

Glory days (Part 1)

I didn't know what our line-up would be for the National 12 stage, but I was well ahead of the game in terms of knowing who was likely to be available for selection. This was important because past experience had alerted me to the ever present possibility of a runner suddenly declaring just before a race that they'd be unable to race due to a 'hamstring injury' (or similar) that they'd picked up two weeks earlier. I spent a week ringing possible selections to check on their health and training. I also tracked the comments on the race taken from the www.letsrun.com website, which amounted to fifteen pages by the time the race had been run. There was little to be gleaned from the predicted teams which were usually exercises in guesswork but there was certainly a significant interest in the race. Interestingly, nobody tipped Beagles as potential winners until the day before the race, when one of our runners, Mark Warmby, picked us out.

I was excited in the build up to the race. Belgrave had whipped us in the Southern race by eight and a half minutes -a huge amount to make up. But I'd heard that they were unlikely to be any stronger for the Nationals, and when I looked at the runners we had coming back into the team, I felt we could achieve a ten minute swing on them. Of course, there were other strong clubs to be considered but I was confident that if the team held together, we would take a lot of beating. Ally Donaldson was away warm weather training, and Moumin Geele wasn't cleared to compete for us until three weeks after the race, but everyone else was up for it. The last to confirm was Mo Farah, who I decided was an automatic selection. Not a particularly rash decision. For a few days, I held back from making a final selection because I was sure that someone would drop out due to injury, but five days before the race, I realised that I would have to line up my team and leave some good runners out.

The men to miss out were Jamal Mohamed, Sam Farah and (unluckiest of all) Ian Grime. Jamal, Sam and Moumin diverted their attention to the Victoria Park 5 on the same day, and I asked Ben Hellmers to be travelling reserve -I wasn't leaving anything to chance. Having selected the team, it was then time to decide who would run short and long legs (there are six short legs and six long legs) and to decide the best running order for the team. I wanted the team to be in contention by the halfway stage, but not necessarily in the lead. Then I intended to field our big hitters at the vital part of the race, so I decided to hold back Warmby, Farah and Mitchinson for the last three long legs. Our normal hotel was unavailable due to refurbishment, and so I booked the team into a hotel in Walsall. The only runners who didn't stay were Kairn Stone (who then had to negotiate horrendous tailbacks on the M5 on the day of the race) and Olly Laws, who stayed with his parents in Shropshire. The preparation was so important to me -race day was the culmination of five weeks concentrated effort, which had started with making sure that everyone knew the date of the race and everyone knew that we could win it.

On the night before the race, I carried out my pre-race ritual of trying to predict the time we would run. The knack is to be conservative in your estimated time, rather than hype up your own runners' ability. The recent history of the 12 stage road relay suggested that any

team running under 4 hours 12 minutes would be close to the medals, and the simple formula for achieving that is for the six long leg runners to average 27 minutes per leg, and the six short leg runners to average 15 minutes per leg. My estimated time was 4 hours 9 minutes 15 seconds. We travelled to Sutton Park in a fleet of cars, and passed through the tented village in a long line to set up our 'camp' under a favourite tree. The weather? It started off very windy and got progressively worse, becoming colder, and then the rain lashed down as the race finished - I don't think anyone from Beagles noticed. The prize at stake was an impressive gold cup which was originally donated by the News of the World in the immediate post war years to be awarded to the winners of the London to Brighton road relay. How times have changed. Car ownership and road travel increased so much that the London to Brighton race was no longer deemed safe by 1965 when Coventry Godiva won the last 'national' version of the race, but for many years thousands of spectators would greet the runners at Grand Parade in Brighton. There was also a 'southern' version of the London to Brighton which was won by Essex Beagles in 1953.

So to the race itself. Anyone reading this expecting (or hoping) for a taut, nerve jangling account of a valiant Beagles victory plucked from the jaws of defeat is going to be disappointed. The runners were psyched up and ready to perform and the race went according to plan.

Leg 1 (long), Olly Laws 27.38 (25th). The opening leg always attracts a strong turnout. Smaller clubs with one outstanding runner will put them on first as it gives their 'star' a proper race and keeps them happy. Olly had been living and working in the States but had arranged his first trip back to UK to coincide with the relay. Given that Olly's fitness was dependent on training and racing that had taken place 5,000 miles away and his judgement of his fitness had always given added meaning to the word "uncertain", I gave him the opening leg to focus his mind on the runners around him. His hamstring played up a bit but he finished only one minute behind the leader (Stuart Stokes of Sale) which was not a great deal given the length of the race.

Leg 2 (short), Tom Bilham 14.47 (12th). Given the first short leg due to his background of pre-race nerves, Tom had spent the previous evening in his room. He was certainly ready to run on the day, carving through the field to improve our position by thirteen places. As he was the youngest member of the team, I'd been concerned that Tom may be overwhelmed on the day so it was a huge relief and bonus to see him finishing strongly. It was Tom's only run in the National 12 stage.

Leg 3 (all odd numbers were long legs), Louis Jones 27.24 (11th).

This was Louis' third run for Beagles since switching from Crawley, and he'd picked up medals in the AAA half marathon and Southern 12 stage in his previous appearances. His was a very solid run in difficult conditions and I can still remember him glancing in my direction in the long finishing straight. He was so intent on not letting the team down - it was as if he was looking or listening for confirmation that he'd done the business. He had.

Leeds had gone over one minute clear but good early legs doth butter no parsnips in this race (or so I tried to convince myself).

Leg 4, (all even numbers are short legs), Steve Hepples 14.18 (5th).

Steve loved to chase and preferred a short leg, so it had to be Leg 2 or 4 to maximise his contribution. This was one of his greatest runs in Beagles colours and it was the second fastest short leg of the day. It catapulted us into contention, as Leeds retained a reduced lead from Northern rivals Sale and Morpeth. One of our key performers had put us right in contention.

Leg 5, Kairn Stone 27.00 (2nd). This was Kairn's fastest time round Sutton Park -a smooth and clinical display that would have left most neutral onlookers in no doubt about our intentions, and which gave the rest of the team great heart. Kairn knew how to wring out every last drop of energy. One of his 'victims' was Beagle to be James Ellis, who was representing Aldershot. Leeds stayed in front but by less than one minute, and as each leg finished, my calculations of an overall time were standing up to scrutiny. Kairn did a proper job for us. Vitty boy.

Leg 6, Rob Cole 15.17 (3rd). Initially, Rob was unhappy with his run but he didn't receive any sympathy from yours truly because I was more than happy at this stage. Rob was the sixth fastest man on his leg, and his enthusiasm to contribute to the team was absolute. There were no major gains or losses by the leading teams. It was a case of 'as you were' and at the halfway stage we were 3rd in 2 hours 6minutes 24 seconds, with the potential for doing some serious damage in the second half of the race. My predicted halfway time had been 2 hours six minutes. The leading eight clubs were covered by less than two minutes with Leeds still in front from Sale.

Leg 7, Mark Warmby 26.10 (2nd). The destiny of the 12 stage starts to get serious at this point. It's entirely possible to stay at or close to the front for half the race but with over two hours still to go, a team can sink without trace if it hasn't held back some good runners who can perform when the gaps in the field appear and the pressure is on. Traditionally, the teams that are chasing the medals hold back some big hitters until the long legs on 7 and 9. Mark was in shape and he knew it, having just represented GB on the country in Japan. He wasn't arrogant but when he was right, Mark wasn't one to lose focus or cruise round. Here, he took nearly thirty seconds out of the Leeds lead (or Leeds lead?) despite coming up against James Walsh, an England cross country international.

Leg 8, Andy Barber 15.07 (2nd). I had no difficulty in putting Andy in at this stage because I knew he'd be good value and wouldn't do anything rash. I'd watched the other leading teams file in at the end of Leg 7, and had noticed Chris Thompson of Aldershot waiting to go out. Was this the start of an Aldershot surge to the front? Tommo was certainly capable of doing immense damage, even on a short leg. Andy told me later he didn't see or worry about Tommo because he had a job to do. Tommo did enough damage, running the fastest short leg of the day, but at the end of the leg, it was Leeds first with Andy three seconds behind. Andy returned to the team 'camp' to a spontaneous

round of applause from the team. There's an element of attrition in winning these long races and we'd finally roped in the long time leaders and our feeling now was that the race was ours to lose.

Leg 9, Mo Farah 25.27 (1st). As George Harrison said 'All things must pass' and that's what Mo did very quickly as Leeds became Follows and Sale pressed their credentials in moving into second, albeit over one and a half minutes behind us. The conditions were awful by this stage, but Mo's time was 29 seconds faster than anyone else on the day. It could have been faster too, as he took a heavy tumble on a slippery path just beyond Keeper's Pond. I'd have been worried if I'd seen it. Steve Vernon, a long term friend of many of our runners, had seen the fall and said it was bad, but Mo just picked himself up and finished the job. Mo wasn't the runner then that he later became, but he was the best runner in Britain and Europe by a country mile, and he'd turned down a payday in Dublin to turn out for his club. Of all our team, Mo may remember least about the day, but I was so pleased at the time that we'd given him the sort of performance that I'd promised him when he signed. Actually I'm not sure I'm calling this right. It's all very well being World and Olympic Champion, but does the fame, glory, publicity, lucrative contracts, gold medals and other trinkets really substitute for a National 12 stage gold medal? I'm not going to debate the point further. There would be no point.

Leg 10, Stuart Major 15.12 (1st). My choice of Stuart for this leg was obvious, given my previous comments about Stuart's ability to judge his fitness level, and his ability to give his best under any circumstances. In fact, Stuart had been under the weather with a virus, and his wife Pippa had given birth to Sam just three months earlier, but Stuart had told me he thought he could run 15.15 for a short leg. He ran two seconds faster and was third fastest man on the leg. It was difficult to see where a challenge would come from, but Sale were doing their best to keep us under some pressure, and Belgrave had hauled themselves up to 4th and had Leeds in their sights.

Leg 11, Dave Mitchinson 26.48 (1st). Captain Fantastic had recently started work as a policeman and had been involved in a fracas whilst carrying out an arrest, but he was hardly going to let an opportunity like this slip. Predictably, Dave was the fastest man on Stage 11, with only Dan Augustus of Sale keeping pace with him, but Dave was able to add to a ninety seconds lead. The clouds were now getting very dark and the wind was fierce and so times were beginning to suffer. We had the bit between our teeth, and it was just one three mile short leg between us and the title.

Leg 12, Andy Robinson 15.00 (1st). The glory leg was given to Andy Robinson which couldn't have been predicted three weeks earlier when he was facing knee surgery. I'd noticed that he had revelled in the last leg pressure at Milton Keynes, and here, freed from the prospect of going under the knife, Andy ran with verve and confidence. His split was undoubtedly affected by the celebrations that took place on the home straight, where Andy (grinning broadly) raised his arms before high fiving his teammates. Then he decided to finish, and we started to celebrate in earnest. Sale were very strong as runners up, and Belgrave came through on the last leg to knock Leeds out of the medals -

somewhat galling for the Yorkshire powerhouse as they'd been in the medals since the third leg. Our winning time was 4 hours 10 minutes and eight seconds -53 seconds slower than I'd predicted, though the weather had undoubtedly played a major part in slowing times.

The aftermath was very satisfying. I remember Dave Lawrence of Birchfield and Alan Mead of Belgrave coming over to congratulate me, and the trip back to London along the M40, where I bumped into Andy Morgan- Lee of Salford, and probably the Meads -again. Steve Hepples called the success "mint" and he was right. We put out a very good team that year at Sutton Park, and were deserved winners - it felt good to be able to say 'national champions' and I'm sure the runners in the team felt the same.