Barkley Marathons 100 – the elite ultra marathon run that "eats its young" – part 2

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on April 20, 2010)

Last week we introduced the history of how the most difficult ultra marathon in the world came to be located in our back yard – Frozen Head State Park.   It was created as a result of James Earl Ray's famous "escape" from Brushy Mountain Federal Penitentiary. The Barkley Marathons 100 has been in existence for 24 years and has had over 700 participants with only nine finishers.

The 2010 Barkley Marathons 100 was no different. 35 of ultra marathon's most experienced and best trained runners began this race as has been the case for almost all of the race's history. There is always a waiting list and some even come to the race hoping an open slot will develop when a runner fails to show.

The night before the start, maps are highlighted using carefully and very detailed instructions written by Gary. The Barkley alumni, those runners who have experienced the Barkley ordeal, gladly answer questions asked by those for whom this is their first attempt at the mystic race. The reputation of the Barkley is world-renowned as the toughest ultra marathon race in existence.

The frozen chicken, provided each year by the person for whom the race is named, Barry Barkley, Gary's neighbor, is grilled without thawing. This too is a tradition of the race and obviously enjoyed by the runners. Soon those who are to start the race the next morning (anytime after midnight) begin to drift off to their tents or cars to sleep for what may well be the last decent sleep for days.

Gary blew a conch shell at 6:13 AM early Saturday morning to alert the runners that the race begins in exactly one hour. At precisely 7:13 AM, Gary lit a cigarette signaling the actual start of the race. 35 runners started together. One runner learned just shortly before the race began that there was an open slot and quickly joined the starters.

The early runners to complete the first 20-mile loop did so in less than 9 hours. The ultimate finishers of the 60-mile fun run and the 100-mile race were all in this group. Only 18 of the original 35 start the second 20-mile loop and only 10 finished. Only nine started the third 20-mile loop and only three finished. Loops four and five were only run by one person, Jonathan Basham who completed the 100-mile race in 59 hours and 18 minutes.

This race is by far the most difficult ultra marathon in existence in the world. We are the community known worldwide among the ultra marathon runners community as the ultimate challenge. It is not unusual to have international runners compete in this famous trail race.

There are some Oak Ridge residents who have participated in the Barkley over the years. One, Leonard Martin, even has a section of the course named for him, "Leonard's Butt Slide," what an honor! Kerry Trammell and his wife, Leslie Trammell who is the only woman to finish 60 miles - even if she did miss the cutoff - she finished! And finally, Hiram Rogers who works at the Oak Ridge National Laboratory has also competed many times.

My son, Zane, was accepted in the Barkley this year and finished one loop and over half of another before running out of time. He lost time during the night by not knowing the course as well as he would have liked. He was glad to be a part of the historic Barkley Marathons and says he is looking forward to another opportunity.

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This most prestigious trail race is documented in a book just published by "Frozen" Ed Furtaw, the first person to win a Barkley Marathons when it was first starting and only 55 miles. He ran again this year and I was pleased to meet him. I enjoyed the book, *Tales from Out There – The Barkley Marathons, The World's Toughest Trail Race*.

The other thing that is so unique about ultra marathon runners is the uncommon sense of family and support that exists for each other. When a runner completes the Barkley Marathons 100, he is accepted into the fraternity of finishers in a most unusual and unique manner.

When Jonathan Basham finished his final loop, well over 20 runners and support crews were still there and gathered at the finish line for close to an hour listening to him talk about his experience and asking him questions, knowing questions by the runners who have also experienced the Barkley. It is a close knit group, the Barkley finishers alumni.

Even though they are separated by many miles, they are together in the spirit of the world's toughest trail race! The 2010 Barkley Marathons 100 had four of the nine finishers who came back to compete again. Their support, help and encouragement for the new runners was obvious, and the respect for their accomplishment was obviously on the mind of all runners who have yet to finish the most grueling race that exists.

So, Oak Ridge has many unique features. Being a scientific community set in Appalachia that is continually evolving to fill its place in the world within which it is located. Over time a city that is taking on the influences of the surrounding communities more and more. And at the same time a city that is influencing its surroundings like nothing that has ever been a part of this area before.

Unique aspects of East Tennessee such as the Barkley Marathons are a part of what makes our home communities such special places. Thanks to Gary Cantrell and Karl "Raw Dog" Henn for such a unique contribution to our heritage.

History is indeed being made all around us. Enjoy the experiences and appreciate the memories. Our historic heritage continues to be created in many varied and unusual ways.

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Four of the nine finishers of the Barkley Marathons 100 – Jim Nelson – 2004, Andrew Thompson – 2009, Jonathan Basham – 2010, and Blake Wood – 2001