

## **The final push to success - more signings.**

2005-06 season started with a weakened Beagles team finishing 7<sup>th</sup> in the Southern 6 stage, followed by poor showings in the opening two Metropolitan League fixtures of the season. After two races in the Met League, we stood 17<sup>th</sup> in the table out of 23 teams. The National 6 stage was much better, and we finished 4<sup>th</sup> but it doesn't help a team when the manager makes bad decisions. I made some fundamental errors on the day. Mo Farah was available to run, but we were without Mitchinson, Warmby and Robinson, and my pessimistic view was that we weren't good enough to finish in the medals. To this day, I'm not sure why, because I can usually convince myself that if everything falls into place, we'll be up there. With this in mind, I ran Mo on leg 4, and put our weakest runner, Ben Hellmers, on Leg 6. The race was unexpectedly weak in terms of quality, and we were 8<sup>th</sup> at the halfway stage - about where I'd expected us to be. Mo ran quick on the fourth leg, but not extravagantly so, to lift us to 3<sup>rd</sup>, behind Altrincham and Wells City. At this point, Stuart Major ran an unbelievably good leg, vying for the lead with Steve Sharp of Belgrave, and brought us home 2<sup>nd</sup> just four seconds from the lead. Ben Hellmers is probably the best young runner to come through the ranks at Beagles in the last 15 years, but his form was uncertain and he was a late replacement for the team. I dashed off to the bottom of the hill to evaluate the overall situation in the race and give Ben any guidance that I could. I knew that he couldn't push on for the win but I was hoping he had a big enough gap for us to stay in the medals. He went by, and then my worst fears were confirmed as Ian Hudspith of Morpeth and Nick Talbot of Notts came into view, about 90 seconds behind Ben. Two very good runners who were battling each other and who had the additional incentive of a fading target in front of them. I trudged back to the finish area, knowing deep down that there was only one likely outcome. Sadly, I was right. I'd set up Ben as a target by running him on the last leg - it would have been much better to have let him run without added pressure in the middle of the race. Ben was a proper gentleman as always and didn't let any disappointment show. He'd been called up late, responded to the call, and travelled to Sutton Park to do his best - and that's what he did.

Any thoughts that signing Mo Farah would result in the team automatically winning, were swiftly revised when he turned out for a third time at Mansfield in the cross country relays. The team was good too - Ian Grime, Stuart Major and Dave Mitchinson completing the line-up, but we finished 5<sup>th</sup>. Another lesson learned there by me. Berry Hill Park is a fantastic venue for the cross country relays - it's got a bit of everything as it's in turn undulating, greasy underfoot, wooded, twisty, and it has some open parkland with good going, and a steep rise to the finish. It's also quite narrow, and it's difficult for a good runner to gain ground in the latter stages of the race due to the number of lapped runners. There's a simple knack to doing well at Berry Hill Park - get near the front from the start and then stay there. I would have been better putting Mitchy or Mo on Leg 1.

Our next team outing in major competition was at the Southern Championships which returned to Bicton College near Exeter after three years. It was a remarkably successful day for Beagles as every senior man who finished went home with a medal. That hadn't seemed likely at the mid-point in the race when Ben Hellmers dropped out. Jamal

Mohamed had been caught in a logjam soon after the start, and had been reduced to walking through a pinch point in the course. After one lap he was back in 220<sup>th</sup> place (I was counting) but as the race progressed, the gaps appeared for him to get into his running and he began to cut through the field like butter. Jamal finished 102<sup>nd</sup> - a heroic run which resulted in the team picking up silver medals, with Mitchy winning his first ever Southern title and deservedly so, as he broke away from Will Levitt of Bedford near the finish. Behind Dave, Kairn Stone (7<sup>th</sup>), Stuart Major (21<sup>st</sup>), Andy Barber (22<sup>nd</sup>), and Mark Wilkinson (63<sup>rd</sup>) completed our line-up.

We had one other medallist at Bicton College. A first year student at St Mary's, Tom Bilham, finished 3<sup>rd</sup> in the Junior Men's race behind Andy Vernon. Tom had joined the club as a 16 year old from Chichester, along with a 400 metres runner, Fraser Deans. He was lightly trained, but quick over 1500 metres and the club used him mostly in Southern League competition during his first year with us on the track. In the winter months, if the club needed to stay overnight in a hotel, Tom would retire to his room and wouldn't be seen until it was time to go to the race. He was unusually nervous before races, especially if he was in the company of older athletes, but he put his nervousness to good use in races.

He gained entry to St Mary's as part of their 2005-06 intake. This was possibly the first year when the St Mary's endurance initiative for promising young distance runners took hold. Andy Vernon, Keith Gerrard, Chris Hart, Tom Boardman all started together and a room was found for Moumin Geele, as Mo alternated between living with Micah Kogo and other top Kenyans, and living at Number 5, close to the St Mary's campus. The student athletes were all grouped together on the ground floor of a hall of residence on site. Discipline within the hall was sometimes a bit lax, perhaps to be expected amongst a group of teenage students living away from home for the first time. The butt of many of the student pranks was a young Scottish runner, Darren Shinnie. There was a serious side to Shinnie (as he was known to everyone) and I gave him a few lifts to and from races and was impressed by his ability to see the wider picture. He lasted two terms at St Mary's before returning to Aberdeen, having decided that the life of an athlete was not for him. Given some of the antics of his fellow undergraduates, I wasn't entirely surprised though he always took the various indignities he suffered in good part, and probably gave as good as he got on occasions. Tom Bilham was usually at the forefront of any of the silliness that arose at St Mary's - he was a very different person when surrounded by people of the same age as himself.

Tom made startling progress as a runner at St Mary's. Rumour had it that he'd never run more than 10 miles in a week before going there, but Mick Woods quickly sorted him out and encouraged him (if not forced him) to go out for a daily run. The following summer, Tom became an outstanding junior runner, running 14:22 for 5000 metres and winning the national 3000 metres title at Crystal Palace in front of a large crowd. Tom was a 'talent' but unfortunately he didn't really like running very much. But for a period of just over 12 months he became a key member of Beagles teams on the country and the road.

In late 2005 Rob Cole of Mandale joined Beagles. He'd been encouraged to join by Steve Hepples. In those pre Power of 10 days it wasn't always possible to evaluate the quality of a new member but Steve was very positive, and Rob made his Beagles debut at the National at Parliament Hill, where he finished 106<sup>th</sup> and the team placed 12<sup>th</sup>. He was clearly a decent runner and I got the impression that he'd drifted a little for want of good races on the track and in the winter months. It seemed like a good fit for Rob to join us, and I was only wary that sometimes runners can join a club that's involved at the business end of team prizes, but be unable to cope with the pressure. It's sometimes a case of trying too hard, and sometimes a case of not knowing how tough it can be when you're at the front in a road relay with people on the course watching your every stride.

The final signing prior to the spring 2006 road relays was Louis Jones, who joined us from Crawley on the recommendation of Andy Robinson. I think Belgrave approached Louis shortly after he joined us, which rather rubber stamped the qualities of the guy. Louis turned out to be a confident and experienced runner who wasn't likely to be fazed by any situation. Like the rest of the guys who would be in contention for places in the 12 stage road relay teams, he was easy to get on with and sociable. We weren't a team of drinkers from the Razer Ruddock 'win or lose we hit the booze' school. If the team stayed in a hotel, it would be before a race to prepare, not afterwards to celebrate. I saw staying in a hotel as a way for the runner to get a decent night's sleep, followed by a morning of getting mentally prepared without the strain of travelling to a race and encountering hold ups on the motorway, or trains that weren't running. The team would often meet up in the bar of the hotel on the night before the race, and we'd chat about our prospects. But nobody ever seemed to drink alcohol. That wasn't because I wouldn't allow alcohol - it was the runner's choice. We were lucky to have a group of runners who were serious and professional in their approach to the sport.

I knew all the theories of Forming, Storming and Norming of teams, and of Team Development from countless training sessions and seminars at work over a 25 year period. Margerison McCann Team Management Wheel, Myers Briggs personality type, Saville Holdsworth personality profile? Been there, trained to administer and interpret the results, understand them, got the tee-shirt. I've also known many former sportsmen who have made good money from giving seminars on recounting their experience as being part of a team as a sportsman and how this can be transferred to the workplace. For what it's worth, I think it's all a load of bollocks. Or as Caius Petronius put in AD 66 (just before the first London to Brighton 12 stage road relay?) "we trained hard, but it seemed that every time we were beginning to form up into teams, we would be reorganised. I was to learn later in life that we tend to meet any new situation by reorganising, and a wonderful method it can be for creating the illusion of progress while producing confusion, inefficiency, and demoralisation."

Leave all that stuff for the workplace - it's not much use there either. As a team manager, I wasn't interested in balancing out the skills sets of the team, or getting a mixture of introverts and extroverts, or finding out how the team would react to a crisis at a race (and we had a few - it was my job to sort those out), or any of the other spurious benefits

which are claimed by cod experts in teams. I didn't care if Rob Cole disliked Louis Jones or vice versa - all that mattered to me was that they both put it all in for the team. I picked the best team that I could put out for a race, and occasionally that involved me selecting some runners and omitting others. I knew the runners and what made them tick as individuals, and I sifted out from the bigger races the timewasters or unreliable runners who wouldn't turn up, or who wouldn't give 100%.

Louis Jones made his debut in Beagles colours at Silverstone in the AAA/UKA half marathon championships. It was a blustery day and the motor racing circuit was quite exposed, but our three man team did very well to pick up team silver medals behind Shaftesbury Barnet Harriers. Dave Mitchinson had one of his greatest races, seeing off the challenge of Matt Smith to win the individual title, and Louis placed 5<sup>th</sup>, with Jamal Mohamed completing our team in 14<sup>th</sup>.

In the previous six years of managing Beagles teams, I had noticed how often we seemed to be one good quality runner short of winning or placing in races, particularly at national level. Signing a huge talent in Mo Farah had improved our chances but we'd failed to trouble the placings in his first three races for the club on the country or the roads. I was (and I remain) a firm believer in the concept of critical mass, which in terms of my team management at Beagles, I'll define as "the minimum number of quality runners needed to make a credible challenge to win a race". For teams that don't realistically expect to win a race, the concept still applies - the important thing to remember as a team manager is that you need bodies to go out there and compete. I've lost count of the number of times I've heard bad luck stories from other team managers about athletes dropping out due to injury, or going on a family holiday, or not turning up. It happens all the time, but the most successful teams have a fallback position. If you have two female pole vaulters in a club, don't be surprised if at some stage during a season, one (or both) of them will be unable to compete. Don't bleat about it - try to anticipate the problem and ensure that someone else can deputise if necessary.

As we approached the climax of the 2005-06 winter season, I realised that Beagles now had the critical mass to win the 12 stage road relays. That didn't just mean that I could fill 24 or 36 names on an entry form. It meant that, even allowing for the normal list of unavailable athletes which occurs before so many competitions, we would still be likely to have 18 good runners available for selection. Our strength in depth was tested at the Southern 12 stage road relay at the Open University on Sunday 26<sup>th</sup> March 2006. We were without first team regulars Mitchinson, Major, East, Warmby, Farah, Laws and Barber, and we expected to be without Andy Robinson too. Andy was a skilled carpenter on building sites, which meant he was liable to work long hours in the summer and shorter hours in winter. He'd been struggling with a knee injury, and had been prepared to enter hospital for a cartilage operation at the time of the race, but the consultant advised him to keep on running for the time being, and so Andy contacted me two days before the race to ask me if he could run. It proved a fortuitous change of position. By the day of the race, I was already looking ahead to the National 12 stage, thirteen days later, when we looked as if we could be loaded. But first we had to qualify, and the Southern would give

me a chance to evaluate the form of all the runners, just in case I needed to make any selection decisions.

The race became a bit of a procession as Belgrave hit the front before halfway, and breezed to a facile seven minute win over Bedford. I'd agreed with Andy that he should run the last leg just in case he had any difficulties with his knee and needed to ease off, or even drop out. It looked as if we would just miss out on the medals as Andy started the last leg in 4<sup>th</sup> place, one minute and eighteen seconds behind Aldershot. That's a big enough gap, but Andy picked up the pace in the second half of his leg in running the fifth fastest short leg of the day. It was an unexpected and delightful finish to a long day when Andy powered up the short finishing straight at Milton Keynes in bronze medal position. Next stop would be Sutton Park, and I'd been planning that for a few weeks already. Mike East was a definite non-starter, but it was positive regarding the other absentees from the Open University.

**Next - Glory days (Part 1).**