

Six stage glory and Keith Gerrard's day in the snow

There was a decent influx of new runners in the months following the 2012 Olympics. We signed a few runners as a result of a Community Athletics event that was held at Terence Macmillan Stadium between the Olympics and Paralympics. Rob Perkins, Phil Eldridge, Thomas Fouret and Rashid Ali put in appearances, mainly in the Met League, over the course of the next couple of seasons. Peter Huck had moved to London after graduating and joined us second claim, and then Eliot Buckner, a student at Loughborough, came to the club. Both are talented runners on the track, as well as on the country and the roads. A key signing around this time was Niall Sheehan, an Irishman who had been studying and working in Edinburgh but had now re-located to London. From the moment Niall joined, he committed himself to racing for the club, and was particularly important in his encouragement of younger or less experienced runners. Along with Wayne Bell, Niall has bolstered our line-ups over the last few years. Later in the 2012-13 season, Gavin Smith joined us from Winchester -he continues to advise John Beattie and Lee Merrien but is also a very good runner in his own right.

Over the years, Rushmoor Arena in late September was often the scene of pleasant and even balmy weather. Not in 2012 though. When we arrived in the nearby car park, the rain was lashing down so I suggested to the runners including Rory Chesser who I'd driven down, that they stayed in the car whilst I picked up the team numbers and found somewhere relatively dry as a team base. There's little in the way of cover at Rushmoor, and the tree we normally congregated under wouldn't give us much respite from the appalling conditions on the day. I'd walked the course many times and I knew that there was a blocked bridge under the road that goes gently uphill towards the end of the circuit. It was about 400 metres from the changeover area, and it was at least dry though a bit gloomy and miserable. The bare facts of the race were that Kent won from Aldershot and Bedford. Our A team (Mitchinson, Hepples, Laws, Pike, Chesser and Dawes) finished fourth, just over two minutes behind the winners. The B team of Sheehan, Major, Stone, Bell, Tommy Bower and Reynolds finished 30th. We nearly had a complete C team too but ended up one short after stints from Andre Duque, Craig Jacobs, Rashid Ali, George Choat and David Kail. George was to play an important part in subsequent events, all of the C team having travelled down to Aldershot in a minibus.

I remember the conditions so clearly. The rain was heavy. It was very wet rain, not drizzle. It was unrelenting. The sort of torrential downpour that goes on and on and leaves you soaked to the skin. I didn't pay much attention to anything other than seeing the race through with our impressive turnout of seventeen runners. Steve Dawes was trying in vain to pull us back into the medals and I'd asked Tony Fern if someone could give Steve a lift back to Southampton Airport. The race finished and it wasn't the sort of day for hanging around, especially since there were no medals for us. I left the team's bleak headquarters for the afternoon in the company of Bryn Reynolds and headed towards the car park. On arrival there, my car was locked and empty. I rang Rory who told me that he'd left early because Olly had offered him a lift back to Kingston. This presented a problem. Rory had just arrived home and he still had my car keys.

The very wonderful Segrid Ayers had given up a day to drive the East London based runners down to Aldershot in a minibus, and fortunately they'd only just left Aldershot. A quick call

to someone on the minibus, and Segrid turned round to collect us. As we left, I saw the also very wonderful Mike Neighbour, from Aldershot, who was responsible for so much of the race organisation, and let him know that there would be a VW Golf left in the car park. He thanked me and explained that the car park would be locked and that I would need to contact him the following day as he would unlock the barrier. Next call was to Rory who agreed to meet me at Twickenham railway station with my car keys. There was plenty of traffic on the M3 but all aboard the Segrid mobile were kept royally entertained by Mr Choat. George, for those who have never met him, has a larger than life personality, and he is irrepressibly positive and determined in all that he does. He's also fiercely proud of being a member of the Beagles and takes interest in all around him. He certainly cheered me up that day as I wondered how I was going to get my car back.

The key handover went smoothly with Rory looking suitably sheepish, and I finally got home after a train journey, some four hours after the race had finished. Next day and the rain had relented as I took a rail journey at a leisurely pace to Aldershot. Then a taxi to Ruhmoor and a wait for Mike Neighbour who I'd called en route. It was just as well that I'd spoken to Mike the previous evening as I left Rushmoor. He was contacted at home on the Sunday evening by the MOD. They'd found an abandoned VW Golf in the car park and were planning to carry out a controlled explosion!

Next stop was scheduled to be Sutton Park and I knew the team would be stronger than at Aldershot with the return of John Beattie, Lee Merrien and Frank Baddick. Unfortunately, Birmingham City Council decided to cancel the National six stage as there was foot and mouth disease identified in some of the animals in the park. At this stage, Will Cockerell of Belgrave started looking for an alternative venue, assisted by Mike Neighbour. They settled quickly on a National Trust property near Worksop in Nottinghamshire called Clumber Park. Unfortunately, we'd lost a crucial week or so, and Lee had elected to race in Cardiff as a replacement for Sutton Park. It was a bit of a rushed job for all concerned, including the team managers, but I was happy enough with the team that lined up to represent Beagles.

Clumber Park was a very attractive setting, and the course was acceptable though a couple of the turnings were a bit on the tight side. This suited our first leg runner, Dave Mitchinson, perfectly. He settled at the back of the leading group, and every time he seemed about to be dropped, the runners ahead of him would slow to negotiate one of the bends, and Dave would regain his position on the back of the group. Frank Baddick scarpered round the second leg to improve our position by four places, before Chris Mackay bolted through to third at the halfway stage. Ahead of us, Johnny Mellor had run the fastest leg of the day to give Liverpool Harriers the lead, with Aldershot just behind them. I'd decided that Chris Mackay and John Beattie were in the best form, so I put Chris in action in the first half of the race, and held back John to later, but not too late. Leg 5 felt right, after Kairn Stone had maintained our position on the fourth leg. John was very good on the day, running a time that only Mellor bettered. The course was unfamiliar to everyone, but as John came into the changeover, it was clear to me that we had a winning lead so long as Rory Chesser judged the last leg properly. He did. There was no need to go belting off. It was a case of trusting your form and believing that no-one behind you was good enough to catch you. Sounds simple, but I'd hazard a guess that Rory was like a cat on hot bricks and ready to bolt if any bystander shouted too loudly. I wandered out onto the course to give Rory some information about his

lead and what was happening, but road relays aren't like motor racing grand prix where the drivers seem to be given detailed computerised feedback on car performance and position of rivals. It was more of a case of 'good stuff Rory, nothing coming behind you.'

So we won by 31 seconds from Liverpool with our old rivals Belgrave enjoying a revival in fortunes to finish third. It was our third National six stage win in six years. Dave Mitchinson had been in all three winning teams, and it was a second gold medal for the modest and likeable Chris Mackay. But for the others it was a first six stage win. I was pleased for everyone, but especially for long serving Kairn Stone who could and should have been part of the winning team in 2006, but was now finally in possession of the elusive gold medal.

We were 16th at Mansfield, despite John Beattie coming in second at the end of the first leg behind Steve Vernon of Stockport. The race was controversial. Belgrave won with their four man team of Nick Goolab, Paskar Owor and two brothers, the De Pedros, from Spain. Nobody had an issue with Nick or Paskar, two highly respected runners. But there was a feeling that the two Spaniards had been flown in for the race and that it was doubtful that they'd ever served a qualifying period in terms of living in Britain. Belgrave's win was met with resentment and anger, and the team were booed as they received the trophy at the awards ceremony.

Belgrave hadn't broken the rule about eligibility of foreign athletes but then the UKA rule about residence before a race was written in a lazy and poorly defined manner. Moreover it was impossible to police or to challenge. The brothers had competed that summer in Britain but had they been 'resident' here for a period that stretched beyond a week's holiday? The feeling of many was that Belgrave had not operated within the spirit of the rules and that they had 'imported' a couple of runners specifically for the race. The stakes were high too, for this was the first year in which winning the National Cross Country relays would result in the winning club being the English entry for the UK club championships at Liverpool in late November, and the winners of that race would then represent UK at the European Clubs Cross Country Champs in February 2013.

A few years earlier I'd been to an end of season BMC meeting at Eton. The finale was the 5000 metres which Mark Warmby had won in about 13:52. Not far behind him was a Kenyan whose name I forget. The following week I fielded a call from someone who had been to the club track at Plaistow, and who was tipping me off that there was a world class Kenyan there who wanted to run in the forthcoming road relays. I was suspicious and found out that the Kenyan was the same guy that Mark had put away convincingly. He had an agent, or a wannabe agent, who was touting the guy around seeking a few little earners for himself and the runner. I could have signed him up and put him in our teams - he wasn't bad. But I felt that would be denying someone else a run, and I felt it was against the spirit of the sport and what we wanted to achieve as a club. I don't like 'win at all costs' - there's a way of doing things which is as important as what you achieve. So I passed on the said Kenyan who subsequently ran about 68 minutes in the Robin Hood half marathon, before returning to his homeland, doubtless saddened about not being given the chance to represent the mighty Beagles at Rushmoor Arena, Aldershot.

I think Belgrave had stepped over that line at Mansfield. But I also had a couple of other views on the situation at the time. Firstly, I was of the opinion at the time that the Spaniards

were a couple of guys who ran low 14 minutes for 5000 metres on the track. Good but hardly earth shattering. They were beatable I thought. My other reservation related to Belgrave's possible qualification for the European Clubs cross country. If they won the run-off at Liverpool against the other home countries champions, they would then be asked to nominate up to six runners for the Europeans - but by the rules of the competition only one of these could be non-British. So there was a distinct possibility that they could qualify with four runners, of whom only two would be eligible to run the following February against the top clubs in Europe. That didn't feel at all right to me.

In fact, Belgrave went to Liverpool but were turned over by the Scottish champions who then represented UK in the European Clubs Champs. But the saga of the Spaniards had only just begun, and it was to have a real bearing on ourselves and other clubs, particularly those in ethnically diverse cities such as London. What started as a squall at Mansfield assumed the status of a fully fledged storm over the following twelve months with potential repercussions for the sport which I felt strongly about.

There wasn't much for Beagles to report on from the 2013 Southern XC Champs at Parliament Hill, apart from the performance of our new signing, Niall Sheehan, who finished 51st. Niall had already been running consistently and frequently for us that winter, having moved to London from Edinburgh. Rory Chesser had put Niall in contact with the club, and it's difficult to think of any runner who has been more wholehearted, supportive and committed to the club. Niall's intelligence and fair-minded values were also to be crucial for the sport in spring of 2014, as the fallout resulting from the Spanish brothers appearing for Belgrave drew to a close. The team title at Parliament Hill was again won by Bedford. This time, their performance surpassed previous successes as their six men totalled a miserly 57 points, with their final scorer placing 18th. That was an incredible performance by Tony Forrest's men.

On a more positive note, our men finally secured promotion from Division 2 of the Metropolitan League on a fine day at Haberdashers Aske School, where the efforts of Niall Sheehan, Wayne Bell, David Kail, Jad El-Houssami, Phil Eldridge, Eliot Buckner and Rob Perkins were rewarded. We set off next for the National XC Champs on 23rd February 2013, which returned to Herrington Country Park near Sunderland. Keith Gerrard was back and looking to retain his individual title. I drove him north on the Friday and we stayed at the Scotch Corner Hotel. There was a minibus coming from Newham, driven by Segrid Ayers with mostly young athletes on board. It was an eventful Friday evening.

Kairn Stone had been on honeymoon, but had agreed to travel north as soon as he got back to Gatwick - a fantastic example of Kairn's dedication to the club. Unfortunately Kairn mislaid his car keys or managed to lock himself out of his car that was waiting at the airport. His Beagles kit was in the car too. He couldn't find a locksmith, and his spare keys were in Plymouth. Arrangements were put in place for Kairn to fly to Newcastle Airport on the Saturday morning, for his Dad to catch a train to Gatwick on the Saturday with spare keys, and for me to find Kairn some kit and buy him some cross country spikes for the race.

By 10.30pm there was no more to be done to resolve Kairn's situation so I went downstairs to the bar where I seem to remember an incredibly boring man explained to me that there would be some very talented runners taking part the next day. I hadn't realised. The minibus was

late. It had left East London before 5pm, but the rush hour and deteriorating weather conditions had led to a tortuous journey north. The young athletes were staying in a hotel in the Services area on the opposite side of the roundabout, so I wandered over and picked up a coffee and waited for them. At 11.45pm, it began to snow, and the minibus finally showed up about half an hour later.

By the next morning, there was a layer of snow on the ground, but fortunately Newcastle Airport had been cleared, and so I was able to collect Kairn and motor back south to Herrington. I parked at the back of the course, and wandered over the course to pick up the numbers, leaving Keith to keep warm in the car. He was very quiet, almost uncommunicative, and very focussed. I watched some of the early races. The temperature rose to just above freezing and a combination of thaw and hundreds of feet pounding the course turned it into a slushy mess. The start area was the usual mass of colourful club tents, but underfoot the area resembled the trenches at a First World War battlefield. The course was now a mud bath, and it was turning colder again.

Our senior men arrived, including a young Eliot Buckner and the Beagles debutant, Gavin Smith. We had a good team, not without a chance of finishing in the top three. The three lap course was churned up by the time the final race of the afternoon, the senior men's, started. It was clear to me by the end of that first lap that we weren't going to pick up team medals, not because anyone was running badly, but because the Northern clubs were stacked at the front end of the field. After nearly two laps, the front group had been whittled down to four - Keith, Steve Vernon, Neilson Hall and the surprise package, Shaun Dixon of Highgate.

The big move came with about a lap to go. Hall and Dixon had been clinging on desperately, but Keith and Steve had too much left in the tank and broke clear. What followed was a brutal head to head and the most exciting clash between two evenly matched runners that I've ever seen. Cross country running is full of stories of the hard men of the past who would never yield an inch in the worst of conditions. These conditions were as bad as it gets and Steve and Keith confirmed their 'hard men' status - though both are as good as gold when they're not racing. Each took their opportunity to try to break clear. I tried to find vantage points to watch the unfolding spectacle, and managed to cross the course to take up a point next to the ropes with about 600 metres to go. Keith had broken clear by maybe ten metres, and I thought he had the race in the bag so I swung round to get into place perhaps 100 metres before the finish line. It was after the race that Keith told me that Steve had regained the lead with about 400 metres to go, but that Keith had managed to respond one last time. Keith ran up the finishing straight just in front of Steve with his face contorted with a combination of pain and determination. It was awesome. Steve lost nothing in defeat - his performance was also awesome.

I was now on the wrong side of the tapes, so I stayed put for a while to watch the finishers, before buying a cup of tea at a burger van. Hall was third, and Dixon fourth - for both it was surely the best run of their careers. Gavin Smith was excellent, finishing 22nd, and our team was completed by Dave Mitchinson (48th), Olly Laws (62nd), Kairn Stone (69th) and Niall Sheehan (125th). We ended up a commendable 6th, but Morpeth, Leeds and Notts took the team medals, with really impressive packing in the top 50 or 60. The finish area was an almost pitiful sight, as team mangers and supporters tried to find scissors or blades to cut the

laces on the shoes of frozen runners. Eliot Buckner, who had finished a commendable 171st in his first senior National asked for my cup of tea. In fairness, I couldn't really refuse, so I handed it over. "I don't want to drink it" said Eliot, "I just want to hold it to warm up my hands". Meanwhile, Niall was in a first aid tent wrapped in one of those silver bacofoil suits. In case anyone thinks that some of the runners were indulging in softie, diva-like behaviour, the winner of the race Keith Gerrard was also receiving treatment for the onset of hypothermia. In the middle of this carnage, the freshly showered, resplendent figure of the remaining Beagle strode across to me with a broad smile on his face, having nailed 565th. It was George Choat. We finished 8th on a nine to score basis.

Eventually, a cold and wan Keith Gerrard was presented with his National trophy. I suggested he waited for me to return with my car, so I set off in the fading light to slip and slide across the Arctic conditions to find my car. There were two figures inside - Kairn and Dave - and the heating was on full blast. It was like stepping into an oven and I fancy I'd only have driven about a mile before falling asleep at the wheel. They'd both run the National a decade earlier at the Downs in Bristol which was the only previous race where these two experienced runners could remember feeling as cold. Keith was going back to the Isle of Man and had arranged to meet the Manx Harriers team that evening. With Tony Shiret present and ferrying various athletes around, we agreed it would be best for Keith to book into a hotel and have a shower and some rest.

So we set off for Scotch Corner again. Here's why the Travelodge at Scotch Corner is the best hotel in the world. On arrival, Keith and I entered the hotel to try to book a room. The guy on reception was in his fifties and his face dropped as Keith wandered in behind me. Keith had put on tracksuits trousers, waterproofs and trainers, but the conditions at Sunderland had got the better of his clothes. As he walked slowly across the reception, a wet and miserable looking slick of sticky mud was deposited on the floor. Fearing that we were about to be denied a room on account of the state of Keith, I announced that Keith was a hero and he'd just put himself on the line to become National cross country champion. Keith summoned up enough energy to point to the medal round his neck, and the deal for a room was struck. Fair play to the guy on reception - many would have turned us down. About six hours later, I arrived at Fleet Services on the M3 with Kairn, where we met his Dad and Kairn was reunited with his car. It had been a long and unforgettable weekend. Keith's courageous win was as good as it gets and the pictures of his mud-splattered face are still shown as an example of cross country running.