

## **2004 and 2005, more new signings, and Mirror Mirror on the Wall, who is the most talented of all?.....**

Our strength, particularly on the country, had been beefed up by a couple more signings. Andy Barber joined us from Peterborough, on the recommendation of Paul Larkins. Andy was experienced, understood the sport, and knew what he wanted to achieve and the part a club could play in entering him or selecting him for good races. He became a dependable member of our teams. Also joining was Olly Laws, who had been at Loughborough with Dave Mitchinson. Olly had pushed top class Kenyans to the limit in a mud bath at Brussels leading to the race promoter predicting that Britain had found its cross country champion for the next five years. That didn't prove to be the case but Olly certainly achieved enough over that period to cement his reputation. Soon after joining Beagles, he departed for a stint at Butler University in Indianapolis. In 2004, he led Butler to 4th place in the NCAA National Championships - a result that was unprecedented for Butler in any sport. Olly achieved All American status and by all accounts became an instant campus hero. He's still running for Beagles because he loves running - a lovely fellow who everybody likes.

The team made a great start to 2004, retaining their Southern Cross Country team title at Parliament Hill. It was a convincing win too, with Mitchy coming close to an individual win. He followed his bronze medal from the previous year with a silver, and Mark Warmby finished 3rd. The team was completed by Kairn Stone (7th), Stuart Major (27th), Kairn Stone (34th) and Andy Barber (55th). We travelled to the National at Temple Newsam, Leeds with hopes of team medals. Kairn was the only absentee from the Southern winning team, but Andy Robinson, Ally Donaldson, Ian Grime, Kris Bowditch, Neville Adams and Ian Grime were all available.

A reasonable formula for success in the team race is to for your sixth and final scorer to be in the top 80. I felt we would have about ten runners on the start line any of whom could finish in the top 80 if they were in shape. So I drove to Leeds with the words of Robert Louis Stephenson in my head - "to travel hopefully is a better thing than to arrive". But what would he know? How can you compare the English National with finishing 3rd behind Willie Wallace and Bobby Bruce in the My Favourite Scotsmen competition on BBC Alba? I prefer Jacqueline Kelly (The Evolution of Calpurnia Tate) "it is better to travel with hope in one's heart than to arrive in safety.....we should celebrate today's failure because it is a clear sign that our voyage of discovery is not yet over." There speaks the voice of someone who has seen her Under 15 boys team come a cropper in the mud at Alton Towers.

On race day, I trooped to the start at the foot of a long hill to gather together the various garments which the team discarded before the gun sounded. By the time I arrived back at my vantage point at the top of the hill, Grimey was out of the race, with calf twang. Next to go was Mark who had gone down with flu on the morning of the race. Kris started well but was treading water when he dropped out after the first of three laps. After two laps, Neville stepped to the side of the course and chatted for over a minute with a couple of friends before deciding to rejoin the race, eventually finishing 173rd to close in the team. Ahead of him, Mitchy was 8th, an unwell Andy was 33rd, Ally Donaldson an excellent 55th, Stuart 73rd and

Andy Barber 111th. The team finished 6th. Quite a lot had gone wrong on the day. Our voyage of discovery had turned up enough maladies and injuries to fill half a medical dictionary, and I'd learned how very hard it is to win a national title. To complete an undistinguished winter, we placed 6th in the Southern 12 stage, and failed to send a complete team to the National 12 stage.

By way of a departure from a repetitive chronicle of past performances, I thought I'd have a go at rating the most naturally talented runner I've managed as a team manager. I've elected to measure this in terms of 5000 metres running. It wouldn't be difficult to rank the athletes according to times achieved, but I'm more interested in the vague use of 'talent' as a measure. Let me make something clear at this point. I'm not going to attempt to define 'talent'. Nor am I about to decry practice and training and the athletes who work and work and work to close the gap on the 'talented' and make it to the top. Others have done this work, and I'll respectfully give a few references to check out. If you adhere to the ten thousand hours to get to the top approach, read *Outliers* by Malcolm Gladwell, or *Bounce* by Matthew Syed. If you're interested in the concept of 'talent', then I recommend *The Talent Gene* by David Epstein. The contrast in the two approaches is particularly well described by Epstein in Chapter 2 of his book, where he describes the route followed to the 2007 World Championships high jump final by Stefan Holm and Donald Thomas.

How many times have we heard an athlete being described as "very talented"? There used to be a very good runner from Manchester in the 1970's called Ricky Wilde, who was always described as 'talented' though his performances are nowadays almost forgotten, whilst those of many of his fellow competitors of the era are remembered. More recently, almost any discussion of 1500 metre runner Colin McCourt usually resulted in someone describing him as incredibly "talented", though he never reached the heights or consistency of other British runners of the last decade or so.

By using 5000 metres as the key distance, I'm immediately eliminating from consideration the likes of Mike East, James Shane and Dale Clutterbuck, who have all represented Beagles with distinction in the winter months but whose track careers have been defined (at least so far) over 800 and 1500 metres. I'll make an honourable mention of Paul Larkins, who competed in some of my teams, and has a fearsome set of personal bests on the track, but they were all set some time before Paul had the dubious privilege of being managed by me.

Our strength as a distance club in the last fifteen years is amplified by the list of runners who don't make the Smith Talent Shortlist. No place for Dave Mitchinson, Olly Laws or Chris Mackay, all of whom had personal bests of a shade over 14 minutes. Then add to the list sub 14 minute runners Keith Gerrard, John Beattie, Lee Merrien, Steve Hepples, and Mark Warmby. Close but no cigar awards go to 13.37 man Ian Grime, and Moumin Geele who made the 2012 Olympic 5000 metres final and has a best of 13:17.77. That leaves my top 3, which reads (in reverse order naturally):

3rd - Kairn Stone. On paper, slower than any of the names above, with a personal best of 14:17.61, Kairn was an outstanding schoolboy athlete in his native Devon. He attended

university at St Mary's and worked with Alan Storey and Kim McDonald amongst others, but his progress was stifled by injuries and student living. Kairn made his senior international debut at the age of 34 when he represented England in the Copenhagen half marathon, running a personal best of 65.28. At the age of 25, K took a gap year from teaching to try to make a big breakthrough as a runner. Unfortunately, injuries got in the way, and so Kairn returned to a paid teaching lifestyle. That's the lot of most athletes of course, but I've never doubted Kairn's desire, his love of running, or his ability.

Earlier in this episode, there's reference to his 34th position in the Southern cross country at Parliament Hill in 2004. The race was over a heavy and hilly nine miles. Kairn had only been out for a run six times in the previous nine weeks, yet he still delivered a quality performance on perhaps the most unforgiving terrain known to cross country runners. His 8th place finish at Exeter in 2003 was another example of his natural ability. He'd only just started running again after injury, and he decided to run less than three quarters of an hour before the start to help out the club. Afterwards I spoke to the winner of the men's race, John Downes. The Irishman was known for being as tough as old boots, and for being forthright and uncompromising in his opinions. I liked him immensely and respected his views because he knew what he was talking about. As we walked back to the car park at Bicton College, John told me that of all the athletes he'd beaten on the day, he would most like to work with Kairn. It was his view that Kairn was capable of running 13.20 for 5000 metres - not that year, and it may take two years to get Kairn to that level, but that's how highly John rated him. I've always agreed with John's assessment. Injury prevented Kairn from fulfilling his potential fully, but his love of the sport and his persistence gave him many an Indian summer to his running career.

2nd - Mo Farah. Currently the GB record holder at every distance from 1500 metres to marathon, as well as being a double World Champion and Olympic gold medallist over 5000 metres, it may be slightly surprising that Mo doesn't come out at No.1 in terms of 'talent'. It's not a reflection on Mo - just a personal opinion that there's one runner who had a bit more natural ability. I shall be looking in a little more depth at Mo shortly, but it's entirely accurate to say that Mo was outstanding as a schoolboy and a junior, and after a short lull in his early twenties, he went on an upwards trajectory that took him to his current position of dominance - a position that he's enjoyed for four years. Mo has great drive and ambition, and he reached a point where I think he realised that talent alone wasn't going to be enough to become the best, and what followed was sustained hard work - that's the bit where so many talents go missing.

1st - Kris Bowditch. For me, Kris could have been the best, but he's probably all but forgotten now other than by those who came across this extraordinary person. His approach to running was idiosyncratic. He was a complete one-off, who either ignored or disregarded the normal approach to running. He was once described to me as having "a rock n roll lifestyle", and in truth I was never sure which Kris Bowditch was going to turn up to race. Kris was no 'big time Charlie' who would only turn out when he was 100%. I've seen him finish plum last in a British League 1500 metres. I found that it was best to put him up the night before a competition with his girlfriend or to see if his Dad, Richie, could bring him to

the race. Getting Kris to the start line was a challenge. There's a book of anecdotes about Kris that could be written (possibly entitled *The Greatest Runner You Never Heard Of*) but my purpose here is to try to demonstrate his talent, and his unique approach to running.

Kris had become a consistent sub 14 minute runner in his early twenties, and represented England at the 1998 Commonwealth Games in Kuala Lumpur. The trip was marred slightly by Kris missing the outward flight from Heathrow, and after spending the better part of the night in Soho, he then had to borrow pocket money from Paul Head when he arrived in Malaysia. He also had stints at college in the States, coming under the tutelage of George Young for a period. He joined Beagles in time for the 2000 season, which was to be a crucial one for him as he was 25 years old and the Olympics were being held in Sydney. His early season form was respectable, but he lost some fitness when he elected to go on holiday in May. He appeared for the club in the Southern 12 stage road relay, and then in the first British League at Eton, where he renewed acquaintance with Paul Head, to whom he still owed the pocket money he'd borrowed two years earlier. Kris resolved this small issue, evading our well-built hammer thrower by sprinting across the infield.

On Saturday 24th June, we travelled to Wigan for the second British League of the season. Kris travelled from his home in Stoke to run in the 1500 metres where he was narrowly beaten by Steve Sharp. At the end of the meeting, he wandered across to me and asked if he could travel back to London with the team, as he fancied running the 5000 metres the following day at Battersea Park. At Wigan station, he wandered through the open ticket barrier, and established himself in a carriage close the buffet from which he bought a few cans of beer. Diplomatically, I positioned myself on the outside of Paul Head in the next compartment. At Euston (also unmanned - Kris somehow got a free ride down to London) he sidled up to me, and asked if I could find him somewhere to stay for the night. I decided to find a hotel on the Cromwell Road, not too far from Earl's Court, which would give him an easy tube journey to Sloane square the next day. The hotel room cost £88 for the night (this was 2000 remember) and Kris didn't have any money, so I paid. I made my way home, wondering what Kris thought he was going to achieve the next day.

The race had been organised by the BMC, and an international field took part. It was the first British appearance for the young Australian, Craig Mottram. Kris stuck to Mottram like glue, but Mottram slipped away at the end. Kris finished second, putting away a couple of Kenyans and Seamus Power of Ireland. His reward was a time of 13:28.22, which was an Olympic qualifying standard. Let's take stock here. The normal approach for an athlete chasing an OQS would be to pick a meeting, check out the opposition, find out if there are any pacemakers, ease down their training, book accommodation and travel and then hope for good weather on the day. Not for Kris Bowditch. He raced over 1500 metres the previous day, and instinctively felt that he was in shape, so he decided to go for it. At the Olympic Trials in August, Kris toed the line as the only British runner with the qualifying standard, and promptly trailed in 7th. He'd let his training go again, and so he had to prove his fitness before selection. That involved racing over 3000 metres at Solihull in late August. There were only four other runners in the race, and Kris won by nearly thirty seconds to earn selection. I've heard that Kris didn't train at all, or at all meaningfully, when he got to the

holding camp on the Gold Coast. He was the only British competitor in the 5000 but was knocked out in his heat - an ignominious outing in a British vest. What I can't forget is his novel approach to running 13:28 - I think he put together nearly two months of solid training to achieve that, so what might he have achieved if he'd dedicated himself to sustained hard training for a longer period? Kris Bowditch once told a group of Beagles runners that he knew he was in shape if he could run 8 x 400 in 57 or 58 seconds - that would mean running twelve and a half laps of a 5000 at 65 seconds would feel easy. It would also give him a finishing time of about 13:35.00. Unfortunately, Kris was happy running 13:35, when perhaps he was capable of running sub 13.10, which at the time would have made him truly world class.

In the next gripping instalment - the signing of Mo Farah, and other runners....