

Consolidation and the curse of Muttley.

Fresh from the Southern success, our next target was the 2003 National which was to be held at Parliament Hill. The team showed one change from Exeter, with Neville Adams coming in as Paul Larkins opted to get his legs massaged-Larks had earned that right over the years. He was nearly as old as me and he didn't owe Beagles a slog round North London.

For anyone reading this who is a serious distance runner, what follows is an exercise in stating the bleedin' obvious, but for those who aren't, it may be an insight into the psyche of a distance runner. It's a snapshot of why they're a bit different to other athletes. Neville had joined us a few months previously, and had been looking forward to running the National. I rang him at the start of the week before the race to check that everything was ok, but I detected a problem by the tone of his voice. He admitted as much "I'm afraid I have to tell you I haven't done a session in weeks" he said, before explaining how busy he'd been at work. I was concerned. Neville was a good runner, and Parliament Hill is no place to race if you're unfit, and if you haven't trained for weeks, well.....the voice at the other end of the phone slipped back into earshot "of course, I've been out for a run every day, and I'll run on Saturday but I won't be as sharp as I'd intended."

I'd failed to understand what Neville was telling me. Here's why. I was a high jumper, who also did a bit of triple jump and could hurdle. I was strictly club standard as an athlete, but I did adopt an athlete's lifestyle. People of a certain age will tell you what they were doing on the day of the original Live Aid in 1985. I'm no different -I did 1.90m at an open meeting at Vansittart Road, Windsor that day -push me a bit harder and I'll guess that Darren Baker of Enfield beat me. I took my athletics seriously, but as I got a bit older, responsibilities at work started to increase and there was a bit less time for training. I was living in Barking by the late 1980's when I joined the Beagles. My regular winter Sunday morning training took place in Epping Forest - a fifty minute run round the bridle paths and hills, followed by a cup of tea at the green tea hut near High Beech. It may not have been the most efficient form of training for a high jumper but so far as I was concerned it qualified as a "session". In the eyes of a committed club distance runner, going out for a run every day doesn't count as a session. It's a contribution to the vital weekly mileage count. For the distance runner, what matters is volume and intensity -volume is measured by miles run (the aerobic stuff) whilst intensity is measured by the sessions - the anaerobic stuff, the repetitions, intervals, hills etc. Going for a run is what a distance runner does and loves. It was best described to me by a guy called Steve Dawes who used to travel over to the mainland from his home in Guernsey to do cross country leagues. Steve was good too and I used to collect him from Gatwick, drive him to a race in say Stevenage, then drive him back to the airport afterwards. We used to chat in the car and I remember him telling me that if he didn't go out for a run in the morning he "felt dirty". Not running in the morning was as unlikely for Steve as not brushing his teeth.

Neville did run the National. Rather well too, as our fifth finisher in 71st. Dave Mitch led us home in 10th and Andy Robinson was superb in 12th. The team were 6th but one absentee was Kris Bowditch, which was a tad strange because he'd set off for London the previous evening. But he was a grown man, and an experienced runner, so I wasn't too worried. The

weather was of the dreary type that afternoon in Parliament Hill so it wasn't difficult to spot Kris at the end of the race. He looked particularly resplendent in his all white England tracksuit amidst the murk, the mud and the mayhem that the National had served up to the committed that day. I'd misunderstood what Neville was telling me, and apparently I'd misdirected Kris too as he'd turned up at Primrose Hill instead of Parliament Hill. Easy mistake to make.

We travelled next to the Open University for the Southern 12 stage, and we were excellent, running under four hours twelve minutes which would usually have been enough to win, and was over five minutes faster than we'd run the previous year. Mark Warmby and Andy Robinson were excellent after injuries, but we still finished over four minutes behind winning team Belgrave. The Bels were the dominant club team in the country for the first five years of this century. They had a fearsome roster of international runners, an excellent team manager in Alan Mead, and they were not very popular amongst other clubs and runners. I felt much of their unpopularity was due to jealousy of their success. When we won the Southern cross country title at Exeter, Alan had been the first person to congratulate me, though I hardly knew him at the time. I found him to be warm, quiet spoken, knowledgeable and very organised. He was competitive and knew how to set his teams up to win, but he never gloated when Bels won and he was dignified in defeat, though I knew he would be disappointed. He was a good guy, and he was supported fully by his wife Pat, and their daughter Hazel. When you put as much time into a role as Alan did to being Belgrave's team manager, you need that backing from your family. Pat and Hazel loved the sport and their club as much as Alan did. The Meads gave a human face to the Belgrave machine, which some likened to a steamroller.

Yet the club didn't attract much respect from others in the sport. If a comparison could be made with a club from another sport, it would perhaps be the Leeds United teams of the 1960's and 1970's -feared but never admired. Alan Mead was no Don Revie, so it can be deduced there were other factors at play. At the end of the race, I wandered across to the Belgrave tent (often an object of ridicule amongst the keyboard warriors on the running websites -it was the size of a semi-detached house) to say well done. There was an absence of response from the runners inside the tent -it felt as if they were being a bit defensive and were waiting for an insult -but a couple of their officials grunted at me, before one of them returned the compliment in a manner. The gist of his comment was that we'd done well though Belgrave could have run five minutes faster if they'd needed to. I smiled. The comment was extraordinary and didn't need an answer. They'd just broken the course record, and competitive runners don't turn up for a race to coast, so at a rational level, it was absolute bollocks. So why make the comment? Was it to put my team (and me) in our place? It had the opposite effect on me. I'd taken Belgrave on at British League level and my teams had scared them, and we had an improving team that could do the same on the roads and country. I never accepted that Belgrave Harriers were unbeatable, but it took a few additional things to happen before we could take them on man to man and come out on top.

Running website forums were attracting increasing traffic. The process of trolling was at an unsophisticated level, but there were always a few willing to take a pop at anyone or anything behind the protection of a witless pseudonym. Belgrave got their share of criticism and one of

their runners, Steve Sharp, was often the butt of criticism. At a superficial level, Steve was a bit brash, a bit in your face, and a version of a London cheeky chappie. If that wasn't enough, he ran on his toes and never seemed to look as if he was hurting when he raced, and his wife Maria was not only attractive but also hugely supportive of her Steven, roaring encouragement at him with a vocal range which belied her petite stature. In summary, Steve Sharp was the perfect target for anti-Belgrave venom. Now I'm not about to suggest that Steve was a paragon of modesty and really a very sensitive type who was terribly upset by anonymous abuse. But he was definitely the wrong target.

I liked him a lot. He had a keen desire to improve and I used to feel he lacked a bit of confidence in himself as a runner, particularly when running as an individual. There was an enthusiasm about him, and he was quite artless. Whenever I turned up at Sutton Park, he'd appear by my side within minutes and ask me how the team was looking. It's a standard question from managers who are trying to get some insight to how confident their rivals are. You pick your victims when you're asked the question. How much information do I want to reveal to this person at this time? Then you answer accordingly. When Steve asked me, I'd give him a simple and honest answer about how strong we were. His reason for asking was simple. He was nervous and wanted to know how hard it was going to be for him to win. He wasn't interested in telling anyone else. Steve loved the road relays and he set himself up to be in really good shape for them. They gave him a chance of winning a medal of some colour, and Steve liked winning medals. He had lots of nicknames, not all of them complimentary. To me, he was Muttley.

A long time ago, before Pixar and Toy Story, before Frozen and computer animation, even before The Simpsons, people had to make do with black and white cartoons made by Hanna-Barbera Productions. I kid you not. One of the more popular cartoon series was Wacky Races, which featured pointless car races across the desert between well-known characters such as the Anthill Mob, Peter Perfect, the lovely Penelope Pitstop, and the evil, cheating Dick Dastardly. Substitute your favourite and least favourite clubs for the above if you wish. This piece of anarchic nonsense spawned other spin-off series including The Adventures of Dick Dastardly and Muttley. Dastardly was in his element in this series. His mission was possibly to stop a carrier pigeon from delivering top secret messages, for which he invented weird planes with contraptions for swatting the pigeon to a feathery death. His plans never succeeded and each episode ended with his latest machine plummeting to earth. At which point, the evil, cheating Dick Dastardly would say "drat, drat and double drat" or "curses, foiled again". His sidekick in all of this was a half-human, half-mongrel dog called Muttley, who would sit loyally behind Dastardly doing very little until the moment when his owner would utter the words "don't just sit there Muttley, do something." At which point, Muttley would snigger contentedly behind Dastardly's back before pointing at his chest and wheezing "medal, medal". It made no difference whether or not Muttley was given a medal. The plane would still crash, and Muttley's tail would whirr like a helicopter blade and he'd float to the ground unscathed. Occasionally, Dastardly would discipline Muttley by ripping the medals off his chest, and Muttley would snarl and growl 'rassin' frassinrassinfrassin Dick Dastardly'.

Now don't read too much into the above. Alan Mead wasn't Belgrave's Dick Dastardly. In fact, I doubt very much if Alan ever needed to ring up Steve to say "get ready Steve, we need you at Sutton Park on Saturday". My guess is that at an early stage Steve would ring Alan to ask "what leg am I running in the six stage Alan?" Steve Sharp had an insatiable demand for medals that matched Dastardly's sidekick -hence my nickname for him. Muttley Sharp won more area and national road relay medals in the first decade of this century than anyone else. He never missed a trick. It took an Icelandic volcano and a ban on flights due to the resultant ash to stop him making the 2010 12 stage at Sutton Park. He'd been warm weather training in Portugal and I can tell you I was negotiating night and day with air traffic controllers in Spain to make sure they didn't lift the ban before the day of the race. Ask a distance runner to name the great club runners of the decade and they'll probably name Ian Hudspith of Morpeth, Dave Norman of Altrincham, our own Dave Mitchinson, Simon Deakin of Leeds. For me, Muttley belongs in that group, although his character and personality was so different to the others in the group. For a team manager, he's perfect. A bloke who really wants to do the race, and will make sure he's fit and ready to do it.

Muttley once told me that at the time he joined Belgrave, he'd considered joining Beagles. I can remember going home and looking at previous road relay results and substituting Steve Sharp for our slowest runner -admittedly a crude way of measuring his worth to Belgrave. It was astonishing to see how often we would have beaten Belgrave though.