

A major signing and a first team win....

There were a couple of unexpected spin-offs from our visit to Milton Keynes for the Sothern 12 stage. At the end of a long afternoon, the teams crowded into a lecture theatre at the Open University to attend the medal presentation. As Beagles were called up to collect their silver medals, the youngest team member, Jamal Mohamed, looked particularly happy as he received his medal - the first he'd ever won in the sport. Jamal's command of English was poor, and he was unassuming but it was obvious that a seed had been sewn, and the following week's report in the Newham Recorder by Ben Kosky was written with the intention of making Jamal think about his running. Within a few weeks, Jamal had asked Mitchy how often he trained. Twice a day said Dave....so Jamal started running twice a day. Just like that - no planned or gradual increase in training volume - Jamal went from running irregularly to undertaking the workload of a serious runner. By the following winter the benefits of the increase in training were obvious and a trip to the Hillingdon 5 opened his eyes to the possibility of racing more often. It became the norm for Jamal to race every weekend, and on one bank holiday weekend, he raced in three different 10km road races. Running became part of Jamal's life, and he became a very good runner. He's still running today, albeit not in Beagles' colours, and remains as popular and committed as ever.

About midway through the Southern 12 stage, I was approached by a runner who asked if he could speak to me as he was thinking of joining a club that would be competitive at the major area and national races. He was about to introduce himself but I beat him to the draw - "you're Stuart Major" I said confidently. Then I introduced myself - no reason why he should know who I was, but every reason for me knowing him. Stuart explained that he was happy at his club, South London Harriers, but felt that he was missing out a bit at races such as the road relays where SLH were struggling a bit to get the numbers or to be competitive.

His pedigree as a runner was well known. Highly respected in South London and Surrey, he was a top class club runner with wins and performances to back up his reputation. He was also very impressive as a person - intelligent, mature, respectful and utterly reliable. After he said he'd like to join, the move went through quickly - Stuart followed the process to the letter and was competing for us on the track inside a couple of months. I was so very pleased. Any club would have been happy to have been chosen by a runner as good as Stuart Major. I'm not sure why he chose Beagles to this day - other than Kairn Stone, I don't think he knew any of the runners at the time - but I like to think that he subsequently felt he'd made the right choice.

One of the things which I liked most about Stuart was his ability to judge his own form so accurately. Much of my work as a team manager was carried out on the phone in the evenings and at the weekend. I liked to keep in touch with all of the runners to find out what shape they were in. Before a race I'd often ask a runner what sort of shape they were in. Sometimes this led to a complex description of sessions completed in the previous weeks, a report on haemocrite levels, mileage run in the last week etc, before the runner would summarise the shape they were in. I became good at working out the optimists and pessimists in the team. The optimists would tell me they were flying and ready to run 13:50 for 5000metres, and

would then run the equivalent of 14:50. The pessimists did it the other way round. Stuart Major was straight down the middle, and after a while I used to tease him a little. How do you think you'll go at Aldershot Stuart? Well, I think I can run about 18.35 would come the reply. After the race, I'd look at the individual times and Stuart would always be within 5 seconds of his prediction. It was uncanny, but over the years I learned to use Stuart's judgement to the team's benefit. He was a very cool runner, who didn't get over-excited and try to do something which he knew he wasn't capable of, and so I put him into relays at pressure points where the team needed someone who would deliver, and Stuart always did deliver.

His debut on the roads for the club came at the 2002 Southern 6 stage road relay, where we picked up bronze medals. After Mark Warmby had run well on the opening leg, we got into a spot of bother as it turned out that Kris Bowditch was in poor shape. Mick Woods of Aldershot was typically forthright in his view of his run "he didn't try a f***ing inch out there". My view was that Kris had said he'd run when he was less fit than he should have been - something he'd found out very quickly when he raced. Stuart and Kairn retrieved the situation a little, before Mitchy pulled us through with one of the best individual runs for Beagles in the last decade and a bit. "I'm going for this on the first lap" he promised, and he was true to his word. He was breathing out of his backside on the second lap but Mitchy was never one to give less than 100%, and we picked up medals from the race for the second successive year. We were tidy too at Sutton Park, finishing 5th, before just missing out on the medals at Mansfield where we were 4th as Warmby just failed to hang on to Chris Thompson of Aldershot on the last leg.

This was an important set of results. With Stuart added to our team, we were now becoming very consistent, and a team which was always in the hunt for medals. I take the view that on the day of any of the big road and cross country races, there will be about eight clubs that believe they have a chance of medals, and of those there will be about three clubs that believe they can win. By 2002-3, Beagles had elevated themselves to being one of the eight medal chasing clubs. But could we take to final step and start winning titles?

Looking at the fixture calendar, the race that caught my eye for a 'smash and grab' first win was the South of England Cross Country Champs. In any three year period, this race will be held at Parliament Hill, but this was the third year and the selected venue was Bicton Collegenear Exeter. This had caused a bit of consternation, particularly amongst some of the London clubs or their members. They were loathe to take on the long, tiring and costly journey. Years of studying geography made me cautiously optimistic that we could get a team down to East Devon and back in less than a week, and with Kairn, Mitchy, Andy Robinson and Stuart available, we'd have the makings of a good team. I'd stayed many times previously at the athletics-friendly Saunton Sands hotel in North Devon, and after discussion with the runners, I booked rooms there for two nights.

Our prospects improved when former 3:35 1500 man Paul Larkins got in touch to say he was reasonably fit and fancied doing the race, and then Kris Bowditch confirmed his availability. But on the downside, Kairn had been injured since before Christmas and had to be considered

unavailable. So the sixth man for the race was Mark Wilkinson, a Kiwi who had been living in Newham for the previous year or so. Mark was as strong as an ox and loved racing for the club, but there's always a feeling of vulnerability when you go to a six to score race with just six men on the start line - there's just no margin for error or misfortune. The team travelled down early and uneventfully, though it took Kris five hours to travel the last ten miles. Just possibly, he may have found the bright lights of nearby Barnstaple. The team warmed up and then started putting on numbers in a tent, when Kairn arrived with his Dad - he was living in Torquay, so had made the journey to watch after doing his first run for weeks in the morning. About 30 minutes before the race, he wandered across to me and asked for his number. I can remember it so clearly. Nothing was said. I think he had surveyed the situation, seen we were pretty strong, and reckoned that he just might be able to help.

The race went like a dream for us as a team. Mitchy picked up an individual medal in 3rd, Andy was excellent in 7th - just one place in front of Kairn (!) with Stuart 23rd. Kris had started the race near the front but he began to fade worryingly which was when we had a small stroke of fortune. Billed as being a nine mile race, the overall win went to John Downes in a shade over 34 minutes. Now Downesy was a fearsome competitor and a great cross country runner but even he wasn't quite that quick. The 'short' course worked in Kris' favour and he came 33rd, with Paul closing the team in 74th. After a short wait we received a tip off that we'd scooped the team title, and comfortably at that. Even better, our seventh man, Mark Wilkinson, didn't miss out either. One of the enduring traditions of this race is that the seventh man in the winning team wins the Perseverance trophy, so Mark went home with a rather handsome trophy to show to Heather, his fiancé (and now his wife). After the obligatory medal ceremony, we returned to Saunton Sands for a celebratory meal, and the following morning several of the team took advantage of the hotel's location to run along the beach and into Braunton Burrows sand dunes. But not Kris Bowditch, who celebrated with a few dozen stubby bottles of French beer, which led to us having to clean up his room hurriedly, which led to me losing my glasses, which led to me having to drive back to London wearing prescription sunglasses in the middle of winter, until it got dark when I couldn't really see much at all. It was a memorable weekend.

Coming next - consolidation and the curse of 'Muttley'....