

Perfect Day

All good things come to those who wait. We'd signed Nathan Riding from Hyndburn. Coached by long term Beagle Don Lennon who was now living in Blackburn, Nathan joined at about the same time as training partner Robbie Schofield, who was an 800 metres specialist. Nathan was a great club man and became a regular feature of Beagles teams for the next four years, until he made the huge mistake of accepting well paid employment in a hot climate once he'd graduated. Also joining at about this time were two runners from Martin Brown's training group at Basildon. For Paige Haines, it was a case of re-joining the club - a resident of Newham, he'd moved to Martin's group to benefit from proper coaching and a good squad. In fact the 'squad' had proved good enough to beat the might of St Mary's in a 4x800 metres relay, when all of them were still aged 17 or under. The star of the squad was James Shane, and now he came to Beagles to benefit from the right level of competition to meet his development needs. Martin was keener on James learning how to race rather than chasing spurious personal bests at BMC races and then being turned over in championship races. James was serious, grounded and talented and he possessed an insatiable desire to learn and improve. Better still, he didn't like losing.

So off we went to Aldershot (for the Southern six stage) where we were given a couple of indicators that some of our runners were in shape. Dave Mitchinson posted one of the top twenty times and, better still, Moumin Geele was the fastest man of all with a 17.23 clocking that has only been bettered by Mo Farah amongst Beagles runners at Aldershot. His time was significantly quicker than those of Andy Vernon, Phil Wicks, Scott Overall, Mike Skinner and Neilson Hall. The team finished 3rd, whilst the B team qualified for Sutton Park in 17th.

The National six stage road relay was held on Saturday 17th October 2009. Those present witnessed the single most impressive team performance in the race in the last twenty five years. A win's a win, but our performance on the day was awesome as we spread eagled the other clubs, some of which were fielding very strong teams. As race day approached, it was clear that we were loaded. Mitchy and Moumin retained their places from the team that had run at Aldershot, and coming into the team were Kevin Skinner, Lee Merrien, Chris Mackay and Mo Farah. This time there were no late withdrawals, and on the eve of the race I was left to ponder on what calamity could deny us victory. A collision with the man on the motorbike who guides the leading team round the course seemed the most likely disaster, but scenarios involving herds of marauding donkeys, a sinkhole appearing in the decaying road just as our last runner rounded the final bend, and Mo being bitten by an over-excited cocker spaniel all kept me awake for a ridiculous and unnecessary amount of time. It sounds arrogant, but I felt we would be much too strong for the other clubs with this team, and the best I could hope for was that Aldershot would include Jonny Hay, Chris Thompson and Andy Vernon in their team which would keep us honest throughout the race.

When we arrived at Sutton Park, practically the first person I met was Andy Vernon. He wasn't running as he'd been ill in the previous week. I was genuinely disappointed because Aldershot had a fine team at the time, and I wanted us to take them on when they were at full strength. There had been some idle speculation on the internet that Mitchy was no longer

capable of running 17.30 round Sutton Park, but he dealt with that in the best possible way by running 17.30 on the dot on the opening leg to bring us home in 13th. Then Chris Mackay marauded through the field to give us a lead of perhaps a metre after the second leg. Lee Merrien extended the lead to 38 seconds at the halfway point, and at the end of Leg 4 Kevin Skinner had protected our lead, which left the other clubs with a bit of a problem, since running our last two legs were Mo Farah and Moumin Geele. Predictably, and without any fuss, they set about rubberstamping the win, with Mo clocking 16.33, the fastest time of the day. Moumin was running the Cabbage Patch 10 the next day, and with a lead of well over a minute, there was no need for him to switch on the afterburners. He still ran quick though to extend our winning margin. After the race, I went with Tony Shiret, Chris Mackay and Lee Merrien to a British League anniversary dinner. It was an odd affair, and not what I would have chosen to do had I known we were going to be so dominant a few hours previously. So those are the bare bones of how we won the 2009 National six stage road relay. With the benefit of a few years hindsight, there are a few statistics and comments which may reveal the scale of our performance:

- Our winning time of 1 hour 43 minutes 14 seconds broke the course record by 70 seconds.
- Our winning margin of 1 minute 40 seconds is the largest in the history of the race.
- Runners-up, Belgrave recorded the fastest non-winning performance of the race (1.44.54).
- Bedford and County somehow missed out on the medals in 4th position after running 1.45.13. One year later, they ran 29 seconds slower and won the race comfortably.
- No fewer than 13 teams ran faster than the 2015 winners of the race, Tonbridge AC. The depth and strength of the teams in 2009 was very good.
- Only one team (Aldershot in 2011) has broken the 1.45.00 barrier since 2009.
- Three of our team featured in the fastest ten legs of the day - Mo Farah (1st), Moumin Geele (4th) and Lee Merrien (equal 9th). These three runners all competed in the 2012 Olympic Games.

I've always felt that we could have gone faster on the day. Mo was already well in front when he took over, and didn't need to extend himself, and likewise Moumin's split of 17.03 suggests he had a bit left in the tank. Maybe we could have run closer to 1.42.30 on the day. I think the course record (our first) will stand for a few more years. Our B team of Sam Farah, Kairn Stone, Ian Grime, Scott Sterling, John Pike and John Clarke were excellent and finished 23rd.

We went to Mansfield for the cross country relays and it was very much a case of 'after the Lord Mayor's show'. The Newham Recorder had somehow missed coverage of the six stage win, but interviewed Mitchy after we finished 20th at Mansfield. He was the only member of the winning team from Sutton Park and stated honestly that "we all had to be at our best to (to

finish in the top 10) and we weren't". James Ellis and James Shane both made their debuts for Beagles in winter competition. The Under 20 team of Harun Abdi, Robbie Schofield and Paige Haines finished 23rd.

It wasn't a good day for us at Mansfield but we had a huge new target in front of us. Having won the National cross country team championship at Parliament Hill in February, we were now pitched up against the Scottish and Welsh champion clubs to earn the right to represent Great Britain and Northern Ireland at the European Clubs Cross Country championships at Bilbao in February 2010.

A report of the race is attached - no point reinventing the wheel. Interesting to note the first Shettleston finisher - Tsegei Tewelde now has a British passport and has been selected for the Rio Olympics after his 2:12.23 marathon at London. The first thing I did after we qualified for Bilbao was to ring Kairn Stone and tell him that he was selected. Kairn demurred and explained that he knew there may be better runners available, but I was insistent, even assertive. Best thing I did all year because Kairn was in shape by the time we went to Bilbao, and for weeks afterwards.

Before Bilbao I went to Dublin to watch the European Cross Country Champs, and do the tourist sightseers gig. This did not involve visiting the Guinness factory or sitting in atmospheric Dublin pubs where famous literary figures whiled away the time in the previous century. There was enough to see and enjoy in Dublin without spending the weekend swimming in alcohol - Trinity College, Temple Bar, O'Connell Street, the walks along the Liffey, the Famine Statues - cracking place. I stayed in Ballymun on the outskirts of the city but close to the airport. Ballymun is now being regenerated which is a polite way of saying the area has some problems. The buildings probably looked great when they were first built but they were tired looking and there was clearly plenty of local economic and social deprivation. The hotel I stayed in was about 15 minutes walk from the course for the cross country at Santry Demesne. It was a decent day. Particularly, I enjoyed Hayley Yelling's performance in a race in which she wasn't fancied for the win. Hayley simply went to the front and challenged the others to take her on - she was awesome and very gutsy. It wasn't quite so simple for Mo Farah, who found the Spaniard Bezebeh, too strong. Mo ran himself into the ground and collapsed at the end. I wandered round to the tent where he was treated and had a quick chat as he recovered, and then took his wife to see him. Bezebeh was subsequently found to be in possession of a bag containing his own blood which was intended for a transfusion, and served a two year ban. I did try to convince Mo that he could gain revenge over Bezebeh in Bilbao, but it wasn't a race that fitted into his plans. I was also impressed with Chris Thompson in Dublin. He had an awful run, and he knew from an early stage that it was all going wrong, but he stuck with it and made sure he finished. He was 55th. I spoke to him the next day at the airport and he explained that dropping out was not an option. Good man. He put it right later in the year when he won a silver medal in the 10,000 metres in the European Championships in Barcelona behind Mo.

The logistics around the Bilbao race were heavy. That is the prospectus weighed a lot and was complicated - it was sent to me by email under the catchy and thought provoking title of

"Harmonised Regulations of the European Champion Club Cups". Fortunately, I was able to skip though most of the bureaucracy. For example Clause 11.5 stated "there shall be no closing ceremony".....that's alright then. Greg Hull of Leeds City gave me invaluable advice based on their previous experience, which included the recommendation that I should nominate our team of six as late as possible. The six runners selected were Kairn, Dave Mitchinson, Kevin Skinner, Scott Sterling, Rory Chessser and Lee Merrien. All bar Scott decided against running nine miles of muddy cross country at Parliament Hill the week before.

We flew from Stansted on the Saturday afternoon. Rory's coach from Ennis, Pat Hogan, met us at the airport and was very agreeable company. We were only in Bilbao for a shade over 24 hours but it seemed to me to be a city well worth exploring. The hotel used by the teams was a five minute walk from the Guggenheim Museum, and the old part of town was a similar distance in the other direction. The women's team representing Britain were Les Croupiers from Wales. They must have done well to win the Welsh Champs, especially since Swansea Harriers are invariably very strong. Their path to Bilbao was then smoothed somewhat by the non-appearance of Scottish and Northern Irish teams at Sefton Park, and by the English champions Charnwood failing to close in a team. Now they were facing the biggest running challenge of their lives. There wasn't a lot they could do, and I think they decided to enjoy the experience. I may be wrong but I think I spotted several of their team disappearing into the night at about 11 p.m. on the eve of the race. Our boys went to bed at 10 p.m. except for Scott who stayed in the bar drinking hot chocolate. On the morning of the race, I wandered along to the Guggenheim which had not yet opened. I may be wrong but I think I spotted several of the Les Croupiers team taking selfies - their race was starting in about two hours.

The course was held on the site of an old pottery, in a fairly bland looking park. Nearly 7,000 people turned up to watch. The course was full of switchbacks, was quite narrow, and by the time the men's race started, there was scarcely a blade of grass to be seen. It was a greasy experience for the runners. Les Croupiers found the women's race to be tough going - there were 72 finishers and their five athletes finished 55th, 60th, 62nd, 70th and 72nd. The men's race was held over 10km, and the field was loaded - arguably it was better standard than the main European Champs in Dublin two months previously. Bezabeh won from Ayad Lamdassem and Gabriele De Nard, with a Kenyan Pascal Sarwat 4th despite being misdirected at the finish and having to hurdle over a rope to get into the short finishing straight. The Czech team he was representing made mild comments about this in the results tent. I joined in light heartedly with some comments about the Spanish and was firmly put in my place by the young woman behind the desk who explained that " we are not Spanish, we are Basques". The Spanish team (not Basque) won the team race from the Italian and Portuguese clubs. A Turkish club were fourth.

It was difficult not to wonder how many of the leading runners were possibly on drugs, especially when you consider that our first finisher, Lee Merrien, was 17th, and later in the year represented GB in the European Champs. As did our second finisher, Rory Chessser, who was 36th. Next came Kairn Stone in 39th, followed by Kevin Skinner (52nd), Dave

Mitchinson (58th) and Scott Sterling (70th). There were 92 finishers. The team finished 8th out of 18 complete teams. It was tough out there but a great experience. With Moumin and Mo in the team, we would have been close to team medals. We had a few hours to kill after the race, so we wandered into the old part of the city and sat down at a cafe for a coffee. There were some British tourists at a nearby table drinking wine - I may be wrong but.....ah, of course. Les Croupiers.

I'd have liked to pop along to San Mames to see Athletic Bilbao play Jerez, but time didn't seem to permit. So we exited Bilbao on a coach to the airport. The airport was closed when we got there, and so we killed a few more hours until the Jerez team arrived at the airport. Then we boarded our return flight, arriving in Stansted at about 11 p.m. Most of the team were working the next day, and Kairn had to face up to a long drive home to Plymouth, followed by school at 9 a.m. the next day. The British club set up is very different to that of most other countries, as was seen by our need to get our runners home so that they could go to work on the day after the race. For example, the Italian team received sponsorship from the Italian Fire Brigade and had flown Andrea Lalli to Bilbao from Kenya. The Russian team that won the women's race was widely suspected to be a Moscow select team. I like the British club approach to Athletics in many ways, but I do think there is much to be learned from other countries (especially in regards of funding) - though perhaps not from the Russian team.

Our next task was to try to defend our National cross country team title at Roundhay Park, Leeds. I think I knew on the morning of the race that it wasn't going to be a successful defence, but I was pleased that we made a decent fist of the defence. Moumin Geele was in great shape and took on Andy Vernon, who eventually prevailed by nine seconds. Midway through the race I was called by UKA who wanted to know about Moumin's nationality status. I was very calm by my standards and refrained from getting stuck into the caller - they'd done precious little in the preceding three years to secure Moumin's passport, whilst giving their support to numerous easier cases of athletes with tenuous links to Britain. Behind Moumin, Kairn (25th) and Rory (31st) were excellent, and Ian Grime made a rare cross country appearance in 69th. The team finished 8th, with Jamal Mohammed (199th) and Andy Barber (268th) closing in the team. Andy's run was of the heroic variety - he gritted his teeth to finish despite being injured, but it was a long time before he was able to race again. On a brighter note, Kairn was seriously fit and on a roll. His next race was the Bath half marathon where he ran a personal best, which led to him being selected to represent England in a half marathon in Denmark - where he ran sub 66 minutes for the first time for another personal best.

To finish the winter season, we had the challenge of the 12 stage road relays. We still hadn't won the Southern event, despite winning medals five times in the previous eight years. As the race approached, it became clear that we would be very competitive again and my thoughts turned to fielding a complete B team. I spoke to Mo who was due to represent GB in the World cross country championships one week after the Southern 12 stage. I suggested it may be a good blowout for him as he hadn't raced for a while. He came back to me five days before Milton Keynes to say that UKA were happy for him to run, but with the proviso that he ran a short leg only. I began to think that this could finally be our year. We weren't at full

strength as we were without Keith Gerrard who was at college in Albuquerque, Chris Mackay (injured), Lee Merrien (marathon preparation), Frank Baddick, Sam Farah and Rory Chesser. The A team (in running order) was Grime, Shane, Stone, Hepples, Sterling, Riding, Geele, Mo Farah, Mitchinson, Ellis, Skinner and Warmby.

Grimey brought us home in 2nd at the end of the opening leg, at which point James Shane took over. As he disappeared into the distance, I remember Alan Mead quietly saying 'that may be the last we see of you today'. It was, although Belgrave were worthy runners up on the day. We were already two and a half minutes clear at the front when Moumin took over. He ran the fastest long leg of the day and handed over to Mo. There's a lovely photo out there of Mo overtaking a woman from Nene Valley. I've often wondered if she saw the photo and has a copy hanging on her living room wall. Otherwise, the reception for Britain's finest distance runner was subdued, as he ran the fastest ever short leg at the Open University course. By this stage, we were six minutes clear of Bels, with strong runners lined up to finish the race. Kev Skinner was a bit doubtful of the shape he was in, so I gave him the last long leg. Kev had been unduly pessimistic, because he flew round the course and it became apparent that we could break the course record. I gave Mark Warmby the nod about the record as he set off. He was in good shape and he brought us home to a new course record and an overwhelming win.

As Mark finished, there were only four other teams that had even started the last leg. Our B team finished 18th. Our slowest short leg runner, Nathan Riding, still featured in the top ten short legs of the day. Goodness knows how fast we may have gone with the likes of Gerrard, Merrien, Chesser and Mackay in our team. In the aftermath of the race, Will Cockerell wrote a piece for Athletics Weekly which questioned why we had bothered to field such a strong team given the overall lack of interest in the race which he felt he'd witnessed at Milton Keynes. This question is easily answered. We'd never won the race Will, and it mattered to us. Winning is fun, as Will himself would probably acknowledge. The more challenging question that Will asked was whether or not there is still a place for a 12 man road relay - from memory he suggested maybe eight or ten stages. I don't think this is the answer, though I think the question is relevant and thought provoking. My personal view is that if you reduce the number of required runners to eight, or ten, it's the thin end of the wedge, and we'll end up with a National 2 stage road relay. Better for clubs to aim at getting their act together and fielding a full team in an important race. Interestingly, Highgate Harriers failed to put out a team at Milton Keynes in 2010, yet in 2016 they've just won the National title. Meanwhile, we scraped a team together for this year's Southern 12 stage at Gravesend and had to work hard to finish in the top 20 and qualify for the National event at Sutton Park. The ebb and flow of club athletics should never be taken for granted. At Gravesend this year I was especially pleased for South London Harriers whose men's and women's teams performed well after many years in the doldrums. I suspect that ex Beagle Stuart Major was largely responsible for this renaissance, and sometimes that's all that's needed - one person with the drive and energy to make something happen.

For the National 12 stage at Sutton Park, we were without Mo, Ian and Scott. Rory came into the team, along with Frank Baddick and Bryn Reynolds who had just joined the club from

Herts Phoenix. Bryn was in good shape as he was preparing for a first marathon run at London. It was a difficult situation for him to make his debut for the club, but he was very level headed and in good shape. In fact, Bryn ran well on the first short leg at Sutton Park, and then stood near the finish watching the race unfold in the bright sunshine. The race unfolded very nicely for us. James Shane hit the front for us on the 4th leg, and Frank Baddick regained the lead after a brief interlude on the 6th leg. We stayed in the lead, with Moumin Geele wheeled out for the classic ninth leg fireworks. he didn't disappoint as he ran the fastest long leg of the day. Steve Hepples anchored us to victory in four hours nine minutes and twelve seconds - over two minutes in front of runners up Tipton and two minutes faster than our 2006 winning performance. The team was Mitchinson, Reynolds, Chesser, Shane, Stone, Baddick, Warmby, Riding, Geele, Ellis, Skinner and Hepples.

I was quoted after the race as saying "we've been on a bit of a roll. Apart from one or two little knocks it's been a very good winter. We have got a score (sic) of established runners who have been with us for a number of years and are around a lot of the time. We have critical mass- quality and strength in depth. Our very, very high quality athletes are supported by a number of up and coming young athletes, who have come through our system." I'm not sure where the "score" of established runners came from, but please feel free to include yourself in this number if you were running at the time. "Our system" was unconventional and not based at this time on developing young, local talent from Newham - that worked well enough in unearthing sprinters, jumpers, hurdlers and throwers, but not in finding distance runners. We had to supplement our distance runners by hard work, talent spotting, and establishing a reputation as a good club to run for with committed and friendly runners. It had been a great winter with wins and course records in the National 6 stage and Southern 12 stage road relays, a win in the National 12 stage road relay and a merry jaunt to Bilbao to the European Clubs Cross Country Champs. To top it off, Lee Merrien ran well in his London Marathon debut and earned selection for the European Championships in Barcelona where he finished a creditable 8th. I was there, passing on improbable pieces of advice to him in the blazing sun "g'wan Lee, you're only a minute off the bronze medal" - Lee didn't fall for it and thankfully ran his own race! Plus of course, Mo did a 5000/10,000 double in Barcelona and Rory made the Irish team in the 1500. Good times.