

Hopes laid bare in deepest Norfolk and the birth of Ellie:

Soon after the win at Mansfield, I became embroiled in the recruitment process for a London Regional Manager for England Athletics. I was eventually appointed and began work just before Christmas 2006. I'd been a senior HR manager for nearly 25 years, and the opportunity to become involved in the sport which I was passionate about was too good an opportunity to turn down. I'm not going to dwell on the challenges I faced, but in the early days the job seemed a million miles removed from the sport which I loved. I entered a world of PESSCL's and PESSYP's and various other unintelligible acronyms. On one occasion I met a former international athlete who told me that he was interested in Athletics being a 'priority sport' in East London. He actually asked me what I knew about East London, and then explained that he'd already chosen sailing as a priority sport. In East London! Worse still, the guy worked at Newham Leisure Centre, but had never ventured outside onto the track where he just might have seen me. The factions at work in London were an early problem too, and my hands were full during a tricky first twelve months. I realised that I needed to distance myself from Beagles work to avoid allegations of favouritism. From time to time, I was contacted by athletes who were moving to London and looking for a club or a training group. For me, my integrity was on the line and I refused to recommend Beagles in these circumstances unless the athlete expressly stated they wanted to join the club. Some rather good distance runners were pointed by me towards other clubs.

Our next target in the Big Seven was the Southern Cross Country Championships. The South of England Athletics Association had selected a new venue - Holkham Hall in North Norfolk, the home of the 7th Earl of Leicester. Torrential rain put the race in doubt as the prospect of the landscaped grounds being thoroughly muddified troubled the owner and his representatives, but a solution was found on the day before the race, much to my relief. I'd put together the strongest team we'd ever taken to the Southern and I felt we had an excellent chance of winning. Nothing on the day, or subsequently, has caused me to question that judgement. The size of the fields was considerably less than usual - North Norfolk really is on one of the extremities of the South territory, and the Northern Championships were held on the same day at Newark - further south than Holkham Hall. The early races featured a number of low finishes by our younger athletes who had perhaps indulged too fully on the full English breakfast on offer at the hotel where they stayed.

The senior men's race started and it was soon clear that Shaftesbury Barnet meant business, but so did Bedford. We did well. Mitchy finished 6th, Andy Robinson 7th, Olly Laws 13th, Louis Jones 15th, Ian Grime 25th and Kevin Skinner was our final scorer in 26th. For good measure, John Clarke was 40th. 6 in 26 and a points total of 92. A total of fewer than 100 always wins the Southern. Fewer than 150 usually wins it too. It wasn't enough in 2007 at Holkham Hall though. Bedford won well with a total of 68. It was a good check on reality for me. On the day, there are always individuals and teams that can excel, and Bedford had turned out a very strong team to defeat us. We had no excuses.....or did we? During the race I was approached by a demure and sensitive young woman, who remarked that one of the Bedford team was displaying particularly good form which was attracting the attention of many of the spectators, especially those who were young and female.

I tracked across to the side of the course as the leaders approached, and sure enough, one of the Bedford guys was swinging free. Not to put too fine a point on it, his shorts had disintegrated and his wedding tackle was just about fully exposed. Meat and two potatoes. He had a fair amount of support from the watching females, though not much from his jockstrap or shorts. There was a suggestion that the runner should be disqualified, as he was not properly dressed. The SEAAA are very good at getting officials to their competitions and my view has always been that officials should be allowed to officiate and make decisions without outside influence. But as the team recovered their breath at the end of the race, I was approached by the race referee who had been notified by observers that a runner from the winning team had been a bit on the naked side of decent. None of the officials had noticed this but he invited me to make a complaint if I wished. I looked across at my team captain, Mitchy, who shrugged his shoulders and got it just right “he ran nine miles like the rest of us” and so we let the provisional team score stand. There were a couple of interesting subsequent developments however. The same athlete suffered the same indignity at a later televised race, but this time the officials were ready and pulled him out of the race - possibly not the best choice of words - he was disqualified anyway. The other development happened two years later when we were denied a win in the same race - the same officials were quick to spot two of our athletes were wearing a different vest to the others. So there you have it. It's the top half that counts, not the bottom half.

A new venue had been chosen for the National too -Herrington Country Park, near Sunderland. I travelled up the previous summer to see where the course was. It had become a traditional ‘busman’s holiday’ for me - visit the venue of the forthcoming big races as part of the preparation. Herrington turned out to be on the site of an old coalmine which had been landscaped. It was all rather featureless when I visited it in the summer, though the nearby Penshaw Monument gave great views over Sunderland, if that’s not a contradictory statement. The real benefit of the reconnaissance trip came with the discovery of Scotch Corner, which stood out as a stopover point prior to the National. I like to think I’m a bit of a connoisseur of service areas on motorways, but in truth there isn’t much to get excited about. Here are the best that I’ve found:

- Tebay, north and southbound on the M6 in Cumbria. The franchise is given to local food producers. The views, the food and the shops are great. It’s a pleasure to stop there, and my mate Emma who lives near Cockermouth reckons that lots of locals pop in there for basic necessities on their way home.
- Annandale Water - on the A74(M) just over the border in Scotland. The services themselves are adequate, but the lake out the back with walks and bird watching dens make this stop a bit different.
- Cherwell Valley, M40. Not what it was since the redevelopment, but wander down the path between the services and the hotel, and you’ll find a small wooden bridge that leads to a lovely area of meadows. Good for a stretch of the legs and a picnic.
- South Mimms M25. As with Cherwell Valley, the services are nondescript, but the path between the services and the hotel leads to a quiet path, which was once the main road into North London. Surprisingly tranquil.

- Cobham M25. New services, and access into and out of the car park can be a problem, but the foodcourt works - a favourite of mine once I've dropped Lee Merrien off at Gatwick.
- Scotch Corner. A1 at junction with A66. On western side there's a big old hotel whilst on the eastern side there's a hotel, service area, shops. After a long drive north, it's a bit of an oasis with enough facilities to keep you happy.

Let me know if you have any other suggestions. The rest are much of a muchness in my opinion.

I drove to Scotch Corner the day before the National, with Louis, Keith, Andy and Sam Farah squashed into my car. The day itself was cold and windy. It was a hard day for me. Alexa Joel had travelled up to race, only to find out that her club, Basildon, hadn't entered her. I gave her a Beagles number, thinking that she wouldn't trouble the front end of the race. I was wrong because she bombed round and finished in the top 20 which was embarrassing and had the potential for questions being asked. Alexa was very apologetic afterwards for any trouble she'd caused, but fortunately there was none. As always seemed to happen at the National, we had a few mishaps on the day. Keith Gerrard was the standout performance of the day for us. It was his first senior National and he led the team home in 19th. With hindsight, he probably learned a little about the course which was to stand him in good stead six years later in dramatic circumstances. The team (Keith, Andy Robinson, Louis, Sam Farah, Andy Barber and Rob Cole) finished 7th, but Kev Skinner was forced to drop out and John Pike had a tough time on the day. Colin Jenkins made the long trip north to finish 882nd and was delighted. The team race was won convincingly by Leeds, with all six scorers in the first 36, and eleven men in the first 69 - another reality check for us. The National was now one of two races in the Big Seven that we hadn't won. The other was the Southern 12 stage road relay, which was always held at the Open University at Milton Keynes. The trip home was long and I didn't hang around. Somewhere in the Midlands, we stopped for coffee and the guys piled out and came back to the car grinning madly with Queen's Greatest Hits. I was then regaled with Bohemian Rhapsody a la Wayne's World. Having driven nearly 400 miles, I was unable to finish the journey, as 500 metres from home, a police block at the end of my road signalled the end of my driving that day - there'd been a fatal road accident.

As always, I travelled in good heart to the Southern 12 stage, although we were missing a few of our big hitters. I brought veteran Paul Larkins into the team, along with Jamal and 18 years old Andre Duque. All of those years of thinking we'd topple Belgrave in this race, but it wasn't to be as Shaftesbury Barnet got the troops out and beat a weakened Bels by half a minute and we finished third. Frustratingly, Andy Mitchell and Leigh Crispin ran faster legs for our incomplete B team than a couple of the A team runners. That's a team manager's worst nightmare, but at least we had the defence of our National 12 stage title to look forward to.

We had a few missing for the 12 stage, most notably Mo Farah. But when the team gathered at the Holiday Inn (Junction 7, M6) the night before the race, we were clearly in good shape to have a proper go at retaining our title. This time there was no travelling reserve. Moumin

Geele, Sam Farah and Kevin Skinner were all in the team, having joined us in the previous 12 months, so it seemed we could cover Mo's absence.

I was asleep in my room when a shrill sound momentarily woke me. I didn't realise it was the bedside alarm, and turned over to go back to sleep. Moments later, there was a repetitive bang on my door. On opening it, I was confronted by Dave Mitchinson. His wife, Jo, had gone into labour a bit earlier than expected. It was most inconvenient for me though (with hindsight) I'm prepared to accept that Jo wasn't deliberately sabotaging our chances of winning. So Dave shot off to be with Jo, and I lay awake wondering who to try to bring into the team. The obvious choice was John Pike. I made a bad mistake (my second - not taking a reserve was the first), by deciding to contact him at 8am. At the time John was working in a food processing factory that packed vegetables that were grown in the fertile agricultural land of Lincolnshire and Cambridgeshire. He regularly started work at some ungodly hour, and I knew not to contact him after 9pm because he would have gone to bed. He wasn't working that Saturday, but when I rang him at 8am I was too late. His wife Julie answered. John had just gone out for a ten mile run!

Half the team had agreed to meet in the lobby at the hotel at 8.15am to go out for an early morning Kenyan shuffle, just to get the legs moving. I met them and told them what had happened. Pandemonium followed. On their return, various solutions were offered as to how we could replace Mitchy. The best came from Steve Hepples who suggested earnestly that we could ask Mike East. My brain was frazzled with trying to sort out who should run but that suggestion lightened my mood - did Steve honestly think I hadn't been in touch with Mike?! More helpfully, Steve offered to run a long leg, and I decided to ring Leigh Crispin who had run very well in the Southern 12 stage. Leigh was used to calls like this - he'd filled in for the club numerous times in unfamiliar events in the British League - and when I spoke to him, he readily agreed to drive up from his home near Thurrock to help the team out. Help the team? He rescued the situation and if there had been any justice that day, he would have been part of a team that went home with medals.

We bowled along nicely throughout the race, and after Rob Cole had lifted us to 6th at the halfway stage, Moumin, Andy Barber and Keith Gerrard made good progress to 4th. Next up was Leigh on the 10th leg and he ran well and did all that could have been expected of him on the 10th leg. Kevin Skinner put Mark Warmby in the position to attack the medal positions on the last leg. He did just that but we ended up agonisingly short of Belgrave in 3rd place. Let's be clear. Leeds won the race, and we wouldn't have been good enough to beat them with Mitchy running. But losing our talisman cost us nearly two minutes, and that would have placed us 2nd on the day. The team fought well and I was proud of their efforts. Better still, Jo gave birth to Ellie, who is hopefully going to run for Newham and Essex Beagles in the not too distant future.