

2012 Olympics - not a problem for Beagles.

We'd finished in the medals at seven of the previous ten Southern six stage road relays, but we had just one triumph (in 2006) in this period. Our starting line-up in September 2011 at Rushmoor Arena had a familiar feel to it - Mitchinson, Hepples, Ellis, Chesser, Stone and Gerrard - but many of these runners were much fitter than usual for the time of the year.

After Winchester had led for the first two legs, Kent AC took over at the front for the next two legs, but both clubs had frontloaded their teams, and Aldershot and ourselves were waiting to move forwards. Rory Chesser lifted us to second after four legs, and Kairn maintained that position on leg 5 as Jonny Hay gave the home club a slight two seconds gap. On the final leg Aldershot fielded Steve Connor, who was in good shape and stuck to his task manfully, but Keith Gerrard was in excellent shape and he sealed the win for us as the team just broke one hour and fifty one minutes. Keith had made his half marathon debut one week previously at the Great North Run where he ran 63.39 and was first British finisher.

Aldershot Farnham and District had turned out to be our main rivals on the day. I spoke to their manager, Mike Boucher, who had been approached by Harun Abdi who was in the process of leaving Beagles and had asked Mike what Aldershot would pay him to join. Harun was told flatly the cost of subscription, vest and travel to be a member of Aldershot and evidently decided to look elsewhere. Harun's decision to leave Beagles had been fuelled by the club's refusal to pay for him to go altitude training in Ethiopia without a coach and for an unspecified period in summer 2011 - he told various people that his period away could be four weeks, six weeks, three months or nine months, depending on how much Beagles paid him. In fairness to Harun, athletes from the club's East London hinterland sometimes fail to recognise that the club is unusually good at senior competition and that it has a fine record of supporting athletes. But the club doesn't pay for warm weather or altitude training, and, quite frankly Harun was hardly the calibre of athlete who warranted that sort of sponsorship. Harun may have taken his Beagles experience as being the norm at all clubs, and I rather think that he was badly advised at the time.

We took an almost identical team to the National six stage road relay a few weeks later, except that Lee Merrien came in for Steve Hepples, and I changed the running order of the team. Aldershot were also nearly identical, except that Andy Vernon came in for Josh Grace. It proved to be the telling change. We ran well at Sutton Park. Rory brought us home 9th after the first leg, and we stayed in contention via Dave Mitchinson and Kairn Stone (who was still aiming to be part of a winning national six stage team) before Lee Merrien took us through to 3rd after four legs. James Ellis maintained our position on the fifth leg, but by this stage Vernon had taken Aldershot into an unassailable lead. Keith strained to close down Birchfield in 2nd but came up short by eight seconds, and he also had the pressure of a fast finishing James Wilkinson of Leeds City who closed to three seconds by the finish. So, a very good performance by a team who all ran under 18 minutes and finished 3rd in 1:45.30.

Mansfield wasn't so good, and although we were left off the final results due to chip malfunctioning, I'd be dishonest to claim that we finished in the medals - I'm pretty sure we

were 13th. The next big target was the 2012 National cross country champs, which were to be held at the spiritual home of cross country running - Parliament Hill. The previous time the race was held there, we'd won the team title, and early pledges to run from Keith Gerrard, John Beattie and Kairn Stone raised my hopes. But it wasn't to be on the team front, as these three plus Rory Chesser all finished in the top 80 but we were missing a lot of good runners on the day, and the team finished 7th.

So much of my reports have been taken up with the performance of our teams, but of course Athletics is (at heart) an individual sport. I've refrained from recounting the individual successes of a great athlete like Mo Farah, because his most impressive feats weren't achieved in the Beagles colours, and I wasn't close to him when they were achieved so I have little to add to what is already known. I'm sure that at some point in the future (probably when his competitive career is over) a decent biography will be written on Mo, and I hope that it focuses on his early days as an athlete, rather than sensationalising the obvious successes and going into copious detail about aspects of his personal life which are less than significant to the reasons why he is famous.

But occasionally, Beagles runners produce top notch individual performances in the club colours, and an instance of this was at the 2012 National cross country champs at Parliament Hill. Keith Gerrard and John Beattie were both superb that day, and I like to think that at some distant point in the future, when they're bouncing their grandchildren on their knee, they'll tell them that they used to be a runner. And when they're asked if they won any medals (because children like a bit of bling) they'll go to a chest of drawers and pull out their National medal.

Keith had targeted this race from months beforehand. He'd been training in Albuquerque with his coach, and he'd booked his flight to arrive back in Britain two days before the race. He'd booked himself into a hotel in Golders Green, not far from Hampstead Heath and was in the zone on race day. He wasn't concerned about who his opponents would be, though I remember him telling me that he expected Steve Vernon to be there, and he certainly respected John who I knew was definitely in good shape. John had also set himself up for the race - he was ready to roll. Keith and John were both experienced runners at this stage and neither would have been phased by tough underfoot going at the race, but Parliament Hill was uncharacteristically dry and firm underfoot on the day. That was only going to work in their favour as both had run in the 28.30 - 28.45 range for 10,000 metres on the track in the previous twelve months. In other words, they fitted in the category marked "genuine pace in their legs" as opposed to the one marked "tough, will keep going forever at one pace". The quality of the race was high, with Frank Tickner, Jonny Taylor, Neilson Hall, Adam Hickey, Luke Caldwell and James Wilkinson all placing in the top twenty, but the medals were destined for our two lads plus 'honorary Beagle' Steve Vernon.

Keith was at his imperious best, striding to the front when the time was right to win by eleven seconds from Steve, with John a further six seconds behind in the bronze medal position. So Keith became the first Beagle to win the senior men's individual title, and John joined a very select band of Beagles runners to place in the top three. I was happy for both of them,

because they're fine runners and good people, but slightly frustrated that on the team front, we'd failed to back up two in the first three, although no blame should be attached to the runners who were there on the day and did their best.

Our next trip on the team front was to Milton Keynes for the Southern 12 stage road relay, seeking a third successive win. The course had changed though. Mick Bromilow, the tireless organiser on behalf of Milton Keynes AC and the SEAA had concluded that the Open University were no longer prepared to play ball and that the cost of holding the race on their traffic free course was now too prohibitive. Mick decided to base the race at the MKAC headquarters with each leg starting and finishing on the track. I wasn't sure about the quality of the course but I remain appreciative of the effort that Mick put in, and there were refreshments all day plus a good atmosphere on the infield where Highgate rigged up a sound and light system with a view to intimidating the opposition.

We were stronger than in 2011 when we'd scored a surprise knockout, so I thought we had a chance. Perhaps I was getting a bit blasé but I made my mind up that I'd backload the team - that's to say that I'd stack the legs on the second half of the race with good runners and let us come through the field. That can be perilous because huge gaps can appear in the long relays which are nigh on impossible to breach. After Dave Mitchinson, Wayne Bell, Sam Farah and Bryn Reynolds had set us on our way, there was some comment that we were off the pace and out of the medals. We were 14th at this stage. By halfway, John Pike and Steve Hepples had lifted us to 7th. Pikey ran well and was particularly pleased to run a couple of seconds faster than Harun Abdi who had joined Woodford Green. Olly Laws missed the changeover from Steve Hepples as he was chatting on the back straight, and we were exactly four minutes behind the leaders, Kent AC, with five legs left to run.

Keith Gerrard was flying out to the States the next day to put in a block of training before running Mt Sac at the end of April. He agreed to run a short leg, and predictably did enormous damage to the other teams that were in contention - Kent, Aldershot, Highgate and Woodford Green. His 14.37 leg remained as a course record until the race again moved to Gravesend in 2016. We were two minutes and ten seconds behind the leaders now, and Kairn Stone ensured the gap didn't grow on the long ninth leg. Then Frank Baddick turned the race very much in our favour with another fast short leg - again we'd exploited the relative weakness of teams on the later short legs. The lead was down to 41 seconds and that was the cue for James Ellis to have possibly his best run in Beagles colours. James tore round Leg 11 to give us a 38 seconds lead over Kent with Highgate a further 16 seconds behind Kent. I was pleased that Kent and Highgate were close as it deflected attention from us and lessened the chance of someone trying to reel us in with a death or glory last leg. I'd saved Stuart Major for the last leg, hoping he'd get the chance to anchor us to victory and the circumstances were perfect for Stuart. We needed a calm runner because our lead wasn't conclusive. Needless to say, Stuart brought us home for a third successive win in the race, with Highgate overtaking Kent as Woodford mounted a late challenge for medals. The first four teams were covered by less than a minute. It had been tight but I'd managed my first back loaded team to victory. The unsung hero of the day was Woodford team manager Terry McCarthy who had 44 runners on the day - their A team had narrowly missed out on medals and one look at stalwart

Bertie Powell's face told you how much that hurt - but as a demonstration of depth, I can't remember anything more impressive.

The new face in our team was Wayne Bell, who had been living in Stratford and had turned up at the track one midweek evening earlier in the winter. I was in a meeting at the time but was called out, but thankfully I realised that a good club athlete was living in Newham and he wanted to join the club. It soon became clear that Wayne wasn't only ultra reliable and willing to turn out for the club in any circumstance, but he was also massively enthusiastic with plenty of contacts in the sport and ideas for moving us forward. To this day I remain indebted to Wayne for the selfless work he's carried out behind the scenes as well as for his performances in Beagles colours. But some of the racehorses he's part owned could have bankrupted me if I was a heavy gambler.

We concluded the season at Sutton Park where we finished 5th in the national 12 stage road relay. We worked our way through over the twelve stages, and Mitchy's run on Leg 11 elevated us to 4th and briefly seemed to have given us a chance of medals but Tipton were clear winners followed by Leeds and Notts. Our team was Grime, Shane, Dawes, Hepples, Laws, Baddick, Stone, Gayle, Ellis, Reynolds, Mitchinson, Major.

It was the London Olympics year and so work was manic. I went to the BUSA Champs in the new Olympic Stadium in early May and had the opportunity to familiarise myself with the stadium in great detail. Quickly I became an expert in how to get from the warm-up track to trackside, the location of the mixed zone and press area, and the best outlets for buying a fast cup of coffee. The BUSA Champs were the official trial event for the Olympics - a chance to tease out any gremlins - but it turned out there was to be another trial event. There were numerous highlights that summer. Newham and Essex Beagles had twelve athletes selected for the Games which I think must be a record for a British athletics club. For the record, the dozen were Abdul Buhari (discus), James Ellington (200m), Mo Farah (5000m, 10,000m), Moumin Geele (5000m - Djibouti), Robbie Grabarz (High Jump), Erison Hurtault (400m - Dominica), Steve Lewis (Pole Vault), Lee Merrien (Marathon), Christine Ohuruogu (400m, 4x400m), Asha Philip (4x100m), Chris Tomlinson (Long Jump), Rabah Yousef (400m - Sudan). If Beagles were a country, we would have finished seventh in the final medal table for Track and Field with two gold medals (Mo), one silver medal (Christine Ohuruogu - 400m) and one bronze medal (Robbie Grabarz - High Jump).

Earlier in the summer, Keith Gerrard finished 9th in the European Championships 10,000 metres in Helsinki. One absentee from the Olympics was James Shane. Having cemented his position as the top 1500 metres runner in Britain in 2011, he succumbed to a calf injury early in the summer and missed the opportunity to qualify. Sadly his last full track season was 2013 when breathing problems at the World Championship trials at Birmingham curtailed his season. I'd love to see him racing again because he's as exciting a middle distance runner as I've seen in Britain in the last ten years, but the years pass us by so fast that maybe James won't be seen on the track again.

About four weeks before the Olympics started I was asked to put together fields of athletes to compete in about a dozen events in the Olympic Stadium, just after the opening ceremony. With the track and field due to start after the first week of the Olympics, the idea was to give the officials a chance to familiarise themselves with the stadium and have a full rehearsal before the main event. The next four weeks were arduous as every athlete competing in the event had to supply personal details so that LOCOG could carry out a security check. In total, nearly 150 people were put through this process. It wasn't easy. I stuck to inviting London based athletes who wanted to compete in the Olympic Stadium (who wouldn't?) as there were no travel expenses available and Londoners would have a better understanding of the perils of travel by public transport in the capital. This wasn't the time to get into detailed conversations with athletes about the best place to park near to Stratford - there were parking restrictions in force throughout East London so public transport was the only sensible way to access the Olympic Park.

To simplify the process, I contacted Geoff Morphitis (Shaftesbury Barnet), Gladys Bird (Woodford Green with Essex Ladies), Ray Gibbons (Enfield Haringey), Steve Bosley (Herne Hill) and Tim Mundle /Rowan Griffiths (Beagles) to line up athletes from their clubs to compete. All of the above are reliable and good athletics people who could be depended on. I filled out the other spots with invites from my list of contacts. The event itself was a lot of fun. The stadium was practically empty but the announcers practiced as if there were 60,000 there. Sam Farah narrowly got the better of Rory Chesser in the steeplechase (both running personal bests) and took off on a lap of honour waving to the imaginary crowd. Mark Findlay was interviewed after winning the 100 metres in a new stadium record - the record lasted about a week until Usain Bolt had a say in matters. I think everyone who competed had a great time, and the officials seemed grateful for the opportunity to have a proper run through.

Through my job, I was also tasked with distributing about 700 tickets for the Olympics, and about 1500 tickets for the Paralympics to London clubs that were affiliated to England Athletics. The more athletes who were registered with England Athletics, the more tickets a club received. Tony Shiret did a wonderful job of devising an equitable distribution scheme and then splitting the tickets accordingly. The logistics were horrendous, and we ended up hiring a room at a hotel near Kings Cross and inviting the clubs to send a representative to collect their tickets within a ten hour window. Generally, the offer was well received. Some clubs held a lottery for the tickets whilst others decided to reward their volunteers who had been helping out behind the scenes for many years.

Through my work, I received a few tickets for athletics sessions as well as being allocated tickets through the general ballot. I boxed clever wherever I could by choosing sessions which I thought would be less popular and thus increasing my chance of getting a ticket. I was lucky to get a ticket through work for Super Saturday (or was it Stupendous Saturday?) when Britain won three gold medals and the stadium erupted. A personal highlight for me was having a ticket for a morning session when Moumin Geele qualified for the final of the 5000 metres - I was on my feet shouting him down that home straight.

Everyone wanted a ticket to see Usain Bolt in the 100 metres but I figured that you'd see him for twice as long in the 200 metres so opted for a ticket for the Thursday. That worked well because I not only got to see Bolt, but also saw Rudisha break the world record in the 800 metres. For me, that was the outstanding race and performance of the Olympics, though I suspect most of the spectators that night will remember it for seeing Bolt. Therein lay one of the quandaries when Athletics becomes a hot ticket for the general public. It should be pointed out straightaway that Athletics isn't often a hot ticket, so it's perhaps a welcome issue when it occurs.

People involved in the sport on a daily or weekly basis enjoy watching the Olympics as an exercise in seeing the most talented athletes in the world lock horns, and there is a pleasure in seeing exceptional performances. I don't want to sound like a particularly stuffy member of the athletics cognoscenti, but was it really necessary for the more casual Athletics fans at the Olympics to be catered for by constant pop music? Would it not have been possible to fill the time between races with something other than a mixture of Rihanna with the dreaded Mexican Wave? Maybe let the crowd watch some field events? I'm old enough to remember the Mexican Wave from the 1986 World Cup. It was tedious then as well. I also tired of the clichés from the announcers - high jumpers like rhythmic clapping we were told in the stadium. No, most high jumpers don't like rhythmic clapping. Take it from me as an ex high jumper. As a spectator of many sports (football, basketball, speedway etc) I do however like to be told who is competing. Usually this peculiar demand is met by the promoting club or organisation producing a programme. Not so at the 2012 Olympics. All that mattered was identification of any British athletes to meet the crazed jingoistic desires of the home supporters. Take it from me; Brexit had its origins at the 2012 Olympics/Paralympics. The Games were massively successful from a British view point and the organisation, and delivery was wonderful. The demand for tickets was incredible and there was a real feel good atmosphere.

The most overworked word prior, during and after the Games was "legacy". Everybody had a different view of what this meant. Legacy of what? For whom? Was it about regeneration of a derelict corner of East London? The bequest of a world class stadium to West Ham United? An increase in participation in sport by young people? An increase in middle aged people taking exercise? An improvement in performance levels in Olympic sports? The spoof documentary *Twenty Twelve* (starring Hugh Bonneville, Jessica Hynes et al) was superbly written and clearly had its finger on the pulse of the misuse and misunderstanding of "legacy" by featuring rival posts in the organising committee of Head of Legacy and Head of Sustainability. As a generalised point, there wasn't enough thought prior to the Games on what legacy was desired, so one shouldn't be surprised if fewer legacies were achieved than desired. But I do wonder if Boris Johnson and other politicians took heart from 2012 and decided to pitch for Brexit as a result.

Athletics approach to 2012 Games legacy was a mixture of the good, the bad, and the well intended and the poorly conceived. For Newham and Essex Beagles, there were (and are) many positives. As we have seen, the club was unusually well represented at the Games themselves. The local Council had initially envisaged finding and training local young

athletes with a view to some of these recruits appearing at the 2012 Olympics. It was a well funded scheme too, but it didn't prove a success. However, it was clear from the time that London was awarded the 2017 World Championships that a new warm-up track would be needed since the warm-up track for 2012 was going to be removed after the Games to make way for a Crossrail marshalling depot. The new warm-up track has now been laid. It's located next to the West Ham shop, and immediately adjacent to the stadium. It's possible that the club will have opportunities to use the track between now and the World Champs and that a more permanent move will take place in October 2017. The club will also have the use of the 'clubhouse' facility next to the track which will act as the Call Room during the World Champs.

It's a great location and the Park is now attracting lots of visitors and is a popular venue for joggers and runners. The club will need to tap into this catchment athletics population. The club continues to provide volunteers for big events in the stadium, and we will become the custodians for the sport in the Olympic Park during the major part of the year. There also remains the distinct possibility that the club could host British League fixtures in the main stadium. Change is a difficult thing but I believe the club moving its headquarters to Stratford is a wonderful opportunity and one that I hope to see happen.