

2008-09 - A Sunny Winter.

As Barry Saunders of Thames Valley Harriers told me “enjoy the good times, they won’t last forever”. Indeed. This was a very good winter for the team, yielding team medals in four national team races, and two sets of medals from area team races. In fact, we only missed out in the Southern 12 stage road relay, where Woodford Green again got the better of us for 3rd place.

The winter season commenced as usual at Aldershot with the Southern six stage road relay. Fireworks from Andy Vernon on leg 4 seemed to have secured victory for the home team, but Belgrave surprised with an unusual team and there was no denying Phil Wicks’ last leg heroics which secured the win. With the exception of Keith Gerrard, our team lacked a sprinkling of gold dust, so we had to settle for bronze medals, in front of the improving Winchester squad, many of whom were coached by Nick Anderson. They were to prove our nemesis a few months later in controversial circumstances. Pleasingly, we again qualified a B team for the national equivalent a few weeks later at Sutton Park.

The National six stage road relay was a cracker. We were not at full strength, but after Ian Grime’s opening leg, Steve Hepples crashed through the field to lift us to 11th. Keith Gerrard was in good nick and he pulled us through to 4th with the fourth fastest time of the day and Kevin Skinner took us all the way to the lead after four legs. Dan Pettit ran well enough on Leg 5, but Phil Wicks of Belgrave was on fire at this time, and he took a minute out of us to leave Belgrave in the lead followed by Notts. The last lap was exciting but Bels held on to their lead, and Bruce Raeside (again) ran very well and held off Moumin Geele. We finished 33 seconds off the win, and one second behind Notts but well clear of the fourth team. The B team were good and finished 25th.

Off we went then to Mansfield for the cross country relays. This was the one national title that Dave Mitchinson never won, but he came very close at Berry Hill Park in November 2008. We had quite a few missing and I opted for an A team of Mitchinson, Pettit, Warmby and Gerrard. The B team comprised of Sam Farah, Baddick, Cole and Pike. This was Frank Baddick’s cross country debut for the club, having joined from North Devon AC. Frank was a student at Loughborough, and he was to become a mainstay of Beagles teams on the track, the road and the country. The race was a romp between some very strong clubs. Belgrave missed out this time after an indifferent first leg, and it was Wells City who took the race out until the end of the third leg, when I noticed they didn’t have a final leg runner. This opened the door for us as we were 5th with an inform Keith Gerrard to run. But Bedford were ahead of us in 3rd, and Neilson Hall soon charged to the front and held off Keith’s charge as we picked up silver medals. The Bedford team of Matthews, James, Deed and Hall was good but on paper they were beatable by any number of clubs. But Bedford loved Mansfield and their runners always seemed to find a bit extra round the tight confines of Berry Hill Park.

Next up was the Southern cross country over nine miles. The race was to be held close to where I was working at Uxbridge. I visited the course on New Year’s Eve 2008. My work shoes got a bit muddy but the course looked manageable. However, at the bottom end of the

course was a stream, running through a broad valley. This was the River Pinn. Heavy rain throughout January was to have a serious effect on the course - on race day the bottom half of the course was under water. We were strong on experience for the race with a group of runners who knew their way round nine miles of cross country. One man who was not yet eligible to run for us was James Ellis, who had joined from Aldershot Farnham and District. He was a good runner who had been hit by a number of injuries following a serious road traffic accident, but he'd retained an optimism and will to succeed and was to prove a real asset to us in the future.

I spent the night before the race feeling very ill after eating goodness knows what in Central London. I slept until nearly midday and then rushed across to Uxbridge feeling decidedly wonky. That's the first part of my excuse for what happened next. The second part of the excuse is that the course was so boggy and wet that everyone who wasn't racing, spent their time picking their way round puddles, and there was no easy way of setting up a team base. Beagles had recently completed a deal with the Japanese sportswear company ASICS to provide our teams with kit. I hadn't received any of the kit, but a couple of our runners who had competed in that summer's British League had been kitted out. As a result, the majority of our team were wearing the traditional black vest with a yellow hoop, whilst two were wearing the spanking new yellow vest emblazoned with NEWHAM across the front. Teams are supposed to declare their colours and all should wear the same version in any race with a team element. I spotted the problem as the runners jogged across a waterlogged field to the start, but there was nothing that I could do to rescue the situation.

The race started and it was clear that our main rivals for the team race were Winchester. To complicate matters further, their colours were.....black vests with a yellow hoop with WINCHESTER across the hoop. Their runners unsurprisingly pinned their numbers across the WINCHESTER so their vests looked identical to those that most of our runners were wearing. To unbiased onlookers, the confusion would have been that the two teams vying for the team title were wearing practically identical colours, but that wasn't the issue in the eyes of the officials. The Winchester lads did well on the day, and at one stage were winning the team race without needing any helping hand from eagle-eyed officials. But by the end of the race, we were in the driving seat, with Kevin Skinner leading us home in 11th, Mitchy 18th, Kairn Stone 22nd, Scott Sterling 31st, Sam Farah 34th, Rob Cole 39th, Stuart Major 59th, Andy Barber 62nd and Ben Hellmers 225th.

I was stood near the finish and Hazel Mead came up to congratulate me as our sixth man ran past. Then the PA system crackled into life with a call for the manager of Newham and Essex Beagles to report to the race referee. I knew what was coming, and I was grateful that the referee was John How, an excellent official and a really good guy. He explained that he'd received a complaint and that in the circumstances he had to disqualify two of our runners. He'd decided to score the guys who were wearing black vests with the yellow hoop. So Sam and Rob were excluded from the scoring, and we just missed out on the team win - at least officially. I heard a rumour about who had made the complaint which if true would suggest a certain amount of jealousy - the individual was from the anti-Beagles camp - but it didn't really matter, and I appreciated that John How had been honest with me. To this day, if I see

John, he always asks me what colours we've decided to wear! He also made the point that if I'd spoken to him before the race about the two sets of colours, he could have made a different decision. Unfortunately, the problem only became apparent when it was too late - for understandable reasons, runners don't 'strip off' until just before the race, especially when it's cold or raining.

Confusion reigned as it became apparent to the runners that something had gone badly wrong. To this day I have three team silver medals hung up on a hook on my toilet door at home - medals that were refused by some of the team. The message boards spluttered into life after the race with a few sad people making dark hints about Beagles 'cheating'. It wasn't a good day for me.

Still, we lived to fight another day, and the next big race was the 2009 National cross country championships which were being held at Parliament Hill. I knew that Lee Merrien was aiming to make his debut for us, and that Keith Gerrard was hoping to run. Having finished second in the Southern, our hopes of winning were dismissed by most tipsters - Bedford and the Northern clubs were considered to be the favourites for the team title. Then Moumin Geele decided to run which gave us a potential three top 20 finishers. Kevin Skinner opted to run a 10km on the roads at Bourton in the Cotswolds, and Rob Cole was out, but otherwise our Southern silver (or gold - depending on which way you look at it) winning team were all available. It looked like a strong team, but how many times had I thought that?

Tony Shiret came along on race day and erected the club tent on the slope parallel to the start hill. Parliament Hill was suitably muddy - not the day for the then Chief Executive of England Athletics to turn up with sunglasses trendily perched on the top of his head, and moccasins on his feet - but that is what he wore. I chose my vantage points for the race - I'd perfected the best viewpoints over the past ten years. Go past the café, bear left to take me to the north eastern side of the course, watch them descend the first hill, then jog to the tree on a hill which the runners pass twice on each lap. The race started with the traditional silence before the starter's gun - it's a moment which always makes the hairs on the back of your neck stand up, the sight of 1,500 runners charging up the first hill. If you've never seen it, I can tell you that National cross country day at Parliament Hill is the best free entertainment of the year in London.

I like to try to score the National as the race progresses. It isn't easy as the runners flow past en masse and you have to be quick to recognise athletes and team colours whilst counting the number of athletes going by. On the first lap, I simply got a feel for the clubs that were in with a chance, whilst checking that our athletes were in the right part of the field - preferably near the front. The early signs were good for us, but Bedford were clearly strong, as were Leeds. At the beginning of the second lap, I started counting in earnest. We were doing fine but it looked as if Bedford were doing better. I took another look as the runners came back past the tree. There was a runner in the top 20 who I'd previously scored for Bedford but I didn't recognise him. Then I realised that the 'vest problem' had thrown me, but this was another version to that which we'd experienced at Uxbridge. One of the favourite sets of club kit is a blue vest, and several of the very best cross country clubs in England wear the same

shade of blue, with slightly different designs. But those design differences - stripes, hoops, lettering etc - are quickly lost if the race is run in a quagmire and vests become mud-splattered. On this day, Bedford, Leeds City, Bingley and Morpeth were all wearing blue vests, so who was the mystery runner? I opened the race programme which listed all of the runners and waited for the field to come by again.

The race at the front was tight - Frank Tickner, Steve Vernon and Andy Vernon were all to the fore, and Keith Gerrard and Moumin were both running in the top 10, with Lee Merrien just behind. Then came the mystery blue vest. I looked up the number and sighed in relief. The runner in question was Nick Swinburn of Morpeth, and on scoring the race, we had the edge on Bedford, but not by much. I rang Tony Shiret who was stood near the finish, who felt that Bedford were ahead. I tracked back to the finish in time to see Tickner win. Moumin led us home in 5th, and Lee was 13th, but where was Keith? After an eternity, he came into sight in 24th - he'd suffered stomach problems one mile from the finish, slowed to a walk, and nearly dropped out. Thankfully he finished the race, and with Dave Mitchinson 38th and Kairn Stone 47th, we were in with a chance, but noticeably, Bedford had already closed in five runners. Bedford's final scorer was just in front of ours, but we had a lot of pressure on the sixth scoring place. Sam Farah prevailed in 87th. I was stood about 150 metres before the finish and I felt that we'd done just enough to win. It turned out I was right - we won by ten points from the competitive Bedford team with Leeds further back in 3rd. Lee confided that he knew it wasn't his day by the top of the first hill but he continued for the team - it was a good team debut which caught out a few observers who didn't realise he'd joined us. The unsung heroes for Beagles were Stuart Major who finished one place and six seconds behind Sam - the closest he'd come in twenty plus Nationals to a medal. Five places and thirteen seconds behind Sam was Scott Sterling who had also run magnificently. It's the classic approach to winning the National - get together a bunch of runners who know that they have to run well to make the scoring six. So often it's the fifth and sixth scorers who determine the destiny of the medals - as we were to discover three years later when the race returned to Parliament Hill. For the record, Andy Barber finished 143rd and we also won the nine to score contest.

It was the club's first senior men's title since 1901. With a previous win in 1893, we remain to this day the only club to have won the senior team title in the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries. The win also qualified us to compete against the Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish champions later in the year to represent Great Britain and Northern Ireland in the European Clubs cross country championships in early 2010.

Moumin had run well in the National. He was living in Teddington and making good progress as an athlete. But he had little money. I'd managed to find him a few races where he could win some money, but only enough to keep him going for a few weeks. Through Moumin and Sam, I'd expanded my knowledge of the asylum seeker's plight. There's so much inaccurate information which is peddled by people who should know better. Moumin wasn't receiving benefits, and he didn't have a National Insurance number which meant that he couldn't work legally, he couldn't register with a doctor or dentist, and he couldn't travel outside of the country. A few weeks after the National, Sam rang me to say that Moumin had gone missing. Sam was close to Moumin but he hadn't heard from him for three days, since

he'd gone to register - a fortnightly requirement for someone in his position. I went to the house in Teddington where he lived with other runners. None of them had seen Moumin, and, with one exception, none of the runners seemed to be bothered. I was quite shocked by the disinterest on show, but Susan Scott (the 800/1500 metres runner) was a shining beacon, and seemed to appreciate the seriousness of the situation. Moumin had no means of contacting anyone so some detective work was required. Twenty four hours later, Sam rang again to say that he thought Moumin was being detained in a new immigration removal centre near Gatwick Airport. I rang the centre and found out that Moumin was almost certainly there, on the basis that they gave me a time when I could visit him in just a couple of hours. So I dashed down in my car, and went through two hours of sitting in various waiting rooms whilst my credentials were fully checked. It was all very thorough but I had the impression that this was due to the centre having been obviously opened very recently. There was a smell of fresh paint and the chairs and tables in the holding areas still had bits of polythene and cardboard attached to them.

Finally, about twenty minutes before visitors were due to leave, Moumin appeared. He did look a bit relieved to see me. He was wearing the same clothes from the day he was detained, and had no money which meant he couldn't buy chocolate or snacks, or make a phone call. Having made contact with Moumin, I went home and rang Peter McHugh who knew Sam and Moumin well. Peter is a great athletics enthusiast and a highly intelligent and caring man. In no time he'd contacted Moumin's MP, Vince Cable, who in turn referred the case to Phil Wooler, then the Minister for Immigration. This was progress and I was able to pass on the information to Moumin when I returned to the immigration removal centre the following day. One of the 'guards' or security people started a conversation with me as Moumin was leaving the waiting room, explaining that he used to be a good miler. Looking at his fat belly, I doubted it somewhat, but told him to look after Moumin because he would be going to the London Olympics. As I left, I managed to get Moumin's agreement that if he was released in time, he would run at Milton Keynes the following Sunday in the Southern 12 stage road relay. He was due to appear two days later in court as part of his asylum appeal. Peter McHugh attended along with Mick Woods and myself, but the appeal was shelved and we learned that on the instructions of Wooler, Moumin had now been released - one nil to Vince Cable. I'd heard that he was highly regarded as a constituency MP, and he certainly made things happen for Moumin. Peter too had been influential - a few years later he set up the Run Fast agency, and he asked me if I knew anyone who may be suitable to help him get the agency moving - I recommended Tom Snow, who proved a really successful appointment. I got in touch with Susan with the good news, and she was genuinely pleased that the matter had been resolved. It wasn't the first legal scrape that Moumin had been involved in, and it wasn't the last either, but I was happy to help him. It wasn't easy for Moumin - his spoken and written English were poor (apart from his knowledge of colloquialisms that he'd learned from some of the St Mary's students) and I knew that he was virtually penniless, and that his nearest relative was living in Leicester. For me, it was a window on a largely forgotten and misunderstood part of English society, as well as an opportunity to help an athlete whose main talent in life was seemingly running very fast.

Moumin ran at Milton Keynes, and despite his lack of training in the previous two weeks, he made an impact with a swift long leg at the end of the race, but we were off the pace as Belgrave won from Aldershot. Moumin's run on leg 11 put the pressure on Woodford Green but Martin Cryer held off Sam Farah on the last leg and we missed out on team medals for the only time that winter.

Our team was much stronger for the finale of the winter season at Sutton Park. We played our part in what was probably the strongest line-up of teams in National 12 stage road relay in the first decade of the 21st century. After Ian Grime's tasty opening leg, Chris Mackay booted us into the lead after two legs with the third fastest short leg of the day. We stayed right in contention with Belgrave until the halfway point of the race - we were just 19 seconds behind at that point. Thereafter, Belgrave stretched away, ultimately winning by over five minutes. Their team was very strong, and Phil Wicks rubber stamped probably the best winter of his career with a swift long leg - faster than anything Mo Farah had achieved in the race in previous years. There was a bit of a mix-up on the times for Rob Cole and Keith Gerrard - the latter benefiting by about 20 seconds, but once we became isolated, we had to settle for finishing the job with silver medals. We had the satisfaction of dipping under four hours and ten minutes for the first time. After the mishaps in the previous two years at this race, I was happy with the result. Belgrave ran super quick on the day, bolstered by a couple of Aussies who were over for the following week's London Marathon. We finished well clear of an epic home straight battle between Tipton and Shettleston for the bronze medals. Tipton prevailed, and we were to become better acquainted with Shettleston later in the year at Sefton Park. Woodford Green, who had got the better of us at Milton Keynes, ran well with a strong team, but finished 11th - a testament to the strength of the race.

So, a very successful winter came to an end. Better was to come, especially on the track.

By way of a strange conclusion, I was recently reflecting on the career of one of our best athletes of the last decade, Gianni Frankis, who has recently opted to compete for Italy in the future. It's a little known fact that Gianni was a very good non-league footballer before deciding to focus solely on Athletics. I saw him as a raw 18 years old striker, playing for Heybridge Swifts in the Ryman League. At that level, you have to be able to look after yourself against older, grizzled former professionals. Gianni was no Lionel Messi, but he was quick, powerful and he could score a goal. Also playing for Heybridge was a former Spurs and Millwall defender called Stuart Nethercott. I was thinking about this last week, and on a whim, I looked up Nethercott's Wikipedia entry. It's brilliant - read the attachment to the end though to see what amused me the most, and let me know of any similar profiles on Wikipedia, or on Power of 10.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stuart_Nethercott