

Glory Days (Parts 2, 3, and 4):

From an early stage in my team management of the road and cross country teams, I'd focussed on the Big Seven races of the winter. These were the Southern and National 6 and 12 stage road relays, the National Cross Country relays, and the Southern and National Cross Country Championships. In tandem with these events, I kept a score of medals won by our individual runners - medals of any colour were recorded in the Metal Detectors Table, and winning medals were recorded in the Gold Diggers Table - in Summer 2006, we'd won two Southern cross country team titles and one National 12 stage road relays, so there was plenty of scope for improvement.

The first race of 2006-07 was the Southern 6 stage road relay at Aldershot, and, remarkably we fielded a team with four runners who had not been part of the 12 stage relay winning team just five months previously. Hepples, Mitchinson, Robinson, Major, Robinson and Bilham were all missing due to injury, but our strength in depth was such that we won the race with one of the fastest times ever recorded at Rushmoor Arena. The team welcomed back Mike East who had suffered an injury-plagued track season.

Mike was a fantastic runner, and arguably the governor of British 1500 metres running for a period of about four years. He joined Beagles in 2001, and as with so many other runners, the move coincided with an upturn in his career. Mike and his wife purchased spectator tickets for the 2002 Commonwealth Games in Manchester, and I was delighted when Mike rang me a few weeks beforehand to ask if I would like his ticket because he would now be competing. It was a wonderful evening as Mike swept to victory off the final bend - there was no doubt in my mind that he would win. Mike had a 'weapon' as a 1500 metres runner - the ability to finish very fast, and invariably he was in the right position to use his kick. He was coached by Mark Rowland and was part of a good training group. His approach to running was very professional. I remember going for a run in Windsor Great Park one cold and windy Sunday morning, and spotting him tackling the big hills at Valley Gardens with Anthony Whiteman and others - that's where the session was taking place, so Mike drove there from his home in Portsmouth to benefit from it. I believe that he had a 'formula' for getting into top shape when it mattered, which was exemplified before the 2004 Olympics when he turned out for the club in a British League 800 metres to test his fitness, and ran a personal best of 1:46.27 into the bargain. He finished a highly commendable 6th in the 1500 final and here's a little known fact - he was the only individual British track finalist in the 2004 Olympics. Mike wasn't particularly comfortable spending time in the company of other runners - he had a life away from the sport (whatever next!) and good self-awareness - discussing training sessions with other runners wasn't his idea of a nice way of spending an evening.

At Aldershot, he set us on the road to a win with a fast first leg, and Kevin Skinner and Sam Farah then put us into the lead at the halfway stage. I was particularly pleased with Kevin's run. The Aldershot course is relatively flat, and each leg comprises two laps. I'd often taken unofficial times for runners at the end of each lap, and I'd been astounded at how often runners would cruise through the halfway point of their leg before running substantially slower to finish. This was Kevin's relay debut for Beagles and he became one of the only

runners I've seen to record a negative split at Rushmoor, which showed to me that he had a good racing brain.

With Kairn Stone, Moumin Geele and Mo Farah still to run, I wasn't anxious, but one team were still battling us hard for the win. One of the joys of club athletics is that strong teams can emerge from the most unlikely of locations. Wells in Somerset is usually described as being the smallest city in England. It's a beautiful town, with an amazing cathedral, and nearby attractions includes Cheddar Gorge and Wookey Hole. Wells' main claim to athletics fame is that it was the home of one of Britain's greatest ever athletes. Mary Rand (nee Bignal) won an Olympic gold medal as a long jumper in the 1964 Tokyo Olympics, as well as a silver medal in the pentathlon, where she was beaten by the controversial Russian athlete, Irina Press. Her athletic prowess was honed at nearby Millfield School, in Street.

At Rushmoor, Wells turned out a really good and tenacious team, built around the Tickner brothers, with Andy Hennessy, Carl Morris, Andrew Baker and Adrian Marriott completing the team. They were clearly there to win, and on the fourth leg Frank Tickner pushed them into a 45 seconds lead. On the fifth leg, Moumin worked hard to catch Marriott. At one stage on the first lap, Alan Storey advised him to back off, and there was no doubting his desire to catch the Wells team. He just managed it, and for the last leg it was a simple head to head between Ben Tickner and Mo Farah. There wasn't much that Ben Tickner could do in this situation except run as fast as he could. He was rewarded with the 15th fastest leg of the day - a truly impressive effort in the circumstances. Mo was imperious and ran beautifully. He clocked the fastest time of the day, and as he descended into the bowl at the end of the race, the spectators and athletes crowded to the side of the road and gave him a spontaneous round of applause. In recent years, it's been suggested that Mo has become disconnected from the mainstream of athletics and that he's lost some respect from the active athletics community as a result. I guess there's nothing new about this situation, which is an inevitable consequence of an athlete moving upwards to a level where the grassroots are scarcely visible, or just a distant memory. But if Mo ever felt the need to reconnect with his athletics roots, a visit to the road relays would be as good a way as any.

So, a first area six stage road relay win and a good race, thanks in no small part to Wells City. Onwards and upwards as my old boss Doug Paterson used to say. Next stop for some of the team was the Cabbage Patch 10 in Twickenham on the Sunday before the National 12 stage. I enjoy watching the Cabbage Patch though I'm not entirely sure why. It's a circular course along the Thames to Kingston Bridge and back towards Richmond, and it isn't easy to watch anything that's happening - but it's close to home for me. Moumin finished 3rd in the race after an early tumble, Dave Mitchinson was 4th and Jamal Mohamed ran well too. So the three athletes went home and left me to pick up the individual and team prizes - cash and medals I presumed innocently. The presentations were held at a well-known local pub coincidentally called the Cabbage Patch. I should have guessed what was about to happen.

Eventually, some days after the race had finished, the prize giving commenced. Moumin had won a cash prize and a fine looking cabbage. Ditto Mitchy. Jamal had won a cabbage too. Moumin had won another cabbage for running under 50 minutes. Ditto Mitchy. Moumin had

won another cabbage for being the first runner who lives in Teddington. Mitchy had won a cabbage for being the first finisher whose father farms in Wiltshire, and another for being married. Jamal won a cabbage for being a good guy. There was a team prize too. No cash on offer, but lots of cabbages - about three per member of team. They were fine cabbages too - green and firm and.....I can't at this moment think of any other word to describe a cabbage. I had no bag with me, so I balanced the cabbages (by now totalling somewhere in the hundreds) delicately against my stomach and along the length of my arms, and started walking the half mile or so to my car which was parked at the far end of Twickenham High Street. About halfway down the said busy shopping road, I decided that Mitchy may not miss some of his prizes so I stopped an elderly woman and asked her if she'd like one, but unfortunately she shook her head and accelerated in the other direction.

This was becoming a problem, and it wasn't helped by the almost complete lack of food recycling receptacles on Twickenham High Street. A litter bin or two wouldn't have gone amiss either (or a greengrocer). I can tell you that it isn't easy surreptitiously dropping a cabbage in the gutter - I tried several times, but Twickenham is a lovely suburb full of lovely people and none of them were going to let me leave their streets without my entire booty. I think I'd recommend Twickenham to any of you who are wannabe bank robbers - the local residents would probably hold the door open for you and chase after you with any dropped banknotes.

Most of the team travelled to Birmingham the next Friday for the National 6 stage road relay. Actually, most of the teams travelled - for the first time we'd qualified our B team which had finished an excellent 14th at Aldershot. I was part of a small convoy of cars, with Mo driving not far behind me. The traffic was fairly heavy but moving well and we were somewhere on the M40 in Warwickshire. My motor of choice at this time was a scorcher - a 1999 Suzuki Wagon R Plus with 1200cc engine capacity - sometimes known as The Passion Wagon. There are two things I can share with you about the Suzuki Wagon R Plus. The first thing to remember is the car is very economical for driving around urban areas but has a maximum speed on motorways of about 70 mph. The second thing to remember is that it has damn good brakes. Something happened on the road in front of me and simultaneously my passenger in the front, Keith Gerrard, said in a matter of fact voice "we're going to crash". I hit the brakes and was aware that a car two in front of me was spinning in circles in the middle lane. The car in front of me stopped in time. I stopped in time. Mo Farah, driving immediately behind me, stopped in time. It's a very strange feeling, and my first thought was that there could still be a multiple car pileup as everything behind the incident slams on the brakes. There was no noise but I saw the driver in front of me open his door tentatively, so I did the same, and Mo sprinted past us. The driver was a bit shaken but unhurt. The car which had spun was still in the middle lane, but facing the hard shoulder, so half a dozen of us pushed it off the road, before dashing back to our cars and continuing our journey. There could have been a much worse outcome to that incident on the M40. By the way, I still have the Suzuki Wagon R Plus (Passion Wagon). I haven't driven it for a few years so I reckon the battery might be a bit flat, but it's very economical around urban areas and it has good brakes. No cash offer needed - just come and take it off my hands if you're interested.

We were a bit loaded at Sutton Park the next day. Only Mike East, Mo Farah and MouminGeele remained from the team which had won the Southern. Dave Mitchinson, Mark Warmby and Tom Bilham came into the team. The B team was super strong - Keith Gerrard, Kairn Stone, Rob Cole, Scott Sterling, Sam Farah and John Clarke. Behind those bare facts lies a story of the toughest decision I ever had to make as a team manager, and the one decision which I still regret to this day.

Tom Bilham had won selection by beating Kevin Skinner the previous week by 70 metres in a Met League cross country race. This proved he was in good shape, as Kevin had run five seconds faster than Kairn Stone at Aldershot. Logic seemed to dictate that Tom should run in the A team at the expense of Kairn. The race was being run on Kairn's 30th birthday. He'd been with the club for ages, and he was running well, and I wanted him to be part of a team that I felt would win. It was a classic case of Head v Heart and I decided to go down the 'percentage' route of maximising our chances of winning, so I selected Tom. I was confident that we would win, and I wanted Dave Mitchinson to run the glory leg, but Mo was determined that he was going to run the last leg, and I reluctantly backed down. This race was fraught with some behind the scenes tensions, and I wasn't enjoying the preparations at all.

The race itself went according to plan. Mike brought us home 2nd after the opening leg, with only John Ndayisenga of Birchfield going quicker. Then Tom Bilham ran with great composure, attacking the course after the first big hill to put us in the lead. He confessed afterwards that he was the slowest man in the team and that he had run to orders from me. Mark Warmby was in great shape and he booted us into a big lead at the halfway stage, which was protected and increased by Moumin and Mitchy on Legs 4 and 5. We were over half a minute clear by the time Mo set off on the final leg. He ran the fastest time of the day and we won by more than one and a half minutes in a fast time. It was a facile win for a very fine team, and I was just as excited by the performance of a B team filled with good runners who would have made any other team in the race, but who were prepared to travel to Sutton Park although they weren't in the A team. On the last leg, John Clarke was badly baulked near the finish line and finished up immediately behind the A teams from Birchfield and Woodford Green in 15th position.

The fastest runner in the B team was Kairn Stone with an 18.02 clocking. Tom Bilham ran 17.50 for the A team so my clinical analysis of form before the race was proved right and I was now a fully-fledged genius in studying form. I was feeling pretty miserable though because I felt I'd made the wrong decision in selecting Tom over Kairn. Hindsight is a wonderful thing, and I can see now why I was right to feel the way that I did, but at the time I couldn't rationalise why I felt that way, or predict what was going to happen next. At an emotive level, I wanted to pick Kairn rather than Tom, not because Tom had done anything wrong, but because Kairn belonged in the A team. I've never been interested in playing the percentages and looking for tiny gains. I take the view that the best runners will turn up and give their best and be reliable and pleased to be there. Kairn belonged in that category, and although Tom ran 12 seconds faster on the day, it mattered little because we trounced the other teams because we were very strong.

Kairn took it hard, and he rang me to tell me that was the case. I respected Kairn's intelligence and decency too much to try and soft soap him with weasel words. I knew how he felt and so I explained the rationale behind the decision. I think we had a mature conversation, but Kairn wasn't ready to run for the Beagles. A year passed and Kairn made no appearances for Beagles, politely declining if asked, whilst Tom Bilham disappeared into a fitness free vacuum known as blobbing out. Tom didn't love running as much as Kairn, and so he packed up. Kairn stuck with it and I would spot his name in small 10km races in the South West, usually winning. At the end of 2007, I decided to travel to Cornwall at short notice, and I noticed there was a 10km race being held in Exeter on a Sunday morning. It looked like the sort of race that Kairn would do, and so I set the alarm early and travelled down. I arrived in Exeter in good time but had huge difficulty in finding somewhere to park - it turned out there was a 10km road race taking place with a lot of runners! Twenty minutes after the race had started I arrived at the finish area, and the first person I spotted was Kairn's dad. We sat and had a coffee, and just over ten minutes later, Kairn wandered across, having won comfortably. I'd wanted to speak to Kairn face to face, but timing means everything, and this turned out to be the right time. Kairn and I were able to talk that Sunday morning in Exeter, and about one month later he returned to run in the Southern cross country at Parliament Hill. It had been a difficult period for me - I don't like 'losing' athletes no matter what their standard, and I'd come as close to 'losing' Kairn as anyone could get. Thankfully Kairn remained a Beagle and in the following years he achieved so much as an individual and as a part of our teams. Sometimes it pays to follow your gut instinct, especially if you can work out what's behind the gut instinct.

The team were on a roll. Impetus counts for a lot, and there was no problem in getting teams out. Our winning run was now standing at three - National 12 stage, Southern 6 stage, National 6 stage - so the next target from the Big Seven was the National cross country relays at Mansfield. We approached this one with the knowledge that Mo wouldn't be running, and that our success was seen by some to be dependent on him. I've always liked Mansfield and the cross country relays. All the age groups, boys and girls, men and women, running to a tight timescale. A good course, with spectators pressed up close as the runners go by. Mitchy was unavailable too, but Steve Hepples was in, and Steve running cross country was as rare as hen's teeth.

It was a wonderful race. Moumin came home in 4th after the first leg, and Steve gained us one place on leg 2, although Jason Ward of Altrincham and Mike Skinner of Blackheath came past him. That's the beauty of the cross country relays. It's a four man team which brings lots of clubs into the equation, and positions are constantly changing. Keith Gerrard went next. He'd been quickly regaining form after being injured, and although we dropped to 4th, we were right in contention as Bedford, Tipton and Sale charged into the medal positions.

The last leg was loaded, with Morpeth fielding Nick McCormick, and Aldershot (just three seconds behind us) putting Andy Vernon into the fray. But we had Mark Warmby at his classy and confident best. What followed was in my opinion the single most impressive relay leg that I've seen by a Beagle since I've been team manager. On the first lap of the final leg, Mark carved his way through the field overtaking the three clubs in front of us. Meanwhile

Andy Vernon tracked him, but remained about thirty metres in arrears. As Mark entered the wooded section for the last time, I could see he was completely focussed but also at ease with the way he was running. I sprinted along a path at the bottom of the woods to give him a further shout and as Mark came into view I detected a slight widening of the gap to Andy. Then it was back to the finish as quickly as my wellington boots would allow me. Just as the announcer told the crowd that the runners were approaching the finish the unthinkable happened. My mobile rang, and like an idiot I answered it! It was Mitchy ringing to find out how we were getting on, so I gave him a commentary on the final minute of the race. The finish at Mansfield is awkward as it comprises a steep hill and an adverse camber. I'd seen Mark Miles of Belgrave come to grief there in a previous year when in the lead, but Mark Warmby wasn't about to let this one go, and he stormed to a memorable win, with Andy Vernon finishing about five seconds behind in 2nd.

Mark was rewarded with the 2nd fastest time of the day, and we'd scored a fantastic win to extend our run of victories in the Big Seven. This win felt very different to the National six stage victory - it was a close and memorable race for all the right reasons. The trophy was huge and very heavy too but I took it home with me and began to wonder about the mounting cost of engraving that the club was now facing. The next morning, I was waiting at Hatton Cross to take Jamal Mohamed to a half marathon in Stevenage when I bumped into Mike Boucher of Aldershot. He hadn't been to Mansfield but he quickly assured me that Andy Vernon had been closing down Mark at the finish but had mistimed his effort. Mike's version of the race was incorrect. Andy had run well but on the day Mark was a bit too strong and had remained in control. Our B team had gone even better than at Sutton Park - Andy Robinson, Ian Grime, Scott Sterling and Andy Barber combined to finish 12th out of 115 teams - more testament to our strength in depth. The Stevenage race featured Mitchy (2nd), Louis Jones (4th) and Jamal Mohamed (8th) - another easy team win.

Coming next - the winning run ends in unusual circumstances in deepest Norfolk.