

## **Mo Farah signs for Beagles, Adjusting our Sights, More signings.**

The 2004-5 started with an undistinguished Beagles performance at the Southern 6 stage, where we finished 7<sup>th</sup> with a frontloaded team. Frontloading is the tactic used by clubs which know that they can only be competitive for some of the race - so you put your best runners on early to get in the race and have some fun near the front. The clubs which are looking to win a relay always hold back some key runners for the latter part of the race, and will tend to space out their strong and not so strong runners evenly. Our performance didn't qualify as a blushing crow, but it was again evidence that we lacked a bit of quality in depth.

Before the race I was approached by Athletics Weekly correspondent Martin Duff. In his usual cheery style, he asked if I was in the market to sign Mo Farah, like all of the other team managers. He explained that Mo had resigned from Windsor Slough Eton and Hounslow for reasons unknown (though I suspected it was to save time in entering races which asked for the name of the club to which he belonged). I wondered how Mr Angry had taken the news. It was the first I'd heard that Mo was changing clubs, and I assumed that he had already identified and probably signed for another club. Mo was already recognised as the best distance runner in the country, and also as someone who was likely to improve further - any club in the country would be glad to sign him. I reckoned he would be most likely to have signed for Woodford Green, Shaftesbury Barnet, Belgrave or Birchfield, but he could have joined anyone - even Highgate Harriers, though this seemed more unlikely the more I thought about it.

A few weeks later, I took a call from Dave Mitchinson who had been training in Teddington on a Sunday morning, and was now sat in a room with Mo who hadn't yet decided which club to join. I arranged to meet Mo a few days later, which gave me time to think about my appearance and that vital 'first impression'. Shaven or unshaven? Aftershave? Tracksuit manager or smart casual? Or should I travel incognito in case EyegateArriers spot me in conversation with Mo? Maybe a false beard? Heavy overcoat? Dark glasses?

I met Mo at Starbucks in Richmond, and he was accompanied by Alan Watkinson, the teacher who had spotted Mo's ability and directed him towards a club. Alan and Mo had stayed in touch, and it was immediately clear that Mo respected Alan's views and had asked him to come along to meet me because he valued his advice. They'd spoken to at least one other club. They didn't feel Belgrave were the right move for Mo. I believe that Belgrave had approached Mo about three years previously which had resulted in some of Mo's teammates going face to face with some of the Belgrave team at a road relay. I got the impression that Mo definitely didn't want any bad publicity. I remember telling Mo that if he joined Beagles he could choose what event he wanted to do in the British League - whether it was an 800, 1500, or a leg of the 4 x 400 relay. I sensed that was what he wanted to hear. We chatted for over an hour, and towards the end I mentioned the Somali born athletes that we had at the club - guys like Jamal Mohamed, Abdi Mohammed and Ahmed Ali. Mo obviously recognised that he was a role model to young

Somalis, but he didn't show any sign of knowing any of our Somali runners. The conversation went well and as we finished I handed over a Beagles application form which I happened to have with me. Mo said he'd get back to me and mentioned that he'd be running at the European cross country trials at Parliament Hill towards the end of November. I decided it may be worth me going along to that race!

Before that, I had extreme difficulty in finding the six runners needed for a team in the National 6 stage road relay at Sutton Park. I'd put on a bright and positive face when I met Mo and had waxed lyrical about how very strong our team was going to be in the road relays. If he'd been a fly on the wall of my flat as I tried to pin down runners for the 6 stage, he'd have probably signed quite happily for Little Dribbling Harriers. As I plunged deeper into despair about fielding a complete team, two runners bailed me out. Steve Hepples had been reluctant to travel but had promised me a run if I was desperate to complete a team. Late on the Thursday evening, I rang Steve to tell him I was desperate. He kept his word, came down to Sutton Park, and ran a terrific second leg, which gave us (and him) a boost. The other hero was a 17 year old, Richard Mead, who agreed to run at very short notice. I collected him on the morning of the race from Bishop Stortford Services, with the promise that I'd get him back there by 7.30pm because he had a date with his girlfriend.

Over the years, I've given a lot of runners a lift in my car, and I've spent many a happy hour clearing up the detritus of the journeys - bottles of water, chocolate bar wrappings, banana skins, mobile phones, wallets - you name it and I've found it under the back seat of my car. Worse still, most of the runners I've transported have no musical taste whatsoever. Your average distance runner is a philistine when it comes to appreciating musical excellence. Occasionally I make a breakthrough. I knew I'd opened a window for Keith Gerrard when he asked me to play Transformer by Lou Reed on a long trip to Sunderland, and Sam Farah was big on Tinariwen. Fortunately, Richard Mead proved to be the real deal in the musical appreciation stakes, as we worked our way along the A14 to the jaunty sounds of the Dandy Warhols. The team finished 24<sup>th</sup> at Sutton Park, with poor Richard getting the worst of the weather at the end of the race as torrential rain turned the course into a swimming pool. He didn't seem to mind though, and told me that he'd learned a lot from the experience. Unfortunately, his running career ended soon afterwards - I never learned why but exams, university, girlfriends, nightclubs are usually cited as the reasons for athletes giving up the sport in their late teens. I accept that's the case but I'm unimpressed by coaches and parents who give up on athletes because they aren't living a suitably nomadic lifestyle. I've known some very good international athletes who manage their lives successfully to incorporate all of these things with training and competition. It doesn't need to be an either/or situation. It isn't unusual for teenagers to want to have a boyfriend/girlfriend, or have a drink, and it isn't unreasonable for them to want to do well academically. Young athletes shouldn't be made to feel guilty because they have a bit of a social life, or because they occasionally miss a training session. I'd rather they find a level of training and competition that they are comfortable with, and which keeps them involved

Our next port of call after Sutton Park (apart from the damned Met League which I'd long since ceased to count) was Mansfield for the cross country relays. Our team of Mitchy, Stu Major, Jamal Mohamed and Richard Sinclair finished 23<sup>rd</sup>. Sinclair had a brief career with the Beagles, joining us from City of Stoke at the recommendation of Kris Bowditch. My impression was that he shared Kris' love of a good drink and social life, but lacked his talent or ability to run fast.

Onto Parliament Hill where Mo stuck the boot in to win the European Trials easily despite being sent off course as he descended the hill to the finish at the end of the race. Behind him, Mark Warmby stormed to a 7<sup>th</sup> place finish, and Dave Mitchinson was 15<sup>th</sup>. It had been raining heavily, and as Mo was surrounded at the end by numerous journos and paparazzi, he reached into his bag, and pulled out a soggy application form to join Beagles. I grabbed it off him quickly and shoved it in an inside pocket. I'd signed the man. It was only later that I found out that Mo (and presumably Alan) had carried out a few background checks. I can't say I blamed them for that - I can talk the hind legs off a donkey. One of the checks almost certainly involved speaking to one or more of the aforementioned Somalis and asking their opinion about Beagles. Abdi had been a member of Beagles and of Woodford Green, and recommended Mo to join us, rather than the Woodies. Mo's change of clubs went largely unnoticed by the wider athletics community. It was one of a number of changes that he was making at the time. He'd joined up with Alan Storey as a coach, and he was spending an increasing amount of his time training with the Kenyans who were based in Teddington. Just as importantly, he was observing the way in which the Kenyans lived - their living conditions were relatively Spartan, and their diet largely consisted of ugali. It was a simple formula of sleep, run, eat, rest, run, eat, sleep. Mo wanted to improve and so he followed suit.

It was a while before we saw Mo in Beagles colours - black with a yellow hoop at the time. But there were more signings to come. Just before Christmas, I was tipped off by Jamal that there was a Somali called Geele who was training in London and who was planning to run in the last Friday of the month 5km organised by Serpentine in Hyde Park. I took a long lunch and trekked over to see if I could meet him. I arrived too late to see much of the race, so I walked to the bandstand where all the runners would return to pick up their kit. Geele had finished 2<sup>nd</sup> because he'd gone off course, but it was difficult to speak to him because his English was poor. The situation was rescued by his mate called Sam, who had also been in the race and asked if he could join Beagles too. Not a problem - we're an open club etc (see previous instalment). Sam Farah turned out to be a damned good runner. The following summer I took him to some open meetings to run 800 metres, and later asked him to run a steeplechase in a British League some 40 minutes after he'd run an 800 metres. He lobbed round effortlessly and professed afterwards to having enjoyed the event. So much for team managers twisting athletes arms to do events they don't want to do. The following summer (2006) Sam won the Southern steeplechase title in his third attempt at the event, and later won the national Under 23 title at Bedford.

Moumin Geele's situation was more complex. He'd been living with his brother in Leicester for over a year, and was a member of Leicester Coritanian, so he wasn't in a position to simply join Beagles and start competing for us. It was a tad difficult to explain to him that club athletics had some strange rules which prevented athletes from changing clubs, without potentially facing a ban from competition. The situation became clearer in 2005, but it wasn't until May 2006 that Moumin was cleared to compete for Beagles - almost 18 months after I first made contact with him.

In early 2005, we were seriously weakened for a defence of the Southern cross country title, and the team finished 11<sup>th</sup>. Mitchy missed the race with shin knock and Andy Robinson with ankle prang, but both returned for the National at Cofton Park in South West Birmingham - one of the best courses used for the race in the last decade or so. I was bullish about the race beforehand - no point in dwelling on past disasters. Before the senior men's race, I took careful notice of the Under 20's race where Moumin Geele finished in the top 20. I was particularly impressed by the winner. It can be taken as read that anyone who wins a national title is very good, but the fresh faced, long striding lad who strode to the front and repelled all challenges looked like the real deal. His name was Keith Gerrard and he was running for Manx Harriers. I'd never been to the Isle of Man (still haven't but I'll put that right before long) but I was fairly sure that regular trips to the mainland to race would be arduous and costly, and that lack of experience made Gerrard's performance particularly noteworthy in my eyes - one to note for the future. He looked like a toughie to me.

The senior men's race was our best performance in the National for a long time. We finished 4<sup>th</sup> and top Southern team, with Mitchy 17<sup>th</sup>, Andy Barber 46<sup>th</sup>, Andy Robinson 48<sup>th</sup>, Stuart Major 55<sup>th</sup>, Kairn Stone 59<sup>th</sup> and Ally Donaldson 94<sup>th</sup> - the sort of performance that often puts a team in the medals but this time we just missed out. I was similarly upbeat in advance of the Southern 12 stage road relay. The team was strong and with Steve Hepples running the fastest short leg of the day, and Dave Mitchinson and Mark Warmby running swift long legs, we hit the front after seven legs. Ultimately Belgrave had too much firepower for us on the day, and we finished 2<sup>nd</sup> just over two minutes in arrears. I was frustrated by the result as we'd got close to Belgrave without toppling them, but I was confident about our chances in the National 12 stage. Mo Farah came into the team for his Beagles debut, and Kairn Stone, Tom Bilham, Andy Mitchell and Andy Barber were also available. Unfortunately Dave Mitchinson, Olly Laws and Mark Warmby were out but I convinced myself that the incoming runners would compensate for their absence. In doing so, I underestimated the quality of the national race - we needed all our strong runners.

In hindsight, the National 12 stage went well enough as we finished 7<sup>th</sup>, our highest ever finish. Steve Hepples ran the quickest short leg, and Mo was 2<sup>nd</sup> fastest long leg - Sutton Park specialist Chris Davies going 12 seconds quicker. Mo wasn't helped by me putting him on Leg 9. That's the leg where traditionally fireworks happen, but Mo was back in 13<sup>th</sup> when he took over, and although he gained five places, the gaps were too large for him to close. Had I put him on Leg 5, we'd have hit the front, and on Leg 7, he'd have put

us in the medal positions. The truth was that we weren't good enough on the day to finish in the medals, but I could see our potential, and so could Steve Hepples. At the end of the race, he told me quietly that if we didn't win the race in the next two or three years, we'd need our backsides kicking. He was right. I drove Mo back to London after the race. He spoke to various people on his mobile and when asked where we'd finished, I could detect the frustration in his voice as he explained we'd finished 7<sup>th</sup>. It was a trait which I saw on other occasions with Mo. He doesn't really do 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup>. Mo has a burning ambition and a drive to finish 1<sup>st</sup>. If he doesn't win, he wants to know why he hasn't won. It was also noticeable that Alan Storey had come to watch him run - Mo was surrounded by good Athletics people which I believe has been an essential component throughout his Athletics career. I believe he's also benefited from his domestic circumstances. When Alan Watkinson took him along to Feltham Arena to join Borough of Hounslow, he was taking him to a club with a great distance coach in Conrad Milton. Mo lived in Hanworth, and this was also close to one of the great distance running environments in the world, with St Mary's University College, Richmond Park, Bushy Park and many of the world's top distance runners resident in Teddington/Twickenham for at least part of the year. Alan Storey, another fantastic coach, had for many years taken an excellent group at Kingsmeadow, and when St Mary's Director of Sport, Dick Fisher, spoke to London Marathon and UK Athletics about setting up a distance running centre of excellence, Mo was a natural fit to be involved from the very start. If Mo had lived in some parts of the country, he may not have been taken to a local club by a teacher, and if he was, he'd have been given a generic training programme and would have packed in within weeks. If he'd continued at some clubs with some coaches, I have no doubt that he would have ended up with a personal best over 5000 metres of about 15 minutes. That may seem harsh, but my point is that Mo benefited by chance from living in a part of London where his talent was going to be properly nurtured by genuine people who cared for him.