be glad to be caught! Keep this in mind as I transition to the modern day equivalent of James Earl Ray’s escape attempt.

When Gary Cantrell, an ultra marathon runner (someone who routinely runs trail races more than the standard marathon length of 26 miles), said, “That’s pathetic, I could have easily gone 100 miles in that much time!” His close friend, Karl “Raw Dog” Henn, a local coal mine inspector pointed out the terrain surrounding Brushy Mountain Federal Penitentiary and Frozen Head State Park and Natural Area on topographic maps and suggested that Gary just might be mistaken.

Thus began the collaboration that has resulted in the world’s most difficult 100 mile trail race. Read that again and know that I did not make a mistake by using the term “world.” Gary and Karl began the Barkley Marathons in 1986. Since then some 700 runners have attempted the seemingly easy 100 miles in 60 hours (less than 2 miles per hour!). Many of these runners are accustomed to completing 100 miles in closer to half that time! Are they ever in for a surprise at the Barkley.

In the 24 year history of the Barkley Marathons, only nine individuals have finished the 100 mile run. So something is surely different in this trail race. The run consists of five loops of approximately 20 miles per loop. The only aid allowed is water at two spots along the route and whatever can be provided at the start finish line campsite at the Big Cove Campground at Frozen Head State Park.

To qualify to continue the 100 mile run, the first three 20-mile loops must be completed within 36 hours. To continue to the second loop, the first loop must be completed in 13 hours and 20 minutes. To continue to the third loop, the first and second loop must be completed in 26 hours and 40 minutes. The “fun run” of 60 miles (three 20-mile loops) must be completed in 40 hours.

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A most unusual feature of the Barkley Marathons is the extremely difficult route that consists primarily of cross country routes that require the runners to use map and compass to determine directions and landmarks. Navigation is made extremely more difficult during the night.

Also, the route that circumnavigates the Frozen Head State Park boundary touches the park at points where maintained trails descend to the park entrance and the Big Cove Campground, enticingly close and easily recognized as taking the runner away from the extreme ordeal that is the Barkley.

The few runners who after attempting and some completing the first 20-mile loop and who continue into the second 20-mile loop spend much of that loop in the dark of night. The route is difficult enough in broad daylight, but if a runner is on the course for the first time, getting lost at night is inevitable.

The stories told by the runners of getting turned around and taking the wrong route are as varied as there are runners, yet the stories all have a familiar ring to them. Each story starts with a minor mistake that leads to more and more difficulty. Many stories contain incidents of hallucinations from sleep deprivation and often a runner’s story contains familiar voices being heard off in the distance and most unusual visions of people that turn into mere objects upon closer scrutiny.

The test of each runner’s endurance is really what is being done here. It is not a course designed to be finished. Rather it is intended to demonstrate for each individual attempting the mighty Barkley just how far they can go and still remain in control of their bodies and minds. It truly is a test of the will and muscle, like none other.

The motto that is found on tee shirts, bumper stickers, and web pages pertaining to the Barkley is “the Barkley Marathons 100 is the trail race that ‘eats its young.’” The reality is that most everyone who enters this race fails to complete it. Many fail to complete even the first 20 miles. It is by far the most difficult race in existence and it is in our community. It is where runners learn the true meaning of pushing themselves to the extremes of their endurance.

The only finisher of the 2010 Barkley Marathons 100 ultra marathon race was Jonathan Basham who had been coming to the race for 10 years and serving in a support crew role for Andrew Thompson the finisher in 2009. This year was Jonathan’s year! And he made the most of it.

Next we will explore the 2010 Barkley Marathons 100 and see how the 35 starters were quickly whittled down to three who finished the 60-mile “fun run” and only a single individual, Jonathan Basham, who finished the 100-mile ultra marathon that is indeed the toughest trail race in the world!

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Jonathan Basham, the single individual who completed the 100-mile ultra marathon that is the Barkley Marathons 100 – only the ninth person to do so