

High Tides, Green Grass and a Rocky Road

Alton Towers was interesting. I'd never been to the amusement park, so I didn't know the best route there. We stayed on the outskirts of Derby and finished the journey on the day. It seemed a long way from anywhere, but the nearby village of Alton was pretty and the hills suddenly loomed up to give a feel for the sort of course we were going to see. The basic facilities at the course were Spartan, with the exception of the car parks which were predictably enormous, given the number of visitors attracted in the summer. In late February, the amusement park was practically empty, giving the ghostly impression of Coney Island in *The Warriors* - "Beagles, come out to play". I walked the course during the younger age group races. The standout feature was a brutish hill with a switchback two thirds of the way up. Intrepid spectators were clinging on to tufts of grass near the top - it was a great place to watch the runners suffer but easy to slip off the hill and be injured. I figured the hill was 45 seconds or a minute of lung bursting agony.

Our team wasn't great - Mitchy, Kevin and Louis were all missing from the Southern team - but we acquitted ourselves very well, and once again it was feasible to look twelve months ahead and think "we can win this thing". Tom Humphries won the men's race. He was a good runner from Cannock and Stafford - I reckoned he'd set himself up for this race as it was 'local'. Andy Vernon had stayed in the same hotel on the previous evening, and he finished 10th, just behind Lee Merrien of Guernsey. Long way to come I thought... wonder where he stayed last night?... I happened to know that he'd been getting training advice from Liam Cain who had a small but talented squad of (mostly) middle distance runners. I knew Liam well, and the next time I saw him, I asked if he thought Lee might be interested in joining Beagles. Liam wasted no time in getting back to me, and soon I was chatting to Lee on the phone and he joined us. Ironically, Lee moved away from being advised by Liam soon after, and indeed the whole group began to disintegrate, largely due to injuries and illness. I don't think any of those problems could be attributed to Liam or his coaching. It was just very unfortunate, but I think Liam lost a lot of his pep and huge enthusiasm. None of his athletes were Lottery funded but they were turning over athletes who were - it didn't last and I think Liam took it hard.

Back to the race - Keith Gerrard led the team home in 14th, followed by Kairn Stone (who was carefully tying his shoelaces as the race was about to begin) in an excellent 26th, and Olly Laws in 49th. We had a bit of a wait then until Rob Cole (80th), Andy Barber (who sensibly stayed off the early pace and came through the field impressively) in 89th, and Sam Farah in 133rd. Leeds and Notts (1st and 2nd) were in a different class, but we managed to get the better of Bedford to finish 4th and top Southern team. It was a heartening day, and certainly a lot better than the next time we visited Alton Towers three years later.

To close the 2007-08 season, we competed in the Southern and National 12 stage road relays. These were to prove unsatisfactory - rocky roads indeed. The Southern 12 stage was held at Rushmoor Arena, Aldershot. It was almost called off, but the overnight snow thawed in the early morning sunshine and the race went ahead. Rushmoor is a great course for the six stage road relay but for the longer version, it was necessary to add a lap for the long leg, so that the

runners were doing three circuits. It was a bit confusing and the event lacked atmosphere. There were four decent teams there - Belgrave (who won), Aldershot (2nd), Woodford Green and ourselves. The Woodies were on a roll and they finished strongly with Plummer, Wardle and Shone running fast on three of the last four legs. They beat us comfortably, so we finished out of the medals for only the second time in seven years. Not to worry - the team was obviously going to be much stronger at Sutton Park, with the return of Geele, Mitchinson, Skinner and Gerrard. We also had a new recruit from Scotland in Chris Mackay, whose coach (Norrie Hay) had advised Chris and Mark Pollard to join English clubs for more competitive exposure. Mark joined Belgrave, and has been a mainstay of their teams ever since, whilst Chris came to Beagles. Both belonged to Inverclyde AC in Scotland and it was always necessary to fit in with their races north of the border. Chris was quiet and unassuming, but a really tough cookie when the race began. Goodness me, he gave Beagles some great runs over the years. He came from Port Glasgow, just up the Clyde from Greenock, but not actually a part of Glasgow itself. I was really quite hopeful before the National 12 stage in 2008, but the team's hopes were dashed on perhaps the most disappointing day for us in a decade.

On our previous visit to Sutton Park, everything had gone our way. The team, and the individuals in the team, had all exceeded expectations. Now, the opposite happened as we had more below par runs than above par. We were never out of the top five all afternoon, and we were still second with one leg to go. Our last leg runner, Andy Robinson, had anchored us to victory two years previously. Now he was about to experience different emotions, as Bruce Raeside of Notts, and Neil Speaight overtook him to bounce us out of the medals. I hadn't realised until now that it was Bruce who did part of the damage - he now belongs to Beagles - I shall have to have words with him....

Some uninformed observers felt that Andy had lost us the race. That was wrong. Andy had pushed hard up the hill with Bruce (who was in very good shape), but he'd been left exposed by us underperforming earlier in the race. Actually, we could have been well out of the running much earlier, but I had a conversation with Moumin just before his leg. I asked him what time he thought he'd run. 'Maybe 26.30' he replied. I suggested that I'd pay him some cash if he ran under 26 minutes. He duly obliged, running the fastest long leg of the day (25.42) and I honoured my commitment despite the disappointing end to the day. As I stood at the finish line waiting for Sam Farah to appear at the end of the 11th leg, I feared the worst. Like so many of the team that day, Sam was a bit slower than I'd guesstimated. The gap to 3rd and 4th wasn't big enough. Leeds won again, and deservedly, but we could and should have finished 2nd or 3rd.

Everyone was a bit stunned at the end of the race. How had we come up short? I was deflated but there was no time on the day to discuss or think about it. I had to get Chris Mackay to New Street Station to catch a train to Glasgow. I dropped him off, but on a whim I stayed put whilst Chris checked out the next train home. On a whim? Well, everything else had gone wrong on the day, so maybe there wouldn't be a train back to Glasgow. There again, Birmingham's a big city in the centre of England, so there's bound to be a train at 4.30pm on a Saturday.....after a couple of minutes Chris re-appeared - no train until the Sunday

morning when Chris was due to be working in Glasgow. What followed was yours truly on auto pilot. I can remember Keith and Sam trying to find an airport with a flight to Glasgow (or Edinburgh) on a Saturday evening. I rang my son, James, who went straight online. No flights from Birmingham, East Midlands, Luton, Stansted or Heathrow. This didn't really simplify matters, but rashly I decided to head south onto the M40. Just after Warwick Services, James found a flight from Gatwick at 9pm, and I read him out my debit card details for him to secure a seat. I drove very fast back to London, dropped off Keith and Sam in Teddington, and continued to Gatwick, arriving a few minutes before the gates closed. At this moment, the whole effort became worthwhile - Chris checked in, and turning to the staff on the gate, he quietly informed them that "this is Bob Smith. He's a legend." At which point, Christopher Mackay sealed his selection for Newham and Essex Beagles for the next ten years. I went back to the car and I was shattered. So much preparation and energy expended without the team getting any reward. The next few days were interesting. Over half the team contacted me to discuss what had happened. I wasn't the only one agonising over a disappointing day. So were the runners. There was no blame apportionment, but there was a feeling that we'd definitely missed an opportunity. The inquest was insular in nature - anyone from outside the group who criticised the performance was likely to be told to do one - I know of a couple of people who made that mistake and were told where to go in no uncertain terms.

So that was 2007-08. Not the most successful season we'd experienced, but still rather better than many clubs enjoy. As a team manager, you learn to take injuries, absences, illness, and misfortune in large chunks. It can be a waiting game - waiting for enough of your best athletes to be available on the same day at a big race. It's very satisfying when that happens, but when it doesn't, it's important to do your best to field a team and take part. That gives other runners an opportunity, and runners should want to compete, and at the highest level they can realistically aim for. That's what belonging to Newham and Essex Beagles is all about. Later in 2008, one of our members, Christine Ohuruogu, won an Olympic gold medal in the 400 metres - our first Olympic gold medallist since Daley Thompson in 1984. Her initial exposure to the sport came with some raw and occasionally stuttering efforts in league competition for the club, before reaching the very highest level - a lesson for all of our members.