

The man who neutralised Muttley, and the Marathon Men.

The 2002-03 winter season had ended with the National 12 stage at Sutton Park. We finished 8th which was fine, particularly after the calamity which befell Ian Grime on the first leg. We'd been confident that Grimey would punch out a sub 26.30 clocking, but unbeknown to him and to us, he had an undetected heart problem. At the end of the leg, there was no sign of him, until after a long, anxious wait, he appeared at the end of the finishing straight. He was weaving from one side of the road in obvious discomfort, and on reaching the handover area, he collapsed and rolled around in the dirt. After being checked out by the St John's, he departed to the nearby leisure centre before returning to Manchester for a wedding reception. Quite frankly, he was in a mess, and it's to his credit that he pursued the reasons for what happened and didn't start racing again until he was medically sound. The rest of the team did exceptionally well in the worrying circumstances, pulling through from 59th to 8th.

Our misfortune at the 12 stage was followed by a decidedly humdrum spell the next winter. It wasn't the first time I'd presided over a decline in fortunes, but it seemed that the harder I worked to steady the ship, the more water we took on board. We started the 2003-04 season at the Southern 6 stage where we placed 4th - a decent performance but we were never realistically in the hunt for medals. At Sutton Park, the team was decimated by injuries and late withdrawals. Our team included two local teenagers, Ben Hellmers and Ahmed Ali, and in the circumstances our final position of 19th was fair enough. Our first two Met Leagues of the winter conformed to usual Beagles typical performances - six at the first race, and eight at the second, when we needed twelve to score. The National cross country relays at Mansfield resulted in a 9th place finish.

Looking back on this series of results, the reason for our performances is obvious. One of my best qualities is to read the game and I feel that my work was betrayed. I'd done phenomenal work and brought the team to a level that they couldn't keep going.....I will admit that I didn't realise all of this at the time, but I've just been reading Jose Mourinho's comments after Chelsea lost to Leicester, and I think he's got a point, which is more than Chelsea got at Leicester.

Hang on - he's just been sacked by Chelsea....

There were some saving graces during this less successful phase. I've mentioned the inclusion of Ben and Ahmed in our teams, and they combined with Tom Bilham for an Under 20 team which finished a creditable 8th at Mansfield. Another young runner, Richard Mead, had made his senior debut for the club in the B team at Aldershot. Unfortunately, none of these athletes made the transition into the Senior age group - that's a theme which I'll be looking at soon.

One piece of team success that Autumn happened at the AAA 10km road championship, where Dave Mitchinson, Andy Robinson and Ben Hellmers picked up bronze medals, with Paralympic gold medallist Noel Thatcher just missing out on a team medal. The race was held at Bourton on the Water, a chocolate box pretty Cotswolds village with a reputation for quick times over 10km. There was initially some doubt whether or not we'd won medals as

nobody seemed to know if it was three to score or four to score, so our intrepid runners went home and left me to hang around for the medal presentations.

The presentations were taking place in a village hall and there was no sign of anything happening for some time, so I bought a cup of tea and looked at the set of results that had been produced. The times were quick and the first three individuals were Kenyans. They were followed by Rob Whalley, Dave Anderson of Belgrave and Stephen Hepples of Loftus AC. I'd never come across Hepples but I knew where Loftus was, and I was pretty sure the club were properly known as Loftus and Whitby AC. Been to Whitby I thought, and my mind wandered to previous visits to the North Yorkshire coast. I'd stayed at Scarborough, which is a bit of a gem - much older than I'd realised, with a castle, and a theatre where Alan Ayckbourn plays get their premiere. Scarborough was also bombed by the Germans, but in the First World War, not the Second. A couple of German ships sailed up the North Sea coast and there were significant deaths incurred in Scarborough, Whitby and Hartlepool. Whitby's a cracker too - possibly makes the top five towns to visit in Yorkshire? I pondered some other options - Knaresborough, Harrogate, Hebden Bridge, Keighley, Bingley? Then I started wondering where Mr Hepples lived. It's a bit remote along that stretch of coast. I'd been to Kettlewell where the village disappeared into the sea during some storms in the 18th century, and to Staithes which is pretty, and I'd walked from there up to the high cliffs at Boulby, where the potash works suddenly appear in a dip on the main road. Better still, I'd dropped down the cliffs to the ledges where they mined for alum, which was used to fix dyes to clothes. It worked even better with urine apparently, and I've always been fascinated by the process of experimentation which led to someone peeing on some alum and deciding the chemical reaction would be just right for dyeing. What else did they try before hitting on that concoction? It must have been a bleak place to work in winter too, with cold easterly winds, and high, precipitous cliffs around you. Bleak place for training runs on cold winter nights too. All this and more I considered as I awaited the damned medal presentation. It was a long wait.

Finally, the moment arrived for the presentations. Hepples was third finisher in the AAA race in 29.49. His name was announced and a small, blonde fellow walked sheepishly forward. He looked pretty young too. I'd like to tell you that I bowed forward, waving a Beagles application form in my hand, before telling him that I wasn't going home until he'd signed for us. But I didn't, though I did make a mental note of his name, and, exhausted from recalling in detail the geography of the beautiful North Yorkshire coast, I did think that he was possibly living a long way from anywhere which isn't easy if you're looking for good quality races. I'm always interested in the notion of peripherality and how runners deal with being located a long way from the top competition opportunities. The travel involved can be lonely, time consuming and costly.

I didn't have too long to wait before I heard the name Hepples again. About four months later, I took a call from Mark Warmby on a Sunday evening. He'd just run the Dewsbury 10km, and was decidedly pissed off that he hadn't been placed first after a tight, sprint finish. I asked him who had been given the decision and he said a bloke called Hepples. I assured Mark that he was a really good runner who'd done well at Bourton, to which Mark responded

that in fairness he seemed like a decent lad and he'd suggested he spoke to me about joining Beagles.

I'd estimate that's how 80% of new distance runners were signed by the club. There was no recruitment policy. Beagles are an open club and anyone can join us, regardless of age, gender, ethnicity, religion, sexuality etc. As team manager, I was very lucky to have a bunch of bright and enthusiastic runners who spoke to other runners. I've often tried to work out a way of showing our signings in a pictorial format. I guess what I have in mind is a form of family tree - Warmby spoke to Hepples, who spoke to Cole etc.

I spoke to Steve Hepples on the phone, and then met him in person when he came along to watch the National cross country at Leeds. It wasn't one of our better days, but Steve was keen to join. I think it would be very difficult for anyone to take a personal dislike to Steve. He was also a very determined bloke who at one point seriously considered relocating to Teddington in an attempt to progress further with his running. His early experience with Beagles wasn't great. I was tipped off by Ian Grime that on his British League debut over 5000 metres, he was told five minutes before the start that he was needed to run a steeplechase too. But as soon as we introduced him to the road relays, Steve was in his element. Steve sometimes ran a long leg in the 12 stage relays but his preference was to run short legs, and I quickly realised that I had the best 'chaser' in the business. I would study previous year's results in great detail, then I'd estimate the times of my runners, and from there I'd calculate the best leg for Steve to run. The aim was to avoid putting Steve on too late when the gaps between teams had emerged, but to set him up with a line of runners in front of him who he could chase down one by one. Steve would finish his leg in pieces but he would invariably be one of the fastest runners at the 6 stage, and maybe the fastest short leg of the day at the 12 stage.

By coincidence, Steve 'Muttley' Sharpe of Belgrave preferred a short leg too. The two Steves got on well together and respected each other's ability, but our Steve was generally a few seconds quicker. There came a time when Muttley sidled up to me before a road relay, but instead of asking me if the team was strong, he asked if Hepples was running a short leg. That was the moment when I felt Steve Hepples had neutralised the damage that Sharpy had inflicted over the years. Steve seldom runs competitively now, but over the years he was a part of seven Beagles team that won an area or national title, and won fifteen medals in total. Dave Mitchinson and Kairn Stone were the only two Beagles to win more than that - not bad for a little, blonde fellow from the North Yorkshire coast - Hinderwell to be precise.

There was another memorable trip for me at this time, when I accompanied Dave Mitchinson to the Amsterdam marathon. Dave's first attempt at the marathon had been the previous April at London. The preparation had gone well, but the race was disastrous. At that time, the course went round the Isle of Dogs in a clockwise direction, and I positioned myself in the middle of West Ferry Road where the crowds were thin. The elite runners and leading British runners had passed when I caught sight of Dave, running close by someone from the elite women's field. I'd guess that the woman was on course to run about three hours and fifteen minutes. She went past Dave and pulled clear. Dave was in trouble. As he got closer, I

looked into his face - his eyes were sunken, he looked pale, and if I'd been a second in his corner at a boxing match, I'd have thrown in the towel. As he went past me, there was absolutely no recognition of my presence. His eyes were fixed on a point in the distance. I shouted some meaningless and futile advice about taking on plenty of fluid, before doing the first thing that came into the void between my ears..... I telephoned Mark Warmby at his home in Huddersfield to ask him what I should do. I'm going to be frank with you here. If you ever find yourself in a similar position, ringing Mark Warmby in Huddersfield is a useless option.

Dave rang me that evening. He couldn't remember seeing me and he couldn't remember much except crashing into safety railings about half a mile beyond the point where I saw him. A couple of spectators managed to plot a way through the crowds and took him back to the hotel near Tower Bridge where he was staying. Being Dave, he soon dusted himself down and started thinking about an autumn marathon. I went to the World Championships trials at Birmingham that summer, and on the morning of the second day, I went to Birmingham University track where Bud Baldaro had organised a track session for Dave and Dave Norman of Altrincham. I sat quietly out of the way and let Bud organise the session - 20 x 400 in 65 seconds off 30 seconds recovery. Bud had lined up some decent quality students to lead on the reps and keep the two marathon aspirants honest. It was brutal stuff to watch, but the session confirmed they were both in very good shape.

Amsterdam followed in October. I travelled with Dave from Heathrow and stayed at a cheap, clean budget hotel next to Schiphol Airport. Dave was staying at the elite runners hotel with three other British athletes - Chris Cariss, Phil Hinch and Adrian Marriott. The Amsterdam weekend was a cracking example of a group of dedicated British runners coming together to try push forward their performances individually and collectively. I think that Bud Baldaro was behind the approach for the weekend - one of countless unheralded contributions he has made to British distance running over the years. I met the other three guys before the race. Cariss was a toughie when he raced who had dealt successfully with a rare lung condition to improve his marathon pb in each of his first nine marathons. Marriott was a little older, studious and passionate about his running, and had already self-funded trips to Kenya to experience altitude training. Hinch was there to carry out pacemaking duties to 16 miles as required. It turned out that Chris and Dave had slightly different target times for the distance, so they had a chat and compromised, so that they could both make the best use of Phil's selfless offer to help.

On the morning of the race, I hopped on the elite runners' bus that took us to the start, which was from the stadium used to host the 1928 Olympics. We sat in a sweltering changing room with a huge number of Kenyans and Ethiopians, plus the Dutch champion Kemal Maase, and various other domestic runners. I took the opportunity as we left the changing rooms for the start to help myself to several hundred unused safety pins. The race followed a 10km loop before the runners re-entered the Olympic Stadium for a single lap. I sat at the back of the stadium reflecting with satisfaction on the ill-gotten plunder nestling in the bottom of my rucksack. The doubts emerged and took root. It would be ok when my rucksack was scanned

at Schiphol, wouldn't it? It was a couple of years after 9/11 and security was still tight. I bottled it, scooping fistfuls of pins out of my bag, before depositing them under the seats.

I found a position on the course at about 16 miles. There was no-one around but after a few minutes the leading pack came by. Phil, Chris and Dave were about seven minutes behind, running strongly. Seeing me, Phil stepped off the course, as pre-arranged. A few minutes later and a pick-up minibus for the elite runners stopped to collect us. Apart from the driver, there was one occupant - a Kenyan whose name might have been Wilson had dropped out, but he wasn't showing any inclination to speak English when we asked him how he was. So Phil and I sat in the pick-up van which drove along at a position where the driver deemed the elite field ended. We didn't see a lot of action, but we got on famously. Occasionally, Wilson the Kenyan would moan out loud before sinking back into silence, and then we spotted Adrian Marriott in the distance. The bus sped up to catch him. He was running smoothly, but all too soon he caught someone who had hit the wall and we returned to driving very slowly until we reached the stadium. At which point, Wilson the Kenyan was suddenly revived and he sprinted away from us to find his compatriots who hadn't dropped out.

The three Brits had done well and were satisfied. Adrian had run 2:22.14. Following this race, he persevered with the marathon and ran his fastest time of 2:18.52 when representing England in the 2007 Toronto Marathon. He retired from competitive racing recently.

Chris Carissran another pb of 2:17.38 at Amsterdam. His best was still to come. In the 2004 London Marathon, Chris went quicker again (for the 11th time) running 2:15.08. UKA had set their own arbitrary Olympic qualifying standard of 2:15.00, so Chris missed out by eight seconds. He was interviewed on the BBC soon after he finished, his pride at his performance overshadowed by the disappointment of coming so close to selection, but his dignity remained intact. He should have been selected immediately to compete in the 2004 Olympics. I understand why UKA impose their own standards, as it affords them the opportunity of omitting athletes who have spent an entire summer scraping an Olympic qualifying standard, when they're not really good enough. Our teams can consequently become bloated and costly. But marathon runners have to be selective in attaining a good performance that merits consideration for selection. Courses are all different, climatic conditions variable, and it's not always easy to draw lines to compare performances. You can't run four marathons in six weeks as you attempt to run a qualifying standard, but in some events you can compete four times in a week with no real detriment to performance. (Actually you can run four marathons in six weeks and run them damned fast too - if you want proof of that, read Rob Hadcraft's brilliant biography of Beagles own marathon legend, Jim Peters. The biography, *Plimsolls on, Eyeballs Out*, is available on Amazon and it's an amazing read). Chris Cariss had overcome health problems to take himself to the verge of international selection. Later he suffered from a bad heel injury and London in 2004 was his fastest marathon.

Phil Hinch was an unsung hero of the Amsterdam weekend. He gave up a weekend to pace some guys in Amsterdam, returning to Britain on a Sunday evening flight. He remained a very good road and cross country runner until the day in 2010 when it all came together for him, as he placed 5th in the World cross country trials. Finally Phil had made the

breakthrough. But he was overlooked. Not selected. Don't ask me why. He should have been selected to represent Britain but he wasn't. Later in 2010, I went to the European Championships in Barcelona. On a break from the action, I hopped on a bus to Montserrat, the nearby mountain which is the site of a Benedictine abbey. I wandered away from the crowds along a path taking me higher, when I heard someone call my name. Looking round, there was Phil Hinch, who'd also come to watch the action on the track. I think he'd got over his non selection and still loved the sport. Another really good guy.

Dave Mitchinson had fallen behind Chris Cariss at about 23 miles but had held things together well enough to complete his first marathon in 2:19.38. Dave ran many more marathons, with a best of 2:18.58 coming at London. He travelled to Florence, China, Dublin, Austria to run marathons too but never quite ran as quickly as he wanted to over the classic distance. I guess in the bigger scheme of things, observers could look at Chris Cariss, Adrian Marriott, Phil Hinch and Dave Mitchinson and say they failed to deliver. They weren't good enough. Not a patch on the guys who were running back in the 1960's, 1970's, 1980's etc. For me, I learned that weekend in Amsterdam that there are still committed, passionate and talented runners out there who are prepared to sacrifice the time and effort to try to realise their potential and meet their dreams. They run because they love running and because it's an obsession. For Chris, Adrian, Phil and Dave, the Amsterdam marathon was part of a journey that had started many years previously. When they reached a point where their running career was over, they hadn't failed. They'd given the sport their best, achieved a lot and had great memories from the journey.