

Top Dogs

Thanks to all who took up my invitation to name some decent motorway services. Rhian from Swansea asked “why are there no Welsh service areas mentioned?” A good question Rhian. Meanwhile Emmanuel from Dagenham wants to know where he can “have a proper meal before training at Terence Mac.” Coral from Ilford was slightly negative with her barbed threat to me “not to encourage athletes to eat too much before training”. It was left to Tim from Forest Gate to request a further list of the six best cafes in Newham. So here goes:

- Ken’s Café, Green Street, Upton Park. A greasy spoon par excellence. Well established and attracts huge numbers of West Ham supporters before home games due to its proximity to the Boleyn Ground. The time to go there is on a weekday lunchtime. Great nosh.
- Britannia café, 355 Barking Road, Plaistow -close to junction with New Barn Street and Balaam Street. Sunday lunch and extensive café menu. Large café and popular. Dodgy dvd’s for sale here.
- Station Café, 12 High Street, Plaistow - about 150 metres from Plaistow tube station. Run by a Tottenham supporter but otherwise clean and ok.
- CaféE13, Prince Regent Lane -at entrance to leisure Centre and track. Now open on Sundays. Simple with good portions. Very acceptable.
- Abigail’s café, 155 Barking Road, Canning Town. Long established and large premises. Friendly, welcoming staff. Standard fry-ups on offer.
- QE (Olympic) Park. The Timber Lodge is fine but better still, head for the south of the park to the green painted café which is situated on a ledge near to the viewing point -about 400 metres from The Orbit. Great views of the Stadium and easy to work out where the Community track (Beagles future home) will be. Run by Italian family. Homemade baked beans if you please!
- Thames Barrier Park café. No cooked lunches but great setting and very good coffee.
- Café 368. This one is outside of Newham, on a rival club’s manor, at 368 Woodford High Road. It’s an absolute gem. Home cooking of the highest order. Recommended.

So there you have it -Newham’s best cafes. The borough is a bit short on decent restaurants but Y Ban is good for Chinese food (part of London Regatta Centre near LB Newham offices) and Nakhon Thai in Royal Docks is excellent for (you’ve guessed it) Thai food. I’ve heard good things about Alex’s Steak Kebab House at 227 Barking Road in East Ham but I’ll come back to you on that one. Hoping this keeps Tim, Rhian and Emmanuel happy - sorry Coral. I’d like some more suggestions though - the list above is a bit light on places in north of borough, so answer on Facebook.

I’ve focussed on the club’s achievements in the big races of Area or National significance, but of course the club was also involved in bread and butter races - Metropolitan League, County Champs etc. We were good at remembering the bread but forgetting the butter. Another way of looking at our efforts would be to say that we were so strong in the bigger races that we gave the other clubs every chance of beating us in other races - “one of the marks of power is knowing when to apply leniency”.

The local races have always proved a bit difficult for us. It's only recently with the development of the Olympic Park (QE Park) that the borough has felt more 'runner friendly'. Newham is characterised by Victorian streets, lots of congestion, relatively small parks. The nearby canals are hardly known about and the best route through the borough for training runs was probably the Greenway -a suitably pleasant description of the path which covers the Northern Outfall Sewer which deposits North London's effluent into the sewage plant at Beckton. The opening up of Dockside and the Olympic Park should have an impact on the club's ability to attract runners. Another issue for the club has been the demographics of the borough. Go to any cross country race and spotting runners from a Black and Minority Ethnic background is rare, but Newham is a multi-cultural area - the last Census showed 16% of its population are White British, 43% are Asian, and 20% are Black British. The club attracts plenty of young athletes who want to sprint or jump, but it's harder to attract distance runners. These aren't excuses -they're reasons for the lack of local distance runners in our teams, but let's remember that the sport is about more than distance running, and there are few (if any) clubs that can boast two Olympic gold medallists amongst their current and former members - both Christine Ohuruogu and Daley Thompson were set on their way by coaching they received at the club. No other club sent as many athletes to the 2012 Olympics (12 in total) as Beagles.

That said, it would be churlish not to respect the efforts of some of our rivals in the Met League -Woodford Green, London Heathside, Serpentine and Highgate regularly turn out huge numbers of runners. At one recent Southern 12 stage road relay, Terry McCarthy (then the Woodford team manager) fielded almost four complete teams -I tear my hair out at the logistics of getting one and a bit teams to the race. The rivalry between the above clubs at the Met League is to be savoured. By contrast, we're good at supplying winners of the race, but we also specialise in turning out incomplete teams which scuppers our chances of ever doing well - my thoughts on the Met League were captured online some years ago and I'm attaching them again - nothing much has changed in the intervening period.

The County Champs is another story. We don't often field teams in the road relays and cross country in Essex, but then we are talking about a County which regularly holds its road relays one day before the Southern 12 stage. The Essex clubs outside of the M25 seldom enter Area or National races -it's a small, introspective version of the sport which focuses on local rivalries, and the clubs aren't good at retaining members into the senior age group (Woodford Green apart). For Newham and Essex Beagles, I would venture to suggest that Essex is of little significance. The club is based in East London - few of its residents would describe themselves as coming from Essex. The Bob Smith rule of peripherality applies - we are based on the western extremity of an area which has historically been the fiefdom of the Essex Athletics Association -many of our members come from London, but not necessarily from 'Essex'. Athletics isn't alone in persevering with old County affiliations -many other sports are similarly organised. But where is Middlesex? Residents of Newham get no services from Essex County Council so why are athletes expected to feel any link to Essex AA? A London Championships needs to be re-introduced. In the 1980's, there was both a London Champs and a London Borough Champs -they worked well but didn't survive the abolition of the

Inner London Education Authority. Intriguingly, London Schools still holds its championships for the boroughs that were once covered by ILEA. It's a mad and confusing world when you try to get a grip on the different competitions that are held in Athletics.

I do enjoy the Metropolitan League, even if the club is rank poor at it these days. On one occasion, Woodford Green hosted a fixture but were unable to use their usual course at Claybury. The races were held on the bit of land that you can view from a car, which is bounded by the M11 and the A406. The runners went round in circles and I stood near the finish which was a cauldron of activity with juggernauts and cars screaming by above our heads. I was unfamiliar with the course and spent much of the afternoon wondering if the runners were going to appear from Charlie Brown's roundabout, or down the hard shoulder of the M11. That course was fun, but we returned to Claybury after a year. Ally Pally (Alexandra Palace) is a tough, traditional course with mud, more mud and a steep hill to be encountered. I used to enjoy the mud and woods at Ruislip, and there's always a place for a course like Wormwood Scrubs -some runners find it too flat and featureless but you can't beat running under the prison wall with the inmates bashing their trays against the internal walls.

I used to take teams to the Essex cross country relays. We grabbed bronze medals one year -I think we had Mark Wilkinson, Jamal Mohamed, Leigh Crispin and Sam Farah in the team. The next year I took a team to the race which was being held at a country park near Braintree. We had a guy running called Adam Zerny. He'd been training with Bob Mortimer's 400 metres group but had decided he wanted to run London Marathon. I suggested a winter of cross country and road running would be good preparation but he didn't fully engage with this. The Essex Cross Country relays were one of his first appearances. I didn't know that he was very short sighted. Jamal gave the team a decent start but we then predictably fell away. Adam was running the final leg, and I was stood chatting to Jamal when he appeared through a gateway close to us. The course was marked with hundreds of those plastic bollards that litter motorways with no road works apparently taking place or even scheduled to take place. It wasn't difficult to follow the route to be taken through the field, and there were a line of runners in front of Adam as well. Having shouted some encouragement to him, I turned to continue my chat with Jamal. Suddenly Jamal said "look" and pointed his finger behind me. I turned to see Adam endeavouring to climb a tree that was surrounded by hedgerow marking the boundary between two fields. I shouted to him to follow the line of orange bollards; it was surreal - one of the funniest things I've ever seen at cross country. He looked quite frustrated that his planned escape from the field had been noticed.

One year we took an inexperienced women's team to the National road relays at Sutton Park. We had a young woman running called Lola. She was quite talented but had no idea about pace judgement, and she was also very short sighted. I was standing about 800 metres from the finish chatting to Richard Mead when she came into sight. She was walking rather slowly and appeared to be a bit confused about where she was. As she got closer, I shouted out "come on Lola, only a short way to go"-at which she gazed in my direction before suddenly springing to life and sprinting past me. Richard gaped in astonishment as Lola sped past him - the look on his face is one I've never forgotten. The team didn't finish too highly. Sometimes

I used to toy with the idea of putting together a women's team at Beagles even though there were no coaches at the club and there was no base to work from. I felt I would need to start from scratch and start coaching, but I was living on the other side of London and if I'm going to do something, I want to do it properly and to the best of my ability. I don't like dabbling or sticking my nose where it isn't wanted and the club never asked me to get involved so I left the women's teams well alone.

We kicked off 2007-08 by attempting to retain our Southern 6 stage title. This time we came up short. The team (Laws, Hepples, East, Skinner, Gerrard, and Mitchinson) was good but Belgrave got the jump on us soon after halfway, and several of our team were just coming back from an end of track season break and were not yet in top shape. The exception was Steve Hepples who ran the second fastest leg of the race with only Frank Tickner going quicker. Bedford were 3rd and Wells City 4th. The race was exceptional for the performance of our B team of Dan Pettit, Sam Farah, Rob Cole, Louis Jones, Stuart Major and Andy Robinson. Unbelievably that team finished 6th in the race -I doubt if a B team has ever finished that highly in this race. The B team qualification was to prove crucial when the National 6 stage was held three weeks later.

As previously reported we'd suffered some misfortune during the previous winter, and it didn't take long for problems to crop up in the new season. In the five days before the race, Laws, East, Dan Pettit, and Robinson became unavailable. Then, on the Friday afternoon, Mitchinson and Skinner dropped out -they'd both caught the dreaded lurgy and were confined to bed. This was where the B team qualification came in handy -I drafted in Rob Cole and Sam Farah, and at 6pm on the Friday, Ian Grime agreed to travel down from Manchester the following day to run. We still had Steve Hepples, Moumin Geele and Keith Gerrard running but my sense was that we would do well to get anywhere near the medals. With five of the team safely ensconced in bed (and none of their partners knowingly pregnant and about to go into labour) I drove down the road to the 24 hour Asda at Queslett to buy some bananas and water for the team for the next day, and to sort out a suitable running order and tactics for the next day. I made two decisions as I trailed round the Asda aisles. I know how to give myself a good time at midnight on a Friday evening. Firstly, I decided to 'backload' my team -I gave Steve a chasing role on Leg 3 but held back Keith and Moumin until the business end of the race. Secondly, I decided to get the team (minus Ian) together on the Saturday morning to explain what (I thought) was going to happen in the race and how I wanted them to respond. I've never really bothered with team talks -whether tactical or motivational. Competitive runners know what they have to do, but I was keen to keep everyone alert to the opportunity of picking up team medals. So, after breakfast, I sat down and explained how I thought the race was going to pan out. I'd always been a statistical nerd and kept previous results, so I had a good feel for where we were likely to be at the end of each leg. I felt we wouldn't make the top 10 until the third leg, and that we would still be in contention if we were within one minute of the medals after four legs.

I've taken the view over the years that a 'par' performance for a team in the road relays will be made up of two above expectation runs, two below expectation runs, and a couple which are to be expected. Sometimes a team will have too many below par runs and do badly, but

occasionally the opposite happens. This was such an occasion -the team did everything I wanted, and everything that was needed to pick up bronze medals. It was one of the most satisfying performances of all. Ian Grime was 27th after the first leg, but within 45 seconds of the lead. Sam Farah ran above expectations and picked up half a dozen places. Steve Hepples hammered out a great leg to lift us to 5th, and Rob Cole had one of his best ever runs to bring us home 7th after four legs but still in contention. Rob's role was critical because he didn't try to do anything which he couldn't carry through. On the fifth leg, Keith had the task of closing down the teams who were chasing for bronze medals - Belgrave and Leeds had practically secured gold and silver -he worked hard and brought us back in 6th, but with three teams well within reach. The last leg was brutal. Moumin scythed through the field but Notts' Billy Farquharson stuck to him like glue. It wasn't quite enough though, as Moumin powered up the home straight to clinch 3rd place. I was very happy -it was a rare occasion when all of the team had performed up to expectations, and probably above expectations. No-one had a below par run. We even got a B team out, despite all of the withdrawals - they finished 45th with Baqir Hussein closing in the team.

Next stop was Mansfield where we attempted to retain our cross country relays title. Olly Laws was back from Butler and had just put away Neilson Hall in the opening Met League race at Ruislip. He combined with Keith Gerrard, Dave Mitchinson and Moumin Geele and we finished just nine seconds out of the medals but in 6th place. It's invariably close at Mansfield. Bedford were too strong for us (again) at the Southern cross country at Parliament Hill, but we acquitted ourselves well. The race at the front was top quality, with Frank Tickner prevailing over Andy Vernon and Keith Gerrard. Keith had made the GB team for the European cross country six weeks earlier. The team was completed by Kevin Skinner (12th), Dave Mitchinson (16th), the returning Kairn Stone (22nd), Olly Laws (23rd) and Louis Jones (39th). Andy Barber (44th) and John Pike (61st) just missed out on the scoring six. Again, our total of 115 would normally be enough to win but Bedford were a tough nut to crack in the Southern. Strangely, we used to get the better of Bedford at the National. The 2008 version was to be held at Alton Towers for the first time.

Questions answered by Bob Smith

How long has your club been competing in the Met League?

Essex Beagles were original members in 1966.

What is your club's best achievement in the Met League?

I don't know. I think we used to win the Senior Men's race but that's a long time ago. Julian Gentry has the most individual wins in Met League. We also had a full team last year at Stevenage.

How highly does your club regard the Met League?

I like it. The runners like it when it fits in with their plans. Some of the runners should do more Met League races. For the better runners it's not their top priority. Racing is important. All the training and coaching in the world is no good if athletes don't compete. When runners pack up, their best memories will be of races - personal bests, high finishes, beating someone unexpectedly etc. They won't remember the details of steady runs, tempo runs and sessions.

Which is your favourite Met League course and why?

None - they all represent the graveyard of my hopes and aspirations for the team. We did once have seven in the first 13 at Welwyn, but finished 5th in the team race - that's probably my favourite.

How would you describe your management style?

No idea -ask the runners. I'm a former high jumper so I don't know much about cross country. I turn up, hand out some numbers and pins, and watch a bunch of little, skinny people with good lungs disappear into the distance. Then they come back and we all go home.

What are your clubs aims and objectives for this season?

In an age of instant gratification and expectation of success, I prefer to take my time and make sure that the foundations are in place for future success. So, with the support of my club and the Metropolitan League, we shall try to do a little better this winter. Rome wasn't built in a day.....although most of it was probably built quicker than the 13 years I've had as manager of Beagles Met League men's team.

In what areas do you think your club/team could improve its performance in the Met League?

Probably by turning out full teams in the men's race, and by turning out the odd runner in the women's race.

Which club do you most enjoy finishing ahead of?

Belgrave Harriers, Tipton, and Leeds City because they're all very good. Our main rivals in the Met League this winter will be the powerful London Heathside B squad, whilst it's always good to finish ahead of London Fronrunners.

Which athlete(s) from your club will be the one(s) to watch this season?

I shall be watching them all - closely. We've had eight new runners from Newham join the club since the Olympics. None of them have done any cross country, so I'm hoping they enjoy it and come back for more. George Choat and Jad El-Houssami are making progress and I'm hoping one of our young high jumpers, Robbie Grabarz, will turn up and do some fitness runs.

Does your team have a pre and post race meeting or socialising location?

No. Some of the lads did try this once, but they ended up in a pub that was full of rowdy sorts from Woodford Green, Highgate and Serpentine - they were no match for their untamed wit.

If yes where and what goes on?

If you could emblazon one word or saying on your club vest what would it be?

Plum.

If you could pick any one male and female athlete in the world to add to your team/club who would they be and why?

Male - Mo Farah.....oh, hang on.

Female - I'd try to entice Hayley Yelling out of retirement and convince Con Milton she should join Beagles. A great runner - always gave 100%.

Is there anything else you'd like to add?

I hope to see more Under 20's in the senior race this winter. There are generally very few, but last winter Steve Mann's group at Ealing showed the value of getting young runners out. ESM were promoted, and the athletes improved a lot - Ben Waterman progressed to 1.48 in the 800 and went to the World Juniors.

On a personal note, I'm hoping to get to grips with the complexities of the scoring system. I have a theory that in the early 1970's a Beagle didn't wear his club vest and the club was punished with a 500 point deduction for the next 99 years.

Ultimately, I'd like to get twelve men in the top 20, because I think this would be enough for us to finish in the top three in the team race.