

It is a unique and uniquely grueling run for those unique and uniquely bloody-minded people: ultra runners. Even among this hardy breed, only 15 people can brag of finishing the Barkley.



Almost all of the route that makes up a single loop of The Barkley Marathons trails through dense woodland, leaving participants to their own devices when tackling dense vegetation, slippery slopes, and the dark of night.



► 13 kilometers (8 miles). Cantrell is said to have joked, “I could do at least 100,” mocking Ray’s mileage, and the Barkley challenge was born. It is named for Cantrell’s running companion Barry Barkley.

The course itself basically consists of a 32.2-kilometer (20-mile) loop over rough, uncleared terrain, five laps of which must be completed for a runner to be considered as having finished the full ultra. It is completely unmarked, and use of GPS technology is not permitted—runners must copy the one version of the map available at the start line and receive scanty directions. The path is traditionally marked by books located at various points, and participants must tear a page from each to prove they have completed the loop. The only aid stations are two points where water is available and, to make matters worse, some say the loop is in fact more than the stated 32.2 kilometers, approaching something like marathon distance.

With more than 18 kilometers (roughly 60,000 feet) of elevation gain over the full course, it’s no wonder that more than half of the races held since 1986 have ended with no finishers at the 60-hour mark.

What else? Well, other eccentricities of the event include the mysterious entry procedure, the only readily available details of which are the registration fee of USD 1.60 and the requirement of writing an essay explaining why you should be allowed to participate. Those who are accepted to run—including one “human sacrifice,” considered the person least likely to complete—receive a “letter of condolence” and first-timers are asked to bring a license plate from their home state or country to the event. Prior finishers submit a pack of Camel cigarettes to Cantrell, while veteran non-finishers must submit an additional “fee,” usually an item of clothing picked out by, again, Cantrell. A one-hour warning of the race start is signaled ►