

## The body fights back.

Bob Forster

**I**T WAS LAST MAY, as readers may remember, that, after 13 years of running, an ailment stretching up from the Achilles to the calf and onwards to the hamstring deposited me flat on my gluteaus maximus. And there I remained until Christmas. Mr. Blobby, the Lump with the Limp, Yesterday's Stick Insect - you name it, I fitted it. The best efforts of the medical profession had failed while attempted comebacks were full of sound and fury but signified absolutely nothing. Except pain.

So I wrote about it. On metaphorically tear-stained paper and wrapped in my old cardigan and carpet slippers, I poured out all my travails before jogging round to the editor's house at the turn of the year. There, it was done, and a lifetime of low-level athletic achievement was consigned to her letterbox. Another history lesson on the countdown to eternity.

But wait. I jogged around. Without pain. I had, as it were, picked up my bed and wobbled. The lump flickered. Perhaps writing about one's ailments is a passport to healing. And so it came to pass that at the coldest, wettest and darkest time of year I was back on the fitness trail. Sod's law for the runner is always being injured at the warm times of the year. Still, I mustn't complain. It's too late to enter the London Marathon so I'll just have to leave the good village doctor guessing at how far behind me he would have finished in this year's race. Wearing my trademark ancient blue sweatshirt, proclaiming "New Life '87" on the front, an irony when one considers that the slogan may have been true in 1987 but now the physique was well beyond its "best before" date, I set off at the beginning of yet another comeback.

However, a reappraisal was needed. All those years of running have taken their toll. Bits are wearing out. Maybe the bits that are left could do without the daily hammering along Tarmac roads. Perceived wisdom has it that what is termed "Cross training" is good for fitness and more effective for preserving those remaining bits. Cross training is simply a mixture of types of training, each one exercising the body in a different way but each one building the level of fitness until competition is, once again, possible. Worth a try.

Swimming would be ideal, tedious but ideal. Access to a pool, though, is a problem. Not to mention the fact that I swim with a panache of one of those bunches of balloons you see pinned on to gate posts a week after wee Jimmy's birthday. Swimming does nothing for me but it is good for fitness and at my painfully tardy level, it strains only the lungs and not the knees. If swimming is effectively out, what are the alternatives?

Of course, there's the bike, my rusty steed. I love cycling but, as regards regaining fitness, I have never thought of it as being in the same league as running. For me, cycling has always been a leisure activity or, at best, a poor alternative to running. In anticipation of more time spent on my bike, Santa was alerted and I received one of those fluorescent yellow tops, gift wrapped and with the greeting from help the aged. Well, two actually, one for wet weather and a short sleeved one for warm weather. You can guess which one remains unused.

I have enjoyed my extra cycling. Usually it's up the hill from Shipton towards Chippy, swoop down that wonderful long gradient into

Chadlington with its bank of daffodils on the left, then across the Evenlode and back through Ascott. Eleven miles of gasping effort with the handlebar computer recording exactly how slowly I'm going.

The main problem with cycling in the winter months, quite apart from permafrosted extremities, is that cycling fast, in dark, isn't safe. And much of my winter training has to be in the dark. Well, would you let me out in broad daylight looking like a third world sparrow in rags? Precisely. Somewhere, there is bound to be an unseen pothole with my name on it. Or, lurking under the skeletal hedges there will be a member of the Flopsy, Mopsy and Cottontail brigade, waiting to rush out with kamikaze fervour, either to frighten the daylight out of me or to lay down its life in revenge for one of his Dunlopped cousins.

One alternative is rowing. After Christmas my father, who is well into his seventies, decided to part with his rowing machine (now you know, dear reader, where these masochistic leanings come from). It is up in our spare bedroom, cohabiting with the mother-in-law when she comes on her monthly visits. It is also state of the ark. No, the machine, that is. As well as the sliding seat it has two arm levers, each connected to a piston which, when overworked, can fry the blisters off a ballerina. Like swimming, it is deadly tedious. There are no dials or displays on which effort can be gauged so I sit there, heaving to and fro, eyes constantly glancing at the bedside alarm clock to see when each two minutes interval is over.

I proposed taking it downstairs and watching the Television whilst sweating buckets. The wife would have none of it. Not on her new carpet. Not with all the attendant sound effects – the seat slides and

rattles, the pistons hiss and my breath comes out in anything from a gasp to grunt to a wheeze. There's quite enough heavy breathing on TV, she says, without me adding to the cacophony. And she only watches Gardeners World.

But the rowing machine does have two major advantages. For a start, in just half an hour, every pore can leak sweat in a most satisfying lather of activity and there's still time for a shower inside the time. Secondly, the machine is indoors. On dark, wet and cold nights, this is very appealing. Apparently it's known as the "Wet Inside Most Probable" element (work out!). At my age, this element has a growing attraction.

Running, though, is still king. Rowing and cycling will feature increasingly in the months ahead but, injury and decrepitude permitting, running will still be the favourite. It's not hard to see why. I was early home on Friday, in time for a ten mile plough across the fields into Bruern Woods, onto Churchill Heath, down to the edge of Bledington and back along, or should that be, through the Oxfordshire Way, plastered in mud from head to toe. I arrived back as night fell and the rain began. Outside on the drive, I was obliged to strip virtually to my nether garments before she'd let me into the house. Like I said, it's not hard to see why running remains favourite.

With a bit of luck and a bit of cycling, a bit of rowing and plenty of running, I should be able to compete once again. Readers can check the obituary columns to verify this.

So the comeback is well into its stride. Time for another fling. Unlike the Remembrance Day by-line, age *shall* weary them, but I'm blowed if it's going to cocoon them.

The fling is dead; long live the fling!