

Success attracts success:

In the months immediately preceding and following the 12 stage relay victory, five experienced runners opted to join the club:

- Moumin Geele - the protracted saga of him joining Beagles was finally resolved nearly eighteen months after he first asked to join the club. During that time, Moumin had moved from his brother's home in Leicester to live in Teddington, which gave him the right to join us due to residence. Moumin had the ability to train at a high tempo and he had the scope for huge improvement. Alan Storey understood that and asked me to give him a range of racing opportunities to increase his experience. I have to say that (Alan apart) I never felt that UKA knew what they had on their hands. Moumin was an asylum seeker, and I learned quickly what that entailed - his was a hand to mouth existence. But he was also a proud man, who neither sought nor accepted handouts.
- Scott Sterling - I was approached by Mark Sanford of Basildon who asked if he could register as a Higher Competition Athlete with us and then pursue his ambitions to become a decent steeplechaser. Mark was a great addition and made the progress with his new event that he was seeking. At the same time, Mark's training buddy and club mate Scott Sterling rang me and asked to join us first claim. Scott came from a background steeped in Athletics and he knew several Beagles from his time studying at Loughborough. I think he was looking for fresh impetus in the sport.
- John Clarke - a former non-league footballer, John had converted to running comparatively late, and had received a lot of guidance from distance running legend Paul Evans. He was living in Hertfordshire and again seemed to be looking for a fresh start to his competitive running. A really good guy with a mature outlook and hard as nails in a racing situation.
- John Pike - experienced and based in Lincolnshire, Pikey was on good terms with Paul Larkins and Andy Barber, but otherwise his only connection to Newham was a lifelong support of West Ham. Hugely enthusiastic and always gave good value, I think he'd become a bit disillusioned with his previous club.
- Kevin Skinner - had been running with Garden City Runners without pulling up any trees or getting close to his potential for a number of years. Based in Hatfield, Kevin started training on a regular basis with Dave Mitchinson who wasted no time in suggesting to him that he could become very good, and that joining Beagles would be a great move.
- Keith Gerrard - initially joined as a Higher Competition Athlete for Summer 2006, but was injured throughout the track season. Keith then joined us first claim in late summer. There was no problem with his club at the time, Manx Harriers - Keith was (and remains) very proud of his roots and appreciative of the support he's always received from Manx. As a student based in London, I think he made a decision after some careful thought that he needed a mainland club - happily he chose Newham and Essex Beagles. I was dead chuffed.

That's six very good runners who joined us in a short space of time, and all went on to make (and in some instances are still making) big contributions to our performances. None of them joined because we had just won the National 12 stage road relay, though all would have been aware of our success when it happened. So why did these six runners opt to join us? None were based in East London, but the London/South East area obviously has good transport links which can make any club in the area attractive to someone who is looking to change clubs. Contrary to the beliefs of conspiracy theorists, there was no financial inducement on offer to these guys, and the club had no aggressive recruitment policy in place. So why did it happen? My view is that there were a number of factors in play:

- The club had built a reputation for being good to belong to.
- Beagles were known as a club which tried to fit its athletes into the highest level of competition it could find.
- Many of our runners were great ambassadors for the club.
- We were seen as a club with a distance running team that had classy runners and momentum - we were going places.
- The team was succeeding and success attracts successful people, or people who want to be successful.

I find that many clubs unwittingly drift along in apathetic torpor, fulfilling fixtures but without any apparent enthusiasm or excitement. Excellence, or the pursuit of success, is envied but not fully understood. Too often, long serving and devoted members of clubs speak reverentially of the good old days, and set their own standards for how the sport should look and how it should function. In other clubs, most of the decisions are made by one person, who is hopefully an enlightened and benevolent dictator - but don't count on it. Yet examples of success attracting success are all around us in Athletics.

Out of curiosity, I looked up Mick Woods on the Coaches section of Power of 10. He is listed as coaching 191 athletes. Now I wouldn't want to stake much on that figure being accurate because the list of athletes coached by Mick clearly includes many who no longer compete, but then again there is no compulsion on an athlete naming their coach on Power of 10. I know that Mick doesn't only look after large groups of athletes at sessions at Aldershot, but that he also advises many athletes by phone or email. Mick may not be everyone's cup of tea, but his athletes certainly have a record of success, and look at the numbers of athletes who choose to go to him for advice. At the other end of the scale, Steve Vernon is a new coach, and Power of 10 attributes just 8 athletes to him (including his wife) but just look at the quality of the athletes who have elected to be guided by him.

My father coached for over fifty years and built up a reputation as a coach of 400 metres runners. In fact, he coached athletes at a wide range of events but if one focuses on the one lap event, he first coached Donna Murray to international level, and then Todd Bennett. When Kriss Akabusi, a PT Instructor with the Army, was told he was being posted back to Britain, he asked to be posted to a base near Southampton so that he could link up with Mike Smith. Then an 18 year old with no real experience of Athletics, failed to get the requisite grades to do a medical degree, and decided to spend his gap year seeing how good an athlete

he could become. So, on a recommendation he started training with the same group - that was Roger Black. Bennett, Akabusi and Black were all members of the GB team that won gold medals in the 4 x 400 metres relay at the Stuttgart European Champs in 1986. Later, Paul Sanders, Paul Harmsworth and Iwan Thomas were all coached by my father. As Fuzz Ahmed (another international athlete coached by my father) has put it "there's nothing special in the water in Southampton that produces 400 metres runners. So why have so many great 400 metres runners been trained there?" The answer is simple - great coaching, hard work and a group that worked hard together. The athletes were successful and so the group attracted more athletes due to its reputation and success.

Let's look at a couple of examples of teams which have been successful. Nobody would argue that the most successful university for track and field athletics is Loughborough. They seem to win the BUCS Championships for top university every year, and easily too. If you're studying for you're A levels with a view to going to University and continuing your Athletics, Loughborough is probably going to be the first university that a student actively considers. The facilities and set up are great of course, and it's unlikely to be difficult to find support and other athletes to train with. There's more pressure on universities today to provide excellent service to their students - the student satisfaction surveys are taken very seriously at a time of high fees for courses - but Loughborough has a head start where provision of sports facilities and support is considered and will retain its position at the top for many years yet.

As a very young boy in the sixties, I used to be taken to cross country and road races across the length and breadth of the South of England. If a race was being hosted at Southampton Sports Centre, I used to try to keep up with Reg Gosney (a former national cross country champion) as he ran into the old Forestry Commission land adjoining the Sports centre to mark the course and direct the runners at a key point in the woods. I loved it and became very conversant with the names of all the runners. I can even remember seeing a young Mick Woods in action at that time. The dominant team at the time were Portsmouth AC and they provide the second example of a successful club, as well as proving there's nothing really new to the concept of success attracting success. They seemed to win everything and the names of their runners are permanently imprinted in my head - Hyman, Tulloh, Johnston, Salvat, Lindsell, the Cooke brothers, Plumpton, Lillicrap and so on. Portsmouth AC were placed in the National cross country for seven consecutive years in the sixties, and they were hugely successful in road relays at the time too. Their team manager was a Scottish shipfitter (be careful with that one if you're prone to reading out loud) in the Royal Dockyard called Andy Gibb. Andy had taken over as Hon General Secretary of Portsmouth after the Second World War, at a time when a high proportion of the GB Athletics teams came from a public schools/Oxbridge background or from the Armed Services. Portsmouth AC were well placed to sign runners from the Royal Navy who were based in Portsmouth or neighbouring Gosport, but the club's approach to the sport in the 1950's was more innovative than that.

Much can be gleaned from a book written a decade ago by one of the club's members throughout the post war years. Alan Keel's labour of love is entitled Men's Athletics in Portsmouth 1880- 1980. Note the book's title - for most of that century, the city of

Portsmouth had three clubs - Portsmouth AC were 'men only' whilst Portsmouth Atalanta and Portsmouth Olympiades were 'women (or girls) only'. The book is hardback, with 420 pages, and is beautifully researched with wonderful photos. Mr Keel obviously had access to a vast quantity of Committee minutes and results and the book is astounding in its detail. By 1954, the club was expressing concern that an offer of a coaching course by a National Coach had not been passed on to affiliated clubs in Hampshire by the County Coaching Secretary, whilst in the same year it was noted that "M. Hyman was now a member of the club thanks to the foresight of our Hon General Secretary, who spotted his potential and arranged for his membership nomination." Martin Hyman was a student at Southampton University at the time and later became captain of GB teams. Later, Bruce Tulloh was spotted at Southampton University and signed by the ubiquitous Mr Gibb, and he went on to become European 5000 metres champion. Of the athletes named by me above, only Johnny Lindsell and Clive Plumpton could be said to be Pompey boys, but the club had ambition, good team spirit and an irrepressible driving force in Andy Gibb. It was of no consequence where the runners lived or trained, because when they came together in a team competition Portsmouth AC were the match of any club in the country. Portsmouth's success didn't last for long, but the secret to sustaining success is one that can be looked at separately.

There's another factor to take into account when looking at 'success'. It isn't just about winning Olympic gold medals or national road relay titles. A former colleague of mine, Steve Surety, talked about athletes needing a 'taste of success' - anything from a personal best, to beating someone for the first time, or qualifying for a final in the District Schools event. I knew what Steve meant, and just recently had a reminder of how valid this is when I attended a Metropolitan League race at Perivale. I was stood at a distant outpost on the course with a few other enthusiasts. None of us knew each other, but I heard a chap from Thames Valley Harriers explaining how it had always been his ambition as a runner to finish in the top 100 in a Met League race. He never made it, but he could remember the race when he got closest to his ambition - he understood from experience what the sport is all about. For clubs, the measure of success may be winning Division 2 of the local cross country league, or retaining athletes and growing membership, or doubling the number of qualified coaches. Those are all valid measures - the important thing is that the club knows what it's trying to achieve, and at its heart it should be athlete centred.

Athletes best memories of the sport (once they are retired) will be of performances in competition, their fondest memories will not be of the night they managed to complete a tough training session. They'll remember the competitions that went well- and badly. All the training and coaching in the world is no good without competition. This is where many clubs and athletes go wrong - they focus on coaching (good) and training (also good) but they don't really think very much about the competition angle. Clubs need people to pull the competition together for their members - this is the role of a Team Manager. I've offered to give talks on this, but no- one has ever taken me up - not that I'm surprised! But I do get frustrated by the approach to competition by many clubs, and I've often surmised that the problem may be that clubs are full of people who think they know what is best for an athlete. In some cases they may be right of course, but there's always a need to respect the wishes or

ambitions of an athlete, however contrary they may seem. Unfortunately, there are many people in athletics, like in life itself, who don't know as much as they think, but who are surprisingly good at carrying off their lack of knowledge with an air of superiority.

So the message is this - success matters, so make sure you're not getting on a train to nowhere. That may sound ridiculous, because trains run on tracks, so they must go somewhere? Well, athletes run on tracks as well, and I can assure you with all sincerity that many athletes don't end up going anywhere at all. They go round and round until they get dizzy and bored, and then they pack up. Or they leave to join another club, which is then blamed for poaching or recruiting athletes.

Next.....Glory Days (Parts 2, 3, and 4)