

Barkley Report – 2000

Short version: The first loop was very pleasant – a bit warm, but not bad. After that, the conditions were terrible – it rained heavily for most of the hours of each the remaining loops, and deluged for my half-loop #5. Heavy fog and wind on the ridges. A lightning storm during the second night. Nevertheless, we had an unusually large number (7) of fun run finishers (three loops, 60 miles). I made it through two nights before taking a 45 minute nap before loop #5, without the hallucinations I was plagued by on loop #4 last year. I was finally turned back six hours into loop five by being unable to ford the rushing, flooded New River between Leonard's Butt Slide and Little Hell. At that point, I was on pace for a tight, but pretty certain finish under the 60 hour cutoff.

Long version:

This was going to be the year (where have you heard THAT before?) In fact, in the weeks before the run, I found myself thinking not "Can I do five loops?" but rather "Can I beat all the other excellent runners at five loops?" Privately, I set a goal of 56 hours, based on my previous three year's experience. I think I'd have made it too, in better weather. But that's a specious argument – you take the Barkley as it comes, weather and all. And this year I didn't do it all. Maybe next year.

My basic five-loop plan was to finish three loops enough faster than previous years to catch a couple hours sleep before starting what I believe to be the crux of the run: the backwards-direction, nighttime fourth loop. This is where I had fallen apart last year. If I could get through four loops in under 48 hours, I felt pretty confident that I could finish the fifth loop (forward-direction, daytime) in the allotted 12 hours. My experience has been that it is significantly slower and harder to stay on course in the backward direction. This plan would require me to do one loop in 8:00 to 8:30 and three loops in under 32 hours.

Some basic info on gear and food: I carried only my running belt, and wore a long sleeve shirt under my rain shell. In loops 4 and 5 I also wore a polypro vest for warmth. I wore shorts under my ripstop nylon wind pants for protection against the sawbriers. I drank out of the streams without treating the water. I typically carried a sandwich to eat during the loop, and stuffed my pockets with beef jerky and dried apples. The jerky became unpalatable when it got wet. I ate my home-made maltodextrine/dextrose cubes for extra calories, and got something to eat in the campground in between loops. I took a Succeed! cap every hour. During the nights, I kept chewed up pieces of fresh ginger in my water bottles to prevent nausea - this worked very well. I carried a compass around my neck and a "waterproof" topo map that I replaced every loop. I carried a camera on the first loop, and will post some photos later to my web site.

I pretty much hung out with my family after arriving Friday afternoon, except to check in, grab some Barkley chicken, say hello to friends, and compare some sewing with Eric Clifton. Eric felt the front running half-dozen or so of us should stick together as a mutually supporting pack for the five loops, but I figured I had to run my own race, especially since I knew that Eric, Dave Horton, Dewayne Satterfield, and others were likely to blast off at a pace way too fast for me, despite their professed plans to do the first loop in 8:30.

Like last year, Gary started us off at 9 am – a bit later than I'd hoped, since it would reduce the amount of daylight I had at the start of the fourth loop. Despite Eric chiding Horton that "we always used to RUN up this section", we held to a brisk walk. Once over Bird Mountain, the leaders missed a switchback, and to Sue Johnston's delighted cat-calls of "Losers! Losers!" found themselves at the back of the pack. We pretty much arrived at book #1 in a big bunch, after only 57 minutes, but they all took off up Jury Ridge while I stopped to take pictures, record the time, get something to eat, fill my water bottles, etc., and I never saw them again.

The trail between books 1 and 2 has short runnable sections between innumerable blowdowns, while repeatedly gaining and losing 500'-1000' at a time over a number of ridges. I ran this section with Kerry Trammel and Leslie Hunt. By the time we reached Son-of-a-Bitch Ditch and the coal mine cut beyond, I found myself running with John DeWalt, who probably knows the course better than anyone, and who finally showed me the correct way to locate the start of the trail climbing to book #2 at the Garden Spot.

After collecting our page, a quick run on a dirt road brought us to the water drop at Coffin Springs. Someone along the road told us that the leaders had come by 45 minutes before (out of about 3:30 at this point). So much for an 8:30 first loop! I guessed they would come in about 7:30.

The remainder of the first loop was uneventful. I steadily moved up through the pack, chose good lines down Leonard's Butt Slide and Zipline, and found a subtle, but easily visible path up Ratjaw, Little Hell, and Big Hell. I finished the first loop in 8:30 and turned my pages into Gary (I note that Gary seemed to have made an effort this year to choose books with the title on each page, presumably to squash the temptation to stockpile pages.) With Rebecca and my folks help I managed to get back out on the trail again after only a bit more than 20 minutes in camp, having changed into a polypro shirt and taken my rain shell in case the weather turned bad.

It got dark enough to turn on my flashlight shortly after book #1. Climbing Jury Ridge, I could see several flashlights descending behind me toward book #1. However, I didn't see any lights ahead of me until a couple hours later, when I began the descent toward SOB Ditch. I was catching these slowly, but was surprised when two lights appeared immediately above me as I was climbing to the coal mine cut. "Who goes there?!" I called out. "I'm embarrassed to tell you, because we're dropping out!" came the reply. It was Horton and Dewayne Satterfield. Dave had been throwing up, and Dewayne was dropping because (as he put it) "I had to watch David throw up."

I caught the other four lights ahead of me just below the Garden Spot. It was Mike Dobies, Hans Put, Craig Wilson, and Sue Johnston. "We figured it must be you, Blake." Mike said. "No one else could climb that fast."

I lagged a bit behind them at the book, but caught back up at Coffin Springs. I did a poor job of finding the route down to the meadow that Eliza McClean had shown me that morning, but the others didn't do any better and we all reached it at the same time. I took off running the mile and a half of old mining road to Bobcat Rock, and immediately plunged down Leonard's Butt slide. I nailed the book at the bottom right on. Looking back up, no lights were visible. I was pushing this leg hard because the nights had always been very slow for me, but I felt that a fast nighttime loop would be important for meeting my 32 hour-three loop schedule.

Little Hell (and Big Hell, for that matter) are easy to negotiate in the dark in the forward direction – you just keep going uphill and you can't miss. Running along the road toward book #7 at the base of Ratjaw, I could see three or four more lights ahead of me. One of these must be Eric Clifton, I figured, but I didn't know who else was out there with him. I was gaining on them up Ratjaw, but lost sight of them when I had to stop to tape a couple painful blisters. By the time I reached the water drop at the top of Frozen Head, they had already left. It was about 1 am – by far my best time to this point on the second loop. A heavy fog was starting to settle on the ridge, and I began to feel occasional raindrops.

I was puzzled to see only one light ahead of me while running down the road toward Indian Knob. It started to rain consistently as I proceeded along this road. When I reached Indian Knob, I found Mike Tilden with his shoes off, tending blisters. "Where's everyone else?" I asked. "Clifton and Fred (Brooks) are out, they returned down the Judge Branch trail" he said. I told him what I knew of Horton and Satterfield, and that Dobies and crowd were somewhere behind. I debated whether to wait for him before descending Zipline, but decided against it – he was still working on his feet, I was in a hurry, and I didn't want to be held up if he was slower than me. I took an approximate bearing off my map and started down, perfectly nailing the start of the trail 1250 vertical feet below.

By now it was raining hard, and in my shorts, windpants, polypro shirt, and rain shell, I was getting chilled, particularly after enough water worked its way in to soak my shirt. I knew that the upper part of the trail down from Chimney Top gets very slippery in the rain, but it wasn't as bad as I expected when I got there. Still, I had to run gingerly to avoid falling. I made it back to the campground at a few minutes after 4 am – 10:15 for the nighttime loop! Alright!! My having laid off caffeine for a few weeks before the run had paid off – two NoDoz had kept me alert all night.

I was really cold, so I took a hot shower to warm up before getting into my dry clothes, while Rebecca stood in the rain to scramble me some eggs. I had to retape my blisters as well – the tape had come off in the wet. It took me about an hour to get ready. At one point, one of my daughters came to tell me that four runners had just come in, and that one of them was already heading back out again (Sue Johnston was actually only heading down to her campsite.) This got me back on track!

I headed out for loop three – a backwards-direction, daytime loop, with a small pocket flashlight instead of my usual 2-D cell one – just enough to see me through the last 45 minutes of darkness. It had stopped raining, but there was

fog and a vicious wind when I met Eliza McClean and Andrew Thompson near the end of their second loop below Chimney Top. They confirmed that I was the first third loop runner. I expected my buddy and fellow New Mexican Randy Isler would be chasing me up here (I had thought he was one of the four who came into camp while I was there), so I was very surprised when I ran into him at book #10, at the Chimney Top summit. He was really bummed – he had missed a turn during the night and ended up miles off course, finding his way back with difficulty. As he put it “To have worked so hard, and have it end like this!” I really felt for him – Randy is one of the toughest runners I know, and I had figured him to be my strongest competition for five loops. I encouraged him to stick it out for three loops, but at this point he was nearly four hours behind me, probably putting the 36 hour cutoff for continuing on a fourth loop out of reach.

I followed the route down Big Hell carefully, aware that I might have to do it at night on the fourth loop. It was not too difficult to follow the subtle scuffed up route, but the rain had begun again. When I started my ascent of Zipline an hour later, I discovered that I’d forgotten to pick up a new map after leaving my wet one in camp following the second loop. I thought I remembered a bearing of 260 to get down, so I reversed this and followed a bearing of 80 degrees to climb. This turned out to be too far to the right, and I wandered around the caprocks of Indian Knob in the fog and rain for a while before locating the yellow-dot trail that took me to the correct one. Along the trail leading to the Frozen Head road, I passed Leonard Martin, the last runner still on the course.

Frozen Head was shrouded in a thick fog. The descent of Ratjaw was difficult – the dirt was rapidly turning to slippery mud. By the time I reached the bottom, it was pouring, and the mine road was flooded, the beautiful patches of violets underwater.

I ran as much as possible on the road up to Sawbrier Point, then started down Little Hell. With some effort, I could follow the vaguely visible route down in the rain, but it was obvious that this would not be possible during the upcoming nighttime fourth loop. I missed a turn in the route at the bottom, and ended up reaching the New River trail upstream from book #5, but this didn’t delay my finding it significantly.

Hopping over the New River crossing on stones, picking up book #4, and scrambling up Leonard’s Butt Slide, I managed to miss the book at the top (with no map, I couldn’t determine a bearing), cross the road thinking it was just another mine cut, and started climbing the hillside above Bobcat Rock. Suddenly I had the feeling something wasn’t right. I looked around, descended back to the road, and recognized it for what it was. Thankfully, I hadn’t climbed too far, but it was still frustrating to have to descend the first pitch of the Butt Slide again to pick up book #3.

The remainder of the third loop went well, although the rain didn’t let up and the slippery muddiness of the north boundary trail made this a slower leg than I had hoped – it took me five hours to get back to the campground from the Garden Spot, an hour more than I had planned on. The rain finally let up about an hour before I finished my third loop in 10:45, for a fun-run time of 31 flat – comfortably under my 32 hour plan. I was dismayed that my quads were starting to get sore, and the constant wetness was taking a toll on my feet – they were blistering badly.

After changing into dry clothes (again), and going through my checklist while sharing my kid’s dinner, I headed out for the fourth loop just after 4:30 pm. This was the loop I had been dreading – the backwards nighttime loop. I had fallen apart on this loop last year before reaching Chimney Top. However, this year I had a big advantage - I had enough time in the bank to get down Big Hell in the daylight. My plan was to get some sleep after it got dark, and I carried my fleece vest and a mylar “space blanket” to help me do this comfortably. Whether I made it through the fourth loop before the 48 hour cutoff depended on if I could get by with two hours sleep, or whether I needed more to stay on the trail.

Just outside the campground, I flicked on my flashlight for a check. Nothing. Uh oh! Rebecca had put in fresh batteries for me, but had apparently not checked to see that the bulb still worked. As I’d already checked out, I couldn’t go back to the campground. I had a spare bulb I could use, but didn’t like the thought of going into the wilderness all night without a spare for the spare. I changed the bulb. Still nothing. What was going on!? I popped out the batteries and found that one had been put in backwards. When I fixed this, it worked fine. Whew!!

It wouldn't be dark for two hours yet, but I pushed hard up the trail to Chimney Top, reaching it in my usual 90 minutes, and headed down Big Hell. The daylight held to the bottom, and I had no trouble following the route. What a load off my mind that was – one Hell down, one Hell to go!

I had planned to sleep at the base of Big Hell, but decided to push on, as I didn't feel sleepy yet. Darkness fell as I headed up the trail toward where the Zipline ascent began. It seemed to be taking a very long time – had I gone past it? The trail didn't look at all familiar. I recognized this feeling from my fourth loop last year, when it had really tripped me up. My sense of time was all messed up, so I couldn't trust the internal clock that says "I should be there by now." I decided to trust my intellectual knowledge of where I was rather than my feelings – "If I'm on this trail, and was paying attention the whole way, it MUST be the correct one, no matter what it feels like!" I pushed on, and, sure enough, reached the base of Zipline in a bit.

Now that I had a map again, I took a careful bearing and concluded that 60 degrees would do it (no wonder I'd ended up so far to the right following 80 degrees on the third loop!) Half way up Zipline I was in a pea-soup fog. My flashlight beam disappeared into a white fuzz within about 15 feet, so I could see nothing except the immediate area around my feet. Not being able to pick my way, I got tangled up in the sawbriers a bit. After what seemed like a VERY long time, I began sensing large rocks around me – I must be near the caprock, but couldn't see enough in the fog to be sure. Nothing looked familiar. Should I go left or right? On Zipline, you cross two vague trails about half way up, and there is the yellow-dot trail that skirts the caprock. I had crossed a trail that sloped in the correct direction (up to the left) a bit below, so I decided to descend back to it. It was marked with white dots – not the yellow-dot trail that I hoped it was, but it would do. I started to despair of ever finding the correct caprock in the fog, but forced this feeling down by formulating a plan: I'd follow this trail up to the left. According to the map, it should eventually switchback and from there I could ascend directly to the saddle on the side of Indian Knob that was past book #8 – a roundabout way to get there, but it should work. I followed the trail for what seemed like a long time (again), and found myself skirting the caprocks. Suddenly, it all looked familiar – I was right at book #8! I realized what had happened: a flashlight isn't sufficiently bright and white colored to distinguish between yellow and white dots!

The trail over to the Frozen Head road was very difficult to follow due to the thick fog – every minor turn or jog threatened to lose the trail for me. That it was slippery and wet didn't help any. Again, it seemed to take a long time to cover, and most of it didn't look familiar at all. Again, I had to trust that I was in the right place and push on. Eventually I reached the road.

I reached Frozen Head at about 9 pm. The fog was thick enough that I couldn't see the power line that ran down Ratjaw, even when I was standing directly under it. As I filled my bottles at the water drop, it started to pour – not just rain, but a real deluge! My first thought was to try to get down Ratjaw before it became too much of a quagmire, so I headed down. It already WAS a quagmire, and I spent a lot of time slipping and falling in the mud. I had just started down when suddenly the world lit up around me like I was inside a flashbulb! I started counting...where's the thunder...where's the thunder...BOOM!!! Several seconds – not too close, but I wanted to put as much distance between me and the upper part of the mountain as possible. It continued like this all the way down – FLASH!...BOOM!!!...FLASH!...BOOM!!!... - all in a drenching rain on an extremely steep, thornbush covered slope that was slippery as ice. Probably the worst night I've ever spent out of doors.

About half way down, it occurred to me that in a lightning storm, it was probably a bad idea to be hanging onto the old downed power line which I'd been using to sort of rappel on the steepest sections. I finally made it to the bottom of Ratjaw in one piece, thankfully out of the fog so I could identify the correct cross-cutting road to pick up my page at book #7. I splashed along the violet covered road, now under ankle deep water. I tried to pull my rain shell down over my fleece vest, which was rolled up and strapped to the bottom of my running belt, but this wasn't very effective and it was soaked like a sponge when I finally decided I might as well wear it as carry it.

The road steepened on the climb toward Sawbrier Point and the top of Little Hell, and I was forced to walk. Rivers of water ran down the road. The lack of mind-stimulating running or route finding started to put me to sleep, but I was too wet and cold now to take a nap. I kept dozing off on my feet, and waking up to find myself just standing there. At one point, I opened my eyes, and found myself standing right by the Sawbrier Point jumpoff. "Lucky I opened my eyes here – I might have walked right past it!" I said to myself at the time. Now that I had a difficult route to follow, I woke back up. This was the crux of the whole race – Dave Horton's '98 fourth loop attempt had

ended when he got lost descending Little Hell, and I had gotten lost here myself in broad daylight in previous years. The heavy rain and thick fog made it even worse. The rain had erased the scuff marks made on earlier loops, and the thick fog (which I'd climbed back into) made it impossible to see any landmarks whatsoever. There was only one hope – take and follow a bearing down and hope I could figure out where I was at the bottom. This I did, pulling my compass out of my shirt every 10 yards or so to check my direction (I didn't leave the compass out because it would have strangled me on brush and sawbriers I was cutting through.) I dropped off the ridgeline and found myself following a gully with a booming rain-fed stream. Finally, I crossed a bench with a trail, which I assumed must be the one passing by book #5. Was I above or below the book? I decided to go upstream, because eventually I'd hit and recognize the New River crossing, and I knew that I could run back down the trail to the book from there. This I did, although the crossing was barely recognizable when I got there due to the high water in the New River. I started back down the trail, which was now full of water. I ran for a long way. "Must have gone too far – better go back." Back to the stream crossing, watching carefully for the broken wall containing the book. Nothing. I remembered that I had earlier timed the book to be a three minute run below the crossing. I checked my watch and started running. After a long time I checked my watch again. Only one minute had passed. So much for my sense of time! I continued, and found the book. My blind 1200' vertical descent of Little Hell in the rain and fog had brought me out within 100' of my target. Surely one of my greatest orienteering feats!

The New River had risen in the rain, and the rocks we usually hopped across were underwater. I waded the widest spot in muddy, knee deep water. The trail beyond was a stream itself where it climbed up to the bench above the Gorges. I looked for landmarks as I went along – the Gorges... a bunch of downed trees to climb over... and finally the leveling on the left where I'd find book #4. Where was it?? I couldn't see anything that looked like the ore bucket or the 55-gallon drum with the book. I continued up the trail, but drew near the Barley Mouth Branch, which I knew was too far. Back to the downed trees, then forward to the level spot again. Still no book. Back to the trees again and forward once more. Still no joy. I knew it had to be here somewhere, but where? It had been so easy to find in the daytime! I finally started wandering around the level area figuring that eventually I'd bump into it, and I finally did. Now, up Leonard's Butt Slide. I scrambled up within earshot of the Barley Mouth Branch until I figured I had gone far enough, then headed straight up the hillside to my right, digging into the ground with my fingers and grabbing ahold of anything that looked like it might stay put on the incredibly steep, slippery slope. I reached the second or third mine road bench, and there was book #3 just a few yards to my right. Bingo!

The mine road back toward the meadow below Coffin Springs was completely underwater, but as I was already soaked to the skin, I didn't mind running through the ankle deep water. It continued to pour. I made very good time along this road, and soon found myself in the meadow where the road ended. Or was I? Something didn't look right.... I knew that the road split a few hundred yards before this meadow, and that the correct route was the lesser traveled one on the right. Could I have missed it? I decided I'd better go back to check, and sure enough, I had missed the turn.

Now that I was in the correct meadow, Coffin Springs was at the pass just up-canyon from me, through the trees a few hundred yards. I should have taken a bearing, but didn't bother. I started retracing my route from earlier loops, but it all looked different. Before there had been one stream up in the canyon bottom, and another that came in from the east by the meadow. Now there were rushing streams in every gully. I climbed for a long time, seemingly in the right direction, but began to fear that I'd lost my direction and was climbing away from the pass, up one of the surrounding mountains. I decided to backtrack, then was afraid that I'd miss the meadow. Wait! Here was a muddy patch covered with footprints! I recognized this as the mudhole that Eliza McClean had done a face-plant in on the first loop! Now I knew where I was, took a bearing, and soon reached Coffin Springs. I HAD been going in the right direction before, just not far enough.

From here on in, the fourth loop was relatively straightforward, though not easy. In fact, it was a real SOB (and not just the ditch by that name, which had a rushing river in it.) The North Boundary trail was slippery, difficult to find in the rain and fog, and very slow to negotiate. Despite having changed batteries in my flashlight, I couldn't see well enough in the rain and fog to be sure each step wouldn't send me head-over-heels on a muddy patch, so I was forced to do a careful shuffle rather than run. I had a bit of trouble following the trail along the mine road cut above SOB Ditch, because it was underwater and (like many other places) looked completely different. I had figured on getting back from book #2 at the Garden Spot in something like four hours, but this stretched to five hours, and finally six hours. It stopped raining at first light, as I crested Bird Mountain for the final downhill stretch to the

campground. It had been a VERY long night, and I didn't have it in me to run down this trail, but rather shuffled along in a sort of race walk. My feet were very blistered and sore. The fourth loop had taken me 15 hours.

Still, this fourth loop was something to be proud of. Although I could (and often did) take a wrong turn at dozens of spots along the route, through a combination of luck, orienteering skill, and knowing when to push on and when to backtrack, I had managed to find my way around the course in horrible conditions that chased the remaining runners away and left everyone in the campground wondering how in the heck was I surviving. Completing this fourth loop was perhaps my greatest ultrarunning performance.

I was surprised to see such a large number of runners in camp when I arrived. I had decided that I would get as much sleep as possible before heading out on the fifth loop, since I was certain I could make it in the 12 hours allotted me after the 48 hour cutoff for starting. As it was, I didn't have as much time as I had hoped – only 80 minutes. I told Rebecca “Let me sleep until 40 minutes before the cutoff, then I'll get up, eat, prepare, and hit the trail.” After changing into dry clothes, Rebecca threw a sleeping bag across me in the back of our VW Eurovan, and I was instantly asleep.

The alarm woke me up, and I felt surprisingly refreshed and alert from my 45 minute nap. Eric Clifton helped me retape my feet, but they had swollen during my nap, and hurt like heck when I forced them back into my remaining pair of dry shoes. I was surprised that people kept asking me whether I was planning to go out for a fifth loop. Of course I was! It never even occurred to me not to. It started to rain again while I sat in the car talking to Eric, Rebecca admonishing me “You've only got 10 more minutes. Stop talking and start eating!” Finally, I got everything together, checked out with Gary with 5 minutes to go, and walked up the dirt road out of camp in the pouring rain. My feet were extremely painful and a pull in the back of my right knee was aching and tight from the 75 minutes of inactivity. This was going to be a grim business.

I told myself that this was just like my fifth and last day running the John Muir Trail in '98, and that my feet would eventually stop hurting so bad after I'd pounded the swelling out of them. This finally happened about the time I topped Jury Ridge, two hours later. It had taken a long time to get to book #1, and I was getting concerned about my schedule. The pain in my feet had subsided enough that I could run sections of the trail, although every time I changed from going up to down, or vice versa, the part of my feet that had gotten a respite on the previous section would hurt like crazy for a few minutes. I ignored this, and ran every step possible. Every few steps I'd clench my fist and squeeze a stream of muddy water out of my saturated fleece gloves. My ripstop nylon wind pants were shredded from the knees down by the sawbriers and the falls I'd taken.

I was scrambling up the hillside below the Garden Spot when I heard voices. This was not unusual – I'd been hearing imaginary voices in the rain and wind for most of the past two days, but this seemed more real. The voice seemed to be talking gibberish, and I couldn't see anyone. Suddenly, a huge white animal bounded past me out of nowhere, heading up the hillside. I recognized it as Randy Isler's dog, and could now make out the voice calling “Argus! Argus!” Randy was waiting for me at the road just below the Garden Spot, appearing soaked and bedraggled in the pouring rain. Feeling bad about having only completed a bit of a third loop, he had hiked all the way out here in the storm to give me moral support. What a guy! I got my page at book #2, and Randy followed me down the flooded road to Coffin Springs, trying to keep Argus from tripping me. We parted there, Randy saying that he'd wait for me at Sawbrier Point.

My feet were better now, but my pulled knee was killing me. If I didn't move my leg too much, however, I could still manage a good shuffling run on the levels and downhills. I had planned for this loop to take 11 hours, roughly partitioned into four hours to the Garden Spot, three hours to Frozen Head, and four hours to the finish. That gave me one hour of grace before the 60 hour cutoff. However, it had taken me five hours to get to the Garden Spot, using up my margin. I was concerned.

I scrambled down to the meadow at the end of the road leading to Leonard's Butt Slide, and fast footed it along this road, eager to make up every minute possible. The road was completely flooded, I was soaked to the skin, and was starting to get cold. I paused only long enough to grab my page at book #3, then plunged down Leonard's Butt Slide, finding a particularly efficient (though muddy) route others had taken but which I had missed on earlier loops. The Barley Mouth Branch boomed and roared off to my right. I was starting to feel much better about my time – I'd certainly make it to the river crossing by six hours elapsed, and knew that, for me, this point has always been exactly

halfway through the loop time-wise. In addition, I felt the North Boundary trail slowed more in the rain than any other part of the course. I was feeling comfortable that I'd make it with at least 30 minutes to spare.

I reached the flat spot where book #4 was located and got my first glimpse of the New River, and knew in a moment that my run was over. What was usually a small, clear, cascading stream was a muddy, foaming, raging torrent! I don't know why it hadn't occurred to me before then that I might have trouble with the river crossings, but this obviously wouldn't go. I got my pack and decided I might as well continue to the crossing, hoping to find some weakness in the barrier before me. There was none.

I stood at the crossing for about 20 minutes, marveling at the sight, sorely wishing I had a camera with me. A half dozen or more huge booming waterfalls launched into space where side streams hit the line of cliffs above the crossing. The crossing itself was at least 30' wide, a rolling, boiling flood with large pieces of trees carried along, disappearing beneath the current and reappearing further down the rapids. Before my eyes, the mountains were coming apart. It was an amazing and beautiful thing to see. I REALLY wanted five loops, but wasn't even tempted to find a way across, and didn't think twice about my decision to turn back. Attempting to cross would be suicide. I was disappointed, but relieved at the same time. The race was over, I knew I could have done it, and was stopped by the raw, naked forces of nature. I hadn't given up, and didn't feel like the course had beaten me.

This was no ordinary hundred, where after declaring yourself DNFed you can climb into a car and be whisked away to a hot shower and a warm bed. This was the Barkley, and I still had a miserable three hour run to get back to the campground, starting with a re-ascent of Leonard's Butt Slide. The time I spent gawking at the flood had tightened up my pulled knee, and it was with difficulty that I started back up the trail. Just below the Gorges, there is a small ravine that usually contains a trickle of water, if that. Now it was a rushing stream that I leapt over with difficulty. From this direction I could see that a few feet below the trail, the stream launched into free space in a spectacular muddy waterfall. I was extra careful not to slip and fall in!

Leonard's Butt Slide was a grim climb. It killed me to lift my knee to hip level, and the climb required this maneuver with every step. Now that I was heading back to camp, everything that I'd suppressed before started to hurt. I scrambled up with the aid of a stick that I used like an ice axe, and started walking back along the flooded road toward Coffin Springs.

It was still pouring and windy, and was now late afternoon. I wrapped myself in the space blanket that I was still carrying from the previous night, but was getting very chilled – walking just didn't generate enough heat. I realized that at this rate, I'd never make it back before dark, when it would get colder still. With that incentive, I started running as best as I could manage, regardless of what my knee felt like. It gradually started feeling better, as use warmed it up.

The road back from Coffin Springs seemed to take forever. It clung near the ridgetop for several miles, and thus was exposed to the full force of the storm – windy and very cold. Every few dozen yards along the road a huge stream would roar down the hillside on the right, flooding the road. It was amazing to see this much water, and incredible to imagine that it was all coming from the rain on the few hundred feet of slope between me and the ridge.

Finally, I made it back to the campground, and told Gary what had happened. It appeared to be with genuine reluctance that he tapped me out. Everyone beside him, my family, and Randy and Linda Isler had cleared out. My family had moved their camp into the bathrooms – the only dry place left in the campground, setting up our folding chairs, cooler, and stove. After a shower, it felt really good to be warm and dry again.

Writing this now, a week and a half after the event, Barkley seems like another world. We got a bad break on the weather, but it could have been worse – if the storm had come two days earlier, no one might have even finished one loop! My blisters have callused over, I can stuff my feet into shoes again, and my knee is feeling better.

Several people have asked me if I'll go back to try it again. In previous years, I'd always felt like I could have done more, if only I'd been stronger, so the answer was always "of course!" I don't feel that way after this year's run, although the fact remains that I DIDN'T finish five loops, so I guess I'll have to try again. Every year at Barkley is unique and exciting, so although '01 is sure to be different from '00, it is equally certain that it will be interesting in its own way, and that's the real reason to keep going back to try again.