

2012 Barkley Marathons at Frozen Head State Park, part 2
(As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on April 17, 2012)

The Barkley Marathons, likely the most difficult 100 mile ultramarathon that exists, is located in Frozen Head State Park, just 30 minutes from Oak Ridge. Frozen Head is a favorite place of mine. A place so secluded, yet so close to home, that I can be there in minutes. A place where I can be transformed from a world of modern high-paced living to a basic elementary environment filled with nature's wonders for me to photograph. A place where I can be amazed by the sight, smell, sound, touch and taste of wildness.

One weekend per year, the last weekend in March, this peaceful state park filled with wildflowers becomes the chosen location for an epic challenge, a race that pits the runner against the elements and terrain like none other. It is the home of the Barkley Marathons...known for its lack of finishers. Only 13 people have finished the 100 miles of the unmarked course while well over 800 have started in its 26 year history.

The Barkley attracts the strongest runners, the most daring challengers and those who can write a convincing essay to Gary Cantrell, known by his chosen name of Lazarus Lake or "Laz" to his "family" of runners who love the race. Each year he allows some 40 or fewer individuals to participate in this elite competition. His email of "condolences" and witty commentary on their high probability of failure, which actually becomes true for most of them, welcomes each runner to the world renowned Barkley.

On March 31, 2012, at 9:12 AM, 41 runners started the first loop. There were runners from the United Kingdom, Germany, France, Belgium and Bolivia as well as Indiana, Alabama, Georgia, Washington, Colorado, South Carolina, North Dakota, Michigan, Kentucky, Florida, Oregon and Tennessee. Wow, what an exceptional spread of countries and states represented. Right here in our back yard, so to speak, is this INTERNATIONAL ultramarathon race that is likely THE most respected trail run of its kind in the world.

We should be proud to be able to promote such a famous event in our media. Oak Ridge and Knoxville media should be touting it. Matthew Everett did cover it in *Metro Pulse*. John Henry of WBIR Channel 10, came out to Frozen Head on Sunday and ran a short video on the news at 10:00PM. Good for them!

My son, Zane ran with Iso Ucura of Bolivia for the second 20+ mile loop and half of a third loop. The two of them decided they did not have time to finish the third and final loop to complete a "Fun Run" of 60 miles (more like 78 miles, according to some) in the allotted 40 hours and descended from the Fire Tower. As with all who fail to finish, they were "tapped out" by having taps played on a bugle.

Zane was pleased to get to know someone from an entirely different culture but someone who understood and appreciated ultrarunning. I think they will stay in touch. The ultrarunning "family" is a tight group, they stick together and help each other, yet they are fiercely competitive. But that competitiveness is not like you might think...they strive to better their performance or to endure the struggles that most of us would never even attempt.

The Barkley challenges the ultrarunners like no other trail run. To locate the books to tear out the single page with their race number for that loop, thus proving they covered the required course checkpoints, "Laz" provides detailed written directions the night before the race. The ultrarunners transfer that information onto maps of Frozen Head and surroundings.

They are then given one hour notice of the start by a conch shell blast blown by "Laz." Precisely one hour later, the race starts when "Laz" spins the wheel on his cigarette lighter creating a spark that bursts into a flame and lights the cigarette he smokes.

He told me that this year, the runners were off before the cigarette lit, the spin of the wheel did it. They were anxious to get going. "Laz" had told the runners that the race could start anytime after midnight. It did not start until 9:12 AM...that is part of the struggle...no sleep because they were constantly anticipating the conch shell blast at anytime.

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This year, the tweets of Matt Hart, Keith Dunn and Henry Speir as well as many others who retweeted on Twitter allowed many ultrarunning enthusiasts from all over the world to keep pace with the Barkley Marathons runners as they completed loop after loop. I was pleased to see links to photos I made of the start/finish camp included in the various tweets.

Here is a link to those photos:

<https://picasaweb.google.com/109845787057992130059/BarkleyMarathons2012>

Another first this year was the documentary film that was made of the 2012 Barkley Marathons. Tim and Annika Kane have created a Kickstarter.com initiative to fund the documentary film at \$15,160. They have \$10,032 pledged to date. If you want to contribute to this effort, you can do so at the following link:

<http://www.kickstarter.com/projects/684009223/the-barkley-marathons-the-trail-that-eats-its-youn>

You will find it amusing that Tim decided he should film the starters when they arrived at the location of book one. So, he hiked there with his video camera. Some 16 hours later he was found and brought back to camp. During the lengthy ordeal in the woods of Frozen Head, he phoned using his cell phone to say he was, "safe but lost."

Eventually the film crew decided they should send someone to find Tim. He was relieved, I am sure, to see his rescue team arrive. In the interim of his being "out there" and lost, he did locate book two.

I am pleased to have had the opportunity to just be in camp with these magnificent athletes who brave the saw briars, 59,100 feet of climb and 59,100 feet of descent over five loops, no marked trail, dark of night "out there" hallucinations (most all runners report seeing things that are not actually there early in the morning hours of running all night).

These runners are beyond anything you can imagine. They have conquered self-doubt and have known success and failure in measures to which most of us cannot even conceive. They have a quiet, but determined demeanor that just exudes confidence...yet many of them cannot complete even one loop of the Barkley. Only the truly elite, best trained and most fit runners can successfully finish that monumental challenge.

They even eat partially cooked unthawed chicken halves that "Laz" grills which are donated by the person for whom the race is named, Barry Barkley, Gary's neighbor. Placing the chicken on the grill unthawed assures that it will quickly char black on the surface while the center remains virtually raw!

All who undertake this tremendously enlightening challenge owe thanks to the insight into human nature of one man, known affectionately as "Laz." Gary may seem unassuming or even unconcerned, but his heart is very much dedicated to the runners, literally hundreds of them, maybe as many as close to 900 who have written him essays convincing enough to get accepted to run the Barkley Marathons.

Many more do not get selected as the number of runners is limited to approximately 40 or less. No one was more pleased than "Laz" to see three people complete the Barkley bringing the total times runners have finished to 13 (one a repeat).

Yet, I can see his mind working, thinking, how can I make it more difficult. These young runners are getting better each year! Never fear, "Laz" will create even more challenging runs in the future Barkley Marathons...a most unusual human endurance phenomenon right in our back yard.

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"Laz" accepts the pages torn from 11 books Zane has just brought to him after completing his second "20 mile" loop

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Typical saw briar scratches to the runners' legs, remember this is an unmarked run from one book to another with few if any trails between the checkpoints

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"Laz" plays taps to signal a runner has decided to stop, indicating they either did not finish a loop or declined to continue after finishing a loop - almost everyone hears this sad tome played

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Taps being played by Dave Henn, son of Karl "Raw Dog" Henn, the person who introduced Gary to the terrain that would become the Barkley Marathons