

Running out of ideas

The Sod Jobber

LIFE IS FULL of little disasters; my left foot is one of them. It looks perfect, though that view isn't shared throughout this household. Five toes, apparently all too long, but all in good wiggling order. Looks, however, are deceptive. One tendon has gone on strike.

Years of abuse haven't helped. Child abuse, teen abuse, mature abuse and past-his-best abuse; they've all taken their toll. Now enough is enough. I've hardly run a step since September after years of being a ten-a-day man (miles, that is). Such inactivity plays hell with the ravaged body. Christened 'Robert' I'm now in danger of being renamed 'Mr. Bobby'. An extra three quarters of a stone doesn't show and the boss reckons it's all for the good; rib cage less in evidence and pectorals no longer out of proportion with the wizened gut. An almost regular man stares back from the mirror.

Clothes, though, give the game away. Not all trousers fit any more while my face contorts into a squinting grimace as I wrestle with the top button of my shirt. I'm not sure if it's the trousers or the collar which most readily bring tears to my eyes.

Something had to be done. Rest made little difference. Cycling made matters worse. So what were the options? Or, more precisely, what were the options for somebody whose sole expense in sport lay in buying a new pair of running shoes every eighteen months? Fifty pounds seems expensive, but not compared to alternative sources of exercise. Something, though, had to be done to prick the bubble of flatulence.

I tried swimming. Tedious in the extreme to somebody who is used to running down Cotswold lanes. Not to mention hard work. Blessed with the natural buoyancy of a millstone, swimming does not come easily. Only once did I take part in a triathlon, an experience which confirmed my total lack of aquatic talent. We started at one minute intervals in Telford's swimming pool. The whistle blew and I hurled myself forward, hitting the water with the subtlety of a steel pancake. Glancing back I saw the next entrant, shaven head and tinted goggles, legs braced on the edge, wheeling his arms like a precariously balanced raven. Once into the water, Jaws on Ecstasy couldn't have gone faster. My painful half mile of sidestroke left me 110th out of the 120 starters, followed by 60th on the bike and 10th on the run. Clearly my talents lay far from the chlorine. And when Witney pool closed for a month I didn't know if I was disappointed or not.

What about a gymnasium? Pumping iron might even make me bulge in the right places. But no; to the solitary runner and, indeed to a large number of people, gymnasiums have an image problem. To the beautiful inside them, image is everything and the image is cool. Designer fluorescence or designer grungewear, the aim is the same: 'look at me, I'm cool'. The cult of narcissism reigns supreme. Every wall is lined with mirrors; why? 'Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the vainest of them all?' With a body like mine, self-adulation is not on. No, the beautiful people and the po-faced sweat-ers can keep their gymnasiums and health clubs and fitness centres.

Which just leaves me with fitness at home. The rowing machine I once borrowed was virtually a sledge with skipping ropes – antiquated, repetitive and unbelievably tedious. I'd rather be in the spectators gallery at the House of Lords during a late night sitting. Exercise bikes are an alternative but with my bad.....oh well, never mind.

"How about an all-terrain skiing machine?" suggested a friend. Apparently such machines simulate cross-country skiing and cost a mere £600. Suddenly, those running shoes seem like loose change. Anyway, I've never fancied skiing. It seems to consist of a morning getting to the piste, an early afternoon the piste and the rest of the time as piste as a newt. No, thank you.

I've run out of ideas. But corpulence increases so there's nothing for it: I'll have to exercise behind closed curtains at home. Up in our bedroom, dressed only in non-designerwear shorts and T shirt, I switched on the tape recorder, shut the door, turned down the lights to prevent neighbours seeing a silhouetted horror show and started exercising.

Sit-ups, press-ups, knees-ups and, given perseverance, throw-ups; an open road lined with silent hedges has to be better than this.

"Don't despair", quelled the doctor, "we'll get you an appointment with a sports injury specialist." And so it came to pass. I lay propped up on the couch while the brave man investigated the offending organ. The room went quiet. "Well, we can try and fix you up with some orthotics and we can give you a spot of hydrocortisone". It sounded so simple. Except that inserting a needle into the bottom of a seasoned runner's foot is not as simple as that. More tears to the eyes. Then it was in, and hydrocortisone squirted into the tendon. Though, come to think of it, he may have taken pity on me and injected me with hydrophilosan for all I know.

Time will show if ancient man has been reborn. Perhaps, dear reader, you'll see me, as of yore, striding around the villages; alternatively, look out for suspicious shadows behind closed curtains.

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	19th March	Church Raod layby, Reade Close
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