

Some early successes....

The initial promise of our results in Autumn 2000 couldn't be sustained of course. Turnout in the Metropolitan league and Southern cross country veered between negligible and non-existent. We had no runners in the National and hopes of fielding a team in the 12 stage road relays were thwarted. The club was still in the team forming phase. I had a sense that some of our runners didn't really believe we would compete on the day. Years of experience told them that others had a habit of dropping out and that they'd end up as part of an incomplete team. The main bugbear was unavailability. Athletics is at heart an individual sport. Every athlete has their own aspirations (personal bests, medals, wins) which are based on individual success and turning out to put one in for the team doesn't always tally with personal aims. Additionally, athletes can be unavailable due to injury, illness, personal commitments, amnesia, stupidity, unreliability – whether it's a reason or an excuse is immaterial to a team manager who needs to find someone to complete a road relay team the following afternoon in Milton Keynes. Back in the second half of the 2000-01 season, what we lacked was numbers. If you want to run a team in a 12 stage road relay, you need 24 potential runners – minimum. For the first BAL match of 2000, we had 27 athletes unavailable, but still managed to get a team to Eton which covered most events and finished 2nd on the day. It was my view that if we got enough quality runners to race together, we'd have some success and that would generate more success. I can't explain why this is the case, but it's more fun being part of a team that does well, even in an individual sport like Athletics.

As the winter season 2001-02 approached, we'd made just one new signing. A promising 1500 metres runner, Michael East, had joined us from Portsmouth. Mitchy had persuaded a university mate, Andy Mitchell, to join us but his clearance to compete for us became bogged down in petty bureaucracy. The process of changing clubs is an area of the sport which has improved massively in the last few years - England Athletics have simplified the process. My position on this has always been clear. Changing the club that you compete for is not a hanging offence. Athletes do not sign contracts when they join a club and they should have the freedom to compete for whoever they wish. Over 50 years ago, changing club could result in a two year ban, and as recently as 2001 an athlete could face a nine month ban if the club they were leaving objected to the athlete moving. Andy was an example of an athlete who became demotivated whilst he waited to compete for a new club.

Many 'smaller' clubs still perpetuate the belief that the biggest evil facing the sport comes when athletes choose to join a bigger club. It's nonsense. Athletes change clubs for a combination of push and pull factors. The pull factors are those which attract an athlete to a club whilst the push factors are the reasons why they choose to leave their existing club. Clubs 'losing' an athlete would be well advised to ask themselves why this has happened and whether or not it was avoidable. In my time as team manager, Beagles have gained more athletes than we have lost. I'm entitled to believe that for various reasons athletes like competing for the club and consider that they are treated properly. But athletes do sometimes leave us and I refuse to stand in their way when this happens. In Summer 2000, a promising young runner called Simon Burton turned out for us regularly and then suddenly decided to return to his original club, Notts AC. He'd joined us for better competition, but he was still

training with the Notts lads and wasn't really happy with the progress he was making. Simon was a good lad and Notts are a proper club. I remember him being very apologetic about wanting to leave us but I wouldn't have any of it – it had been great having him as a member but I wanted him to enjoy his running and in fact he continued running for Notts for many years afterwards.

We kicked off the 2001-02 winter season at the Southern 6 stage at Aldershot and it was a hugely satisfying afternoon as we finished 2nd - the first time the club had won medals at area level since the halcyon days of the mid 1950's when the club's roster included Jim Peters and we regularly featured in traditional races such as the London to Brighton. We were at full strength (not often you can say that) - Grimey, Mitchy, Mark Warmby, Andy Robinson, Kairn Stone and Michael East. No divas in that team. They were all there because they wanted to run. From a team manager's position it was a low maintenance team and a pleasure to manage.

We were in the lead for over half the race, and there was a sense that this wasn't in the script. Then Kairn went out on the fifth leg and ran the ninth fastest leg of the day but for his troubles he was blown away by a whippersnapper called Farah. The story goes that as Mo overtook Kairn, some of the Windsor boys shouted "destroy him Mo". Kairn wasn't bothered – a real class act and we were all delighted with the result. Sutton Park and the National 6 stage was almost as good. We missed Kairn in that race but Ian Grime showed he'd lost none of his finishing kick as he sprinted into 4th place at the finish. Our time of 1:47.04 would have been good enough to win the 2015 version of the race. Momentum – when you've got it in life, just roll with it. Don't question why things are going well or try to improve things – just enjoy. Off we went to Mansfield for the National cross country relays where we homed in on a set of bronze medals courtesy of Mitchy, Warmby, Grimey and Andy Robinson. So in the space of six weeks, we'd produced three very good performances and bagged our first set of area and national medals in the modern era.

The challenge now was to avoid another season disintegrating after a good start. The Southern xc saw a good 7th place for Mitchy and he and Kairn finished top 33 in the National at a frozen Bristol Downs. The season's finale featured the Southern 12 stage road relay and (hopefully) qualification for the national event at Sutton Park. This time we chased down athletes from all corners. Some were having their first run for over a year. We had six quality runners but it was a bit patchy after that. It got patchier the day before the race when Jamie Parsons dropped out. The only option was to ring Plaistow based teenager, Jamal Mohamed, who readily agreed to run. I liked his attitude but I also knew that he was inexperienced and probably lacking a bit of quality. Long serving member Don Lennon had agreed to come down from Lincoln to run but I had no idea if he was in shape. I decided to keep the long legs strong and to backload the team. Don ran the fourth leg and was about to go home with his family, until I suggested he might want to wait as I thought we could be in the medals. Being part of a Beagles team that won medals was not something that Don had experienced. Jamal did just what was asked of him on Leg 6, before we pulled through strongly in the second half. Belgrave were well away in the lead but we ended up comfortable in 2nd place with a visibly worried Martin Kearns anchoring the team. I learned a lot from how I set the team up

for the day. I didn't want to set up the lesser runners as targets for the other teams, and I noticed how mentally strong you need to be to sit around for four hours before running the last leg. We even took a team to Sutton Park which acquitted itself well enough with a 12th place finish in a shade over 4 hours 20 minutes.

Watch out for the next instalment - A major signing and a first team win.....