

Barkley 2025 - Sébastien Raichon

What word should I start this text with ?

Impossible, rough, painful, haunting, fraternal, addictive, obsessive... One of those words, for sure.

When you don't know this race, it calls you to mind, rejects you, attracts you. Once you've been there, it takes hold of you, excites you, captivates you.

It's been 2 years since I had the privilege of pace up and down this forest with 39 runners from all over the world, and 2 years that I have run into a wall. This year, the wall were impassable. It was Carl and Laz's decision. We realized it from the moment the map is taken the day before start : 9 huge climbs with an elevation gain of 1,300 to 2,000 ft were on the agenda, instead of 7 last year !

The start of the adventure

We arrive in Tennessee three days before D-Day with Yann (my loyal assistant) et Mia (my eldest daughter who's in charge of filming). We get back into our good habits by having lunch at Waffle House before going hiking in Frozen Head State Park. Unfortunately, it's raining cats and dogs. We turn back.

A brief lull in the afternoon allows us to go for a walk near the hotel before joining the French Team at the pizzeria. Excitement is at its height, we discuss the probable new route ... before a tornado alert forces us to take shelter in the cellar ! It starts strong.

The weather is milder on Sunday, and I can get my bearings in the forest by walking 12 miles along the trails. We set up camp on Monday after dropping Mia off at the old prison, where Laz offers a guided tour.

The taking of race's maps

The atmosphere changes...

The taking of race's maps disheartened us. We study the route with Aurélien Sanchez and Maxime Gauguin. I estimate between 1 and 2 hours more per lap compared to last year. In theory, it's impossible. But we don't give back our bibs. We have a Barkley to experience, 16 books to find at each loop. We have to live it fully.

The night was long, Carl only blew at 10:37. The weather is nice but unfortunately already very hot for me. After a short speech, Laz lights his cigarette. The start is given this Tuesday, March 18th at 11:37 a.m.

First loop - A battle against the heat

The French Team starts together in front ! Aurélien Sanchez leads the way in the first ascension. We follow him with Maxime. Then John and Max, the Americans, take the lead but we take over the direction on the first descent. No problem for books 1 and 2. This first

innovation is time-consuming but technically accessible. I take the essential marks on the same section as last year, with the help of my friends.

John comes back to us with a strong pace. We're hanging on but it's starting to get very hot. On this race, there are never any time to rest, the climbs are terribly steep and finding the best route is difficult off-trail.

On the descent, you need maximum concentration, otherwise the fall can be incapacitating, and the brambles will cut your legs ! This lack of down-time doesn't allow me to lower my body temperature.

Aurélien is starting to feel hot and let us go on the terrifying climb towards book 8. This ascension was full of cliffs. I'm holding on but I'm on the verge of breaking down. The next two books are new, I don't want to be alone like last year. With the page of book 9 in my pocket, I let John and Maxime go and decide to take my cruising pace. Unlike last year, I find my bearings cleanly and negotiate the second new feature of the course perfectly.

John and Maxime made a mistake and I meet them again in book 11 before the ascent to the Tower. Our crew are no longer here due to park opening hours. I'm 1.5 hours slower at this point than last year. However, the end of the course is the same ! I'm well aware at that moment that the finish won't be possible. I have to find another mindset !

The first cramps hit me as I descend toward the prison. No ! It is hell in this leaf-strewn ground, the ground is very slippery. Cramps seize me, in waves. The only benefit is that it keeps me awake despite the night and the fatigue ! I finish this lap in 10 hours and 25 minutes without error but slowly.

I touch the yellow gate under the eye of Carl and Laz.

The latter asks me with a big smile how I found this shorter route !

Two hours more than last year, it's insane ! I sit in my chair and scream as the cramps come regularly. I eat my Baobab workout, some compotes and rice cakes. The sandwich doesn't sit well as usual. Guillaume Calmettes, crew of his brother this year, motivates me with passion.

I leave feeling invigorated by all this warm encouragement for loop 2 in the same direction as the first.

But things are really not going well. The first meters of elevation go badly. The cramps are becoming more widespread and my head is spinning. I lie down 1 for minute then leave again. But it's worse. I take a long rest. How many time ? No idea, 15 to 30 minutes. I get my mental back but not my legs. I tread carefully during descent toward book 1, I break an hiking pole on a risky support. Nothing is going right ! I drink as much river water as possible. The cramps are gradually becoming less frequent.

I focus on the azimuths and always find the books without looking for them. At least that's satisfying. Tomo overtakes me at the start of the climb to book 4. I keep my pace. Pain in my

left thigh (vastus medialis) is increasingly painful. It bothers me when going downhill only on eccentric contractions.

I encounter Tomo again at book 7 following mistake from him. We continue together. I'm moving faster uphill now, and he goes down slowly. We realize at book 8 that pages 83 and 85 of John and Maxime aren't removed ! Where are they ? I thought they were 2-3 hours ahead of me... So we're leading the race. Improbable ! This Barkley is full of surprises.

A little later after book 9, Maxime comes back to us and explains to me that he got lost with John in the descent of Rusty Spoon towards book 7 and having found Claire also lost with 1 loop of delay. Absolutely crazy to imagine John Kelly, 8 participations, 3 times finishers, spending so much time in his forest in a place where he has already passed many times. That's the magic, the unpredictability of the Barkley. You're looking for a book hidden in a tree, under a rock... At night, with fatigue, everything looks the same. I had the bitter experience last year !

I find book 10 and give the pages to Tomo and Max. That's the spirit of this race : we help each other, we gain seconds to give ourselves the chance of one more loop, of an improbable finish. The pain in my thigh is getting intense. I'm forced to descend on a single and solid support. I can't run anymore. I let my companions go. I look forward to every climb from now on.

Second passing at the Tower

Day dawned. The descent to the prison, normally very quick, is a real ordeal. I'm practically on one leg and with my only pole. I find Maxime lying in the leaves on the way to Indian Knob. He's knocked out and completely down. We decide to finish this ride together. He takes mini naps and breathers on the descent because I'm going so slowly and I'm in pain. With book 16 in the Ziplock, we walk down to camp on this 3 miles trail where I usually run very fast. It's the only one on the circuit. John is back and passes us. And we also meet Tomo, who's leaving for his third loop.

Maxime has decided to stop here. I want to continue, hoping that Yann is a magician. His massages always make me feel good. At the same time, I tell myself that is not reasonable. I know myself, giving up is never an option unless there is certain danger. Am I in danger ? No, just slow. It's up to the race to stop me, not me ! I want to leave again. Max advises me to be careful.

We arrive and touch the yellow gate together after more than 25 hours

I sit down and break down in my daughter's arms. We cried together. French team is omnipresent, they give us the boost to get going again. Guillaume is an outstanding leader. Aurélien, despite his withdrawal, is also a great support. A true gentleman. I decide to leave at all costs, in the opposite direction, at least to the Tower. I stay in my idea to complete the timing of each loop. For the Fun Run it will be complicated, but I already did it last year.

Guillaume convinced Max to try. I left before him, telling him he'd catch up with me soon. I touch the gate, I break the rules by hugging Mia and Yann as I pass, but Laz and Carl don't

say anything. They have empathy whatever we think !The pain is less severe, morale increases. I go up the trail towards Chimney Top, glancing behind me, hoping to see Maxime. I won't see him again.

I still can't run but the pain is acceptable. The advantage of this pace is that I can easily avoid brambles ! However, I'm less focused on my azimuth but I readjust myself well. Out of prison, I climb the legendary Rat Jaw for the first time. I hope not to arrive too late at the Tower and see my supporters. When they see me, they scream their encouragement. I'm feeling better and I'm even jogging a little to keep up appearances

I decide to continue, I still have 8 hours of Barkley ! I'm entering into a new feature this year in the counterclockwise. I tell myself that this might be useful to me one day.

I handle the situation well. Not running, but clearly. CCW is slower, that's for sure. Time flies and sleep is threatening me. I have four hours left to get from book 8 to the other end of the Park and the sections are terribly steep and technical. I would need six at least.

This is the end of my quest for this year. I decide to head back to camp before 3:37 a.m. I let go. I sleepwalk, lying down for 5 minutes from time to time. The sky decides to cry to wake me up ! Around 3 a.m., I get back into a real weekend hiker's pace to reach the finish line. Unlike last year, I'm not sad, and I'm rather satisfied with my resilience in this collector's edition. At 3:27 I hear cheers distantly. Certainly an arrival in time for the Fun Run.

The camp then sees my headlampLaz told Mia that my defeat was magnificent... Great reward. Better than a medal or a bonus, I assure you.

Yes, I think this year's course will not allow any finish in the future. The weather was nice and dry and we only did one CCW loop.

We will see the choices of Carl and Laz in the future. They hold the cards.

Seb aka the hippy ('24), Back to the future guy ('25)