

BEAGLES Road and Cross Country 2000 Onwards - by Bob Smith

A revival in fortunes....

On Saturday 19th September 2015 I was admitted to hospital for an operation which meant that I missed the annual trip to Aldershot with our senior men's road relay team. On the same day the decision was made for NEB not to contest the senior men's race at the South of England six stage road relays on the following day, as we couldn't field a complete a full team. It was the first time I'd missed the race since 2000. Between these dates, I'd been manager of Beagles and our teams had been to Aldershot every year, medalling on nine occasions, including wins in 2006 and 2011.

The 2000 race marked the first appearance by a Beagles team in the area 6 stage for many years. Team manager Bill Metcalfe took a decent team including new signings Jo Corbett, Mark Warmby and Dave Mitchinson to the race and we finished 10th. The fastest Beagle on the day, Ian Grime, had already been with the club for seven years. With qualification for the National 6 stage in the bag, Bill suddenly resigned and I volunteered to take over the reins at the club committee meeting which was held a couple of weeks before Sutton Park. Bill was a smashing bloke – impossible to dislike – but the journeys to Plaistow were becoming wearing for him from his home the other side of Basildon and so he changed clubs.

The upturn in our fortunes on the roads (and later the country) was overdue. The club had a decent roster of distance runners, most of whom had signed for the club for the benefit of top flight British League competition. Warmby, Mitchinson and Andy Robinson were all in their early twenties and had competed against each other as junior steeplechasers. There was a Loughborough based contingent including Grime, Alasdair Donaldson and Denis Murphy, as well as Kairn Stone in Devon and the enigmatic Kris Bowditch from Stoke, who had just represented Great Britain and Northern Ireland in the Sydney Olympics. At that time the club also had a decent junior middle distance group based in Newham and coached by Derek Darnell, the best distance coach at the club for the last thirty years. Derek later moved to Huntingdon with his family but still retains an allegiance to the club and turns out for us in the Met League when he can. The best of the juniors was Liban Sammater who had placed 2nd behind Chris Thompson in the Southern Under 20 1500 metres.

I had taken over management of the club's British League team for the summer of 2000, and midway through the season I was contacted by an athlete who was looking to join a club that matched and could meet his personal ambitions. The athlete in question, Dave Mitchinson, was already a highly rated steeplechaser who had captained the Loughborough students cross country team. Speaking to Dave, he was clearly enthusiastic, knowledgeable and passionate about running. There was no point in attempting to pull the wool over his eyes about our recent performances on the roads and country, so I promised him that this would change in the future. This was crucial. Distance runners are not necessarily driven by racing on the track, and in fact many prefer the winter season, so it was important to 'sell' our potential to Mitchy. It was the best piece of work I ever did on the phone as Beagles team manager. Dave Mitchinson was the catalyst for our future success. Without Dave it wouldn't have happened.

The National 6 stage road relay marked a first visit to Sutton Park near Birmingham for Beagles. The team acquitted itself well in torrential rain and heavy winds, finishing 12th with Mitchinson running our fastest leg. Better was to follow as the newly formed team travelled to Mansfield on the first Saturday of November 2000 for the National cross country relays. In a four man race, we knew we had three good runners and the final spot was filled by 800 metres man Garth Watson who agreed to run on the basis that it would be a good way to start

his winter training. Mitchy ran the first leg, just prevailing over Alan Buckley of Gateshead. His run was the fastest of the whole race and earned him selection for the Margate cross country international. Mark Warmby carried us into a 300 metres lead at the halfway point. As he stormed up the finishing straight lead, Garth Watson prepared for the moment he definitely hadn't been expecting - taking over in the lead when he had been expecting a gentle workout. If looks could kill, I'd have been in big trouble! To Garth's credit, he ran an absolute stormer and Kris Bowditch cemented a 4th place finish.

This was an eye catching team performance, which nudged the belief of some of our runners that we could be a force in big races. Just as important, it raised our profile in the distance running fraternity. For me, there was an early experience of irrational and jealous reaction to a little success. Minding my own business reading the results at the end of the afternoon, I was assailed by a stranger telling me that it was a disgrace that Beagles had signed Dave Mitchinson and that we didn't deserve to win anything. Ever. Or words to that effect. It was a bit embarrassing as people gathered round to watch. I decided to show some dignity but finally asked Mr Angry who he was. He identified himself as being from Windsor Slough and Eton and he promised me that there were things in the pipeline and that Beagles would never again beat his club. I'm not sure what heinous crime Mitchy had committed in deciding to join us, but 'the pipeline' soon emerged as Borough of Hounslow amalgamating with the Windsor Slough and Eton club. The Hounslow club had long benefited from the coaching expertise of Conrad Milton and the merger meant that Mo Farah, Mark Draper, Sam Haughian, Mike Simpson and others would be running for Mr Angry in future – quite a windfall.

To be continued.....

Next instalment: -'Some early successes'.