

## **Additions and deletions:**

Some parts of being a team manager are a pain. None more so than entering teams for races. It's getting a bit better, but even now race organisers tend to request information which can be more readily acquired via the England Athletics athlete registration scheme. Over the years, I have memorised dates of birth, full names, mobile phone numbers, registration numbers and addresses for Beagles distance runners, but when push comes to shove, and you have two hours until the closing date, it's still best to fall back on a Word document which hopefully has all of the information in one place. The BUPA/Affinity 10km is the worst from a team manager's point of view, as the race organisers send out detailed instructions for runners before the day of the race, and demand a phone number, address, email address and predicted time. The penalty for not completing this information is that everything is sent to the team manager by default, and then has to be redirected at great expense.

Another dubious pleasure of being a team manager is having to absorb the cost of team entries. This never seems so bad when road or cross country relays are being entered - generally the cost is about £8-£9 per runner. But for the big cross country races such as the Southern or the National, it's possible to enter a huge list of athletes, whilst knowing that three quarters of those entered won't run on the day. I've spent over £220 entering senior runners for the Southern when only four runners have turned up on the day. The fault does not always lie with the runners though. The entry closing date for the Southern is generally seven weeks before the race - before the middle of December. Now this may seem sensible given the amount of mail that is in circulation at this time of the year, but I suspect the main driver is that the organising body still deems it necessary to scrutinise entries at length, and perhaps lacks confidence in the simple capabilities of most reliable software results and entry packages. The National cross country is another race with an improbably early closing date - usually before the end of the first week in January for a race which is traditionally held on the last Saturday of February.

For the team manager, there's an element of calculated gamble in entering athletes for these races. The first group of runners to be entered will generally be the 'regulars' - the guys who have been turning out all winter and would only miss the big races for a good reason. Then there are the guys who have declared an early interest in the big races. Next I'll look at the probability of certain runners turning out in certain races. The Southern cross country is usually held over nine miles (15km) and is often at Parliament Hill - not one for a 1500 specialist like Frank Baddick, and not a race for those who have never fancied the delights of that patch of North London. For the spring road relays, I'll be considering who is running London Marathon, or who is going warm weather training - that's particularly important given the maximum number of athletes that can be entered - no point in wasting spaces on an entry form with athletes who are highly unlikely to compete. This can go wrong of course - for many years, Ian Grime didn't run on the country - and then the time arose when he decided he wanted to run, but I'd left him off our entry list. Plenty of less successful clubs cover this sort of omission by running someone under the name of another entrant. It's not an option which is open to Beagles - our runners are known, especially someone like Ian Grime. There's one exception that I do make for the national road relays and cross country - I'll enter

Mo Farah on the off chance that he fancies a low key fitness test....he never has done yet though.

There's another difficulty for the team manager when entering teams. Athletes don't tend to "retire" and formally announce that's what they're doing. The first time I was told by an athlete that he'd retired came in early 2001. For my first season as the club's British League team manager (2000), we had a very good 200 metres specialist called Nigel Stickings. That year, he medalled in the Southern Champs and reduced his personal best to a low 21 seconds. I rang him the following winter to see how his training was going, and he explained that the previous summer had been great and that he felt he'd fulfilled his potential and that there was no further improvement to come. His training the previous year had been hard and consistent, and as a married man with a young child, he felt it was time to focus on his family and his career. I wasn't put out. Nigel had been reliable and was a good guy, and now he was giving me a mature explanation of a rational decision that he had made.

Looking back on my own athletics career, it ended in 1999 when I had a major back operation. After the operation, I went through a period of rehabilitation and regained a level of fitness, but when I tried to high jump, I couldn't clear 1.50m in the high jump, having cleared 1.75m in my last competition before the operation. I'd lost all of the strength in my take off leg and I was 44 years old. I wasn't going to the 2000 Olympics and I wasn't going to get anywhere near my previous level of performance without a huge amount of training. I'd started high jumping 25 years previously, by jumping 1.70m and that had been a benchmark for me of decent club standard high jumping. Now that I couldn't manage that height, it was time to stop. But I didn't actually announce that to anyone, and on one sorry occasion at Jarrow in 2002, I put on my spikes and triple jumped and hurdled for the club when it was short of numbers for a British League match - it wasn't a pretty sight but I did pick up a few points.

So there's no criticism from me of athletes calling it a day but not telling me. From my own experience the decision to stop competing by an athlete is seldom made after a few minutes of contemplation. The decision evolves over a period of time, or is made after a period of inactivity during which an athlete finds out that life continues quite pleasantly without the sweat and grunt of regular training, and that there is a life beyond Athletics. Even the pressure and achievement of competition can be replaced. For me, the substitute for competition was team managing but for others it may be a round of golf, or cycling the route of the Tour de France without EPO or blood doping.

I pride myself usually on reading between the lines and on being a good listener, but I do have a weak spot for runners in my teams. I don't give up on them. If they've been injured or unavailable for the last 18 months, I still choose to believe that they're close to returning to competition. Looking back on my appearance records for 2010 and 2011, there were plenty of 'notes' saying "no reply to messages" or "may race Stevenage" but, more telling was the profusion of x against several names. Rob Cole, Louis Jones, Mark Warmby, Andy Robinson, Tom Bilham had all ended their competitive days and Steve Hepples had become a

more occasional feature in our teams. John Clarke seemed to have succumbed to injury too, but he was to enjoy a last hurrah in March 2011.

Meanwhile, Mo Farah was in the process of exchanging his South West London base for Oregon, which took him out of the equation so far as we were concerned. Part of the deal for Mo was a kit contract with Nike which would prevent him from wearing our club kit without permission. This caused him a problem at the World Championship Trials at Birmingham in July 2011, where he was required to wear his club vest. He'd flown in from Oregon to race, but left his club vest behind. I was sat at home preparing to watch the trials on television when the phone rang at 1.30pm on Sunday -the final day of the trials - it was Mo. He'd been told that he wouldn't be allowed to race if he didn't have a club vest. I have my suspicions who told him this, and even at the time I thought it was cobblers - UKA weren't seriously going to prevent the main attraction of the Trials from running, and I'd seen enough athletes over the years wearing GB vests to feel there was a solution closer to Alexander Stadium than Bob Smith sat in Ashford, Middlesex. But Mo was fretting and he wasn't going to listen to me instructing him to tell UKA to sort it out.

I don't much enjoy BBC athletics coverage - too much chat, too much jargon, too many replays, not much field event coverage, little insight, too many ex international athletes struggling to string together a meaningful sentence - an entire afternoon of coverage can easily be condensed into 20 minutes with astute use of the replay and fast forward buttons on a remote control. So I decided to forsake listening to Colin Jackson, Denise Lewis, Brendan Foster and others droning on about nothing in particular, and I set off for Birmingham with a brand new Beagles vest for Mo to wear, and some gaffer tape in case he decided he wanted to black out our nice ASICS logo. I made good time and pulled in to a park near the stadium at 4 p.m. I'd arranged to meet Mo at the warm-up area at 4.30 p.m. He drifted in at about 5 p.m, and told me he wouldn't need the Beagles vest after all. UKA had agreed that he could wear his Oregon Track Club vest. I felt like a complete mug. I'd bombed up the M40, M42 and M5 to bring Mo a vest which he didn't really need and now I had to go home. In vain I asked UKA if they had any spare tickets. I was a bit peed off to be honest. I sat down and had a cup of coffee, and borrowed a coach's ticket from an athlete I knew which enabled me to see a couple of races including James Shane putting in a superlative performance to win the 1500 metres. That cheered me up as I trooped back outside to return the complimentary before driving back home. Mo's wife Tania rang me late that night. She'd heard what had happened and I think it didn't feel quite right to her. She thanked me properly for what I'd done which did make me feel better - a heartfelt apology goes a long way. A few weeks later, Mo picked up his first World Championship gold medal.

We didn't know it at the time, but we'd also seen the last of Moumin Geele in a Beagles vest....unless he comes back to Britain. It had been a long struggle for Moumin but he was finally given the right to remain in Britain. With that right came a National Insurance number which enabled him to work, to register with a doctor and a dentist, and he was also accorded the right to travel anywhere in the world except Somalia. He hadn't seen most of his family for seven or eight years, and so he travelled to Africa for that reason. Whilst there, he was contacted by the Djibouti athletics federation. Djibouti is bordered by Somalia, Ethiopia and

Eritrea and was formerly known as French Somaliland. Its population is less than a million, and of course 'borders' don't exist per se, and with the hope of competing internationally now a more certain prospect, I think Moumin decided to compete for Djibouti. I didn't know that he was going to Africa, but looking back on events, Moumin bought me a tie shortly before he left the country which I like to think was his way of saying thank you. He rang me again before he ran in the final of the 5000 metres at the London Olympics and I wished him well. I'd got a bit excited as he qualified for the final, knowing that he'd followed a long and difficult route. I think Newham and Essex Beagles helped him on that route too.

Losing this many athletes in a relatively short period of time was likely to cause us some real problems, but we continued to flourish during the 2010-11 winter season. I just carried on getting the strongest team out that I could. September 2010, so it's time to go to Aldershot. We finished 3rd with a team of Dave Mitchinson, Nathan Riding, Frank Baddick, Kairn Stone, Kevin Skinner and Rory Chesser. Kev was flying that day, and was our quickest man, and it was good for Nathan to pick up a medal - on a previous visit to Aldershot his ankle blew up after twisting it on his warm up. October 2010; Sutton Park and we were 6th in our defence of the National six stage title. November 2010; Mansfield and 7th in the national cross country relays with a team of Skinner, Chesser, James Shane and Riding. January 2011; Parliament Hill and 7th in the Southern cross country, led home by Kevin in 19th. February 2011; Alton Towers where just four Beagles ran in the National, with James Ellis finishing an excellent 39th. Conditions at Alton Towers were frankly awful, with standing water on several parts of the course. Liam Markham came over from Ireland to run the junior race and sat in my car afterwards in a state of quiet shock. In his words, there was no way they would have run in Ireland with such a lack of basic ancillary services - there were no changing rooms, no running water, and refreshments were restricted to a couple of burger vans and you had to wade through six inches of mud to get to those. People were travelling hundreds of miles to run in a national championship and then going home encased in mud, soaking wet and with no prospect of getting changed or having something to eat until they got home. But of course you have to be tough to run cross country....true, but some rudimentary facilities wouldn't go amiss.

Our final finisher at Alton Towers was Kelvin Goodwin - he ran himself into the soft, muddy ground and spent thirty minutes in a St John's ambulance tent at the end of the race. Kelvin had finished the 2010 track season by featuring for the club in the 4 x 100 metres and 4 x 400 metres relays at Copthall in a big Cup match. He was a sub 52 seconds 400 metres runner, and had spent years training hard and trying to improve over the one lap event. The received wisdom was that he needed to lengthen his stride to run faster. I always felt this was tosh - Kelvin was short, and you run the way you run... you can't learn to lengthen your stride, but like everyone else I missed something important about Kelvin. He'd also run some 800 metres in 2010 with some success so I think he'd worked a bit on his aerobic capacity.

Nevertheless, I was surprised to see Kelvin when the 2010-11 cross country season commenced at Claybury for the Met League. I was even more surprised after the first lap to see him running comfortably in about 90th position. After two laps, he looked a bit more distressed and he glanced across to me to ask how many more laps. There was one more lap,

and Kelvin finished 102nd out of 338 runners. It was obvious to me - Kelvin was quick enough on the track but he had an engine and his pitter patter style of running was perfectly suited to distance running. That winter, he improved to a 50th position in a Met League, 301st at the National, and the following summer he ran 4:04 for 1500 metres and represented Essex in an Inter Counties match. Sometimes an athlete needs someone with a experience and instincts to guide them towards the events in which they'll be best. Frequently I go to our home track and watch dozens of male and female athletes endeavouring to be the next Usain Bolt, but few of them seem prepared to branch out and discover if they can hurdle, or long jump, or throw the discus. Kelvin was 30 when he found out he was better suited to distance running, and he enjoyed success until his running was curtailed by a knee injury.

John Beattie had also joined us in January 2010, whilst finishing his studies at University of Tulsa. Later, in the summer, he ran 13:42.03 for 5000 metres at Mt Sac Relays and 28:32.31 for 10,000 metres at Palo Alto. John originated from the picturesque, high altitude Hampshire town of Eastleigh. His first club was Southampton, where I went to school, and I tend to keep an eye on things down there, where I know a couple of the distance coaches, Tony Fern and Rod Lock. I'd seen John run at the World cross country in Edinburgh in 2008, and I knew he had good knee lift and a pleasing on the eye free running style. He had joined Winchester when he was coached by Nick Anderson, but when he returned to Hampshire at the end of 2009 for a catch up with his family, the distance running side of Winchester was falling apart, and I think James Ellis suggested he had a word with me. It took a while for John to make his debut with Beagles. He was selected by England to compete in the Delhi Commonwealth Games and he took up the invitation rather than running the Southern six stage.....I'm still baffled by this decision. But John was a key signing for us at just the right time.

Meanwhile, in Newham, a young Somali born runner, Harun Abdi, was making decent progress. There had been rumours for some time of a useful young runner who occasionally came onto the radar at local schools events. He joined the club and progressed well at first. Without pulling up any trees in age group championships, he nevertheless had several top ten finishes in the Met League and picked up a silver medal at the English Schools in the 2000 metres steeplechase. I did worry about some of the things that he told me though. He seemed almost impatient to make a big breakthrough and reach the top. From conversations with Harun and others, there was a recurrent theme that he was doing sessions with two or three different groups and coaches per week. That's very difficult for a coach if they don't know what's going on. Occasionally he'd have a bad time in a race too and would then claim an injury. On one occasion he failed to finish in a race at Parliament Hill. I was summoned over the tannoy to speak to the race referee who informed that one of my athletes was injured somewhere over the back of the course. So I set off to find Harun as the mid-winter gloom descended. After fifteen minutes a St John's ambulance car approached me - they were also looking for Harun. Eventually we found him sitting under a tree, so we loaded him into the car and returned to the finish area. The next day I found out that he'd been training on the hills in Epping Forest, so I presumed it wasn't a bad injury. By the first few months of 2011, Harun was ready in my estimation to make an impact with our senior teams. Unfortunately, by the end of 2011, he'd left the club for pastures new.

If Harun's talent was obvious, the same couldn't be said for another Newham based athlete from the same period. The story goes that Jad El-Houssami came along to the club after a discussion with a lecturer at college who had been helping him with his application to go to University. The form asked for 'outside interests' and so Jad hopefully suggested 'running'. His lecturer advised him to join an athletic club in case he was asked anything at an interview. So he came along to Beagles and the following Saturday he turned up at Claybury to run a Met League cross country. He was nearly last. In his third race, on the tough course that is Alexandra Palace, I became worried when the race officials started dismantling the ropes at the finish with Jad still out on the course. I walked along to the big hill underneath the Palace and stared upwards hoping to see Jad. There wasn't a blade of grass to be seen on the hill. It was a steep, muddy morass. Then it happened. A figure appeared at the top of the final descent, picking his way gingerly through the unforgiving conditions. It was Jad, who when he reached me declared that this was "the hardest cross country course he'd run on." I liked Jad immensely. He kept on coming back for more, and he seemed to really like running. In his final Met League race of 2010-11, Jad put away 15 runners. That summer, I watched him finishing a session at the track and I could see that he'd improved. In 2011-12, he started finishing just below halfway in the Met League, and the following winter, he achieved his first top 100 placing. Jad was very bright, sometimes intense, and he had the heart of a lion.

The omens didn't look promising in March 2011, as we approached the date for our defence of the Southern 12 stage title. We were going to be without Baddick, Shane, Abdi, Grime, Sam Farah plus the athletes above who had retired. Even Stuart Major was injured. Then Olly Laws and Kairn Stone dropped out with injuries closer to the date of the race. John Clarke had retired but I was keen to keep him involved. In his twenties John had been a good non-league footballer, and he had a dash of hardness and competitiveness which sometimes athletes lack. His football days had given him experience of the need to stick together as a team, and I reckoned he could make a real contribution to the management and organisation of our teams. About three days before the race, I rang John who made the schoolboy error of telling me that he'd been out for a few runs in the preceding two weeks with no serious pain or problems afterwards. I suggested he bring along a vest "just in case".

I felt that one of our key runners on the day was likely to be James Ellis who was in a rich vein of form. James was selected to run in the Home Countries cross country international on the day before the 12 stage. Good lad that he is, James said he'd run in Antrim and get an early flight back to run at Milton Keynes the following day. I set off on the Saturday night to collect Chris Mackay from Luton Airport and take him to a hotel next to the course, before driving home. Soon after setting off I fielded a call from James. In the words of Robert Burns who I think may have been Shettleston Harriers team manager in the late 18th century:

The best laid scheme o' mice and men gang aft a-gley (often go awry) an' leave us nought but grief and pain for promised joy.

Quite so Rabbie me old mucker. James was injured and wouldn't be running the next day. Drat, cripes and blooming heck I said quietly to myself, or words to that effect. At 10 p.m. I sat in the car park at the Milton Keynes Holiday Inn reflecting on this latest low blow and

wondering who would be running in the A team the following day. A shadowy figure glided past in the distance. Someone running on a Saturday night in Milton Keynes? Perhaps I could sign them up for the following day? The style looked familiar - pronounced forward lean, easy looking but powerful stride. It was Mackay getting the travel out of his legs. Ah well, at least he seemed to be ready for tomorrow.

By the time I'd driven home that night, I'd decided that we would be ok to finish top eight so long as nobody else dropped out of the team. Conservatively, I reckoned we were good to run about four hours and twenty three minutes (we'd run four hours and seven minutes one year previously which indicates the relative strength of the two teams) which wouldn't give us a shout of the medals. Just to keep things interesting, I decided to frontload the team, as I had back in 2000, when we'd been 2nd after five legs but wound up in 23rd. The first nine legs would be Mitchinson, Riding, Bryn Reynolds, Hepples, Mackay on leg 5, then Pike, Chesser, Sterling and Skinner. Ally Donaldson had asked if he could run for the B team as he'd done some running and was still based just up the road in Loughborough - he turned up and was given a number for Leg 10. John Clarke turned up - I needed another long leg and (bless his cotton socks) he agreed to run Leg 11. That left a last leg runner to find. I figured we'd be well out of the medals and there would be gaps so just a case of putting someone in to close the race out. I chose Kelvin Goodwin in preference to Leigh Crispin and Andre Duque - there were no other runners left in the B team. Just before the race started, Ally wandered over with a wry smile on his face and suggested that I'd given him an A team number by mistake. No mistake Ally!!

The early part of the race was relatively uneventful. Mitchy brought us home in 3rd after the opening leg, Nathan had a good run, Bryn and Steve were about par for the course and we were 3rd after four legs about 90 seconds down on the leaders, Aldershot. About what I expected, though I'd revised our finishing time slightly - maybe 4:21.00 but still well away from the medals. Occasionally, just occasionally, something unexpected happens in sport. Leicester win the Premier League, a British male wins Wimbledon, a British female reaches the third round - you know the sort of stuff. I'd put down Chris Mackay for something in the region of 24.45 for a long leg at Milton Keynes. I was wildly inaccurate. It was the equivalent of saying that Arsenal should finish in the top 15 in the Premier League next season - not exactly showing a lot of faith. Chris Mackay blasted Milton Keynes. He ran the 6th fastest long leg of all time at the Open University course of 23.36 and suddenly Aldershot's lead was down to eight seconds. I had to look twice at my watch before muttering "that was very quick". I think Mark Warmby's run in the 2006 National cross country relays is the best relay leg I've seen by a Beagle in my time as manager. Chris Mackay ran him very close for that accolade. The whole dynamics of the race changed and the rest of the team knew they were going to be further up the field than had been anticipated.

Pikey kept the ball rolling with a cracker as we moved into a narrow lead, and then Rory Chesser and Scott Sterling extended our lead to about 30 seconds. Kev Skinner ran a 24.32 long leg which wasn't his best round this course but the challenge to our lead evaporated and we were left two and a half minutes clear at the end of leg 9. This was definitely not in the plan, but Ally Donaldson ran within his fitness capabilities and even extended our lead as

John Clarke prepared for the sort of pressure run which would have been unthinkable for him two weeks previously. It dawned on us that the other teams were either making a meal of putting us away or they were not terribly strong. Ally and John had both run quicker than I dared hope for and now there was just converted 400 metres runner Kelvin Goodwin to run. The rest of the lads were out on the course by now, and Kelvin's lead was enough as Highgate made a belated attempt to eat into our lead.

You may have noticed that this race report is much more detailed and longer than many seemingly superior wins. I think Dave Mitchinson described it as the "best win of all" and although that was said in the immediate aftermath of the race, the comment still resonates with me. It was an astonishing win and totally unexpected. I was ecstatic. I can usually mount an argument in my own mind for how we can win a race, but on this occasion I didn't even try. Chris Mackay won a cash prize for the fastest long leg of the day. I gave Steve Hepples a lift to Milton Keynes Station and realised I'd had nothing to drink for six hours as there were no refreshments at the Open University. There was a coffee shop at the entrance to the station and I went in with Chris Mackay - "these are on me" said Chris, with his cheque for fastest leg burning a hole in his pocket. I think Chris was in sub 13.45 shape for a 5000 metres that day. A couple of weeks later he went warm weather training with Scotland and picked up an injury so he never found out his shape over 5000 metres. Chris has always had a lot of humility and it's impossible not to warm to him. One of my favourite memories of him is of going to Castellon for the European Clubs track and field champs. Chris went out for an early morning jog with Keith Gerrard and Frank Baddick. They returned to the hotel after 20 minutes but Chris decided to do a bit more, and got lost, finally returning to the hotel looking bemused and a bit sheepish after two and a half hours. He ran an 8.17 3000 metres later that day.

We were to be without Chris and Kev Skinner when we travelled to Sutton Park for the National 12 stage, and there was no need to draft in Ally Donaldson, John Clarke or Kelvin Goodwin at the last minute. In total, there were seven changes from the team that had covered themselves with glory at Milton Keynes. The team was strong and we were in with a real chance of retaining our title. The preparation got off to a bad start as Harun Abdi arrived 75 minutes after the agreed meeting time at Hounslow West, which meant that Rory Chesser was also kept waiting. I guess that most people can be annoyed by something relatively minor. My pet hate is offering someone a lift, arranging to meet them, and then waiting for the passenger to turn up. For me, it's bad manners. Harun's lateness wasn't the worst I've encountered - that dubious honour belongs to a Beagles sprinter who arrived two hours late for a lift from Shepherd's Bush to Bedford. I had to wait because without the said athlete (initials MA) we wouldn't have had a team.

The race went pretty much to plan as Dave Mitchinson, Scott Sterling and Steve Hepples turned in respectable runs on the first three legs. Then Harun improved our position to 7th which put him back in my good books, despite having covered himself in coconut oil which can block your sweat pores and be detrimental to running well. He'd improved over one minute from the previous year when he ran for an incomplete B team at Sutton Park. Steve Dawes came over from Guernsey and kept the pot boiling on leg 5, at which stage we were

1.44 adrift of the lead. This deficit was drastically reduced on the sixth leg as John Beattie marked his Beagles debut with the third fastest short leg of the day (14.05). So, at the halfway stage we were just 37 seconds off the lead, with a group of runners in the second half with experience of Sutton Park. Rory Chesser, Nathan Riding and Kairn Stone kept us in the medal positions and in contention for the win over the next three legs. On Leg 10, Frank Baddick was second fastest runner but bizarrely slipped to 4th. The medal positions were up for grabs now between Tipton, Birchfield, Morpeth, Notts and ourselves. Mark Warmby ran the eleventh leg for us in what turned out to be his last appearance in a Beagles vest. It was a good run too, as he pulled us back to 3rd just 28 seconds off the lead. At this stage I fancied our chances with just one leg and one runner, James Shane, left to run. I knew that James wouldn't leave anything out in trying to give us the win although he was still a bit of an unknown quantity to observers from other clubs. James ran well too, recording the sixth fastest short leg of the day but Ian Rawlinson of Tipton kept him at bay as James reduced the margin to a tantalising 22 seconds.

Our finish time of 4:10.58 was highly respectable and sometimes good enough to win, but not this time. Our fastest long leg runner, Mark Warmby, was the 20th fastest on the day so it's fair to say we needed a big hitter on a long leg to bring home the winner's trophy. But it was a satisfactory performance to end a consistent winter.