

Running Out of Time

Bob Forster has just received his bus pass! This is not the ideal time of life to be a runner but for the past fifty years he has run competitively. In the first of three articles, he takes a light-hearted look back at the ups and downs of his favoured activity.

Part one: the rise to outstanding mediocrity

My love affair with running began at secondary school. In winter, it was either cross-country running or rugby; there was no other choice. To play rugby one or more of three qualities was needed - speed, size or strength, but I had none of these. Anybody playing rugby without at least one of these had to possess the fourth's - stupidity, and as I hadn't got that either, I concentrated on running. I had some of the necessary attributes; bandy legs, the musculature of a well-oiled stick insect, profile of a tuning fork and, of course, flat feet. The cross-country course rose to the highest point in Birmingham, Frankley Beeches, now better known for its neighbouring service station on the M5, and before long I could slither and spit with the best of them, rising eventually to captaincy of the school team.

A Champion - by Default?

The groundwork had been laid for a lifetime of running. Camaraderie was warming, the showers more so and at the end of the day all that was left was a thoroughly contented, cream-crackered pseudo athlete, plus, of course, a steaming bucket of indescribably plastered kit festering in the kitchen. When summer arrived, so did a new event on the track, a three mile race. I was well



suited to it as it was totally mindless, simply requiring plenty of stamina. As the event was new, few schools had bothered with it so on one heady evening in Aston I became City of Birmingham champion, largely by default. It was time for a bigger hat. Suitably emboldened, I sauntered onto the starting line of the Warwickshire championships; glory was short-lived; I was last and it was back to the usual hat. But whatever the result, I had fallen in love with the sport. The training was invigorating, the results sometimes satisfying and I

had learned several valuable lessons on the way, the most painful being the inadvisability of applying Sloans' Liniment to a groin strain.

Tortoises and Centipedes

And so to Oxford where I was immediately picked to represent the university, the fifth team that was (no, there were only five). Over my three years there I worked up to the second teams of both cross-country and athletics, curiously named the Tortoises and the Centipedes respectively, but the much sought-after 'Blue' was always a step too far. Perhaps the pinnacle, at least before the race began, was representing the Centipedes in the 5000 metres at Crystal Palace, alongside the Blues teams from Oxford

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and Cambridge; you can, dear reader, guess where I finished – yes, I was the one getting the sympathetic applause while the others headed for the showers.

Marathon Man

The last event before leaving Oxford was to be the first of many marathons. The Polytechnic Harriers' Marathon from Windsor to Chiswick was virtually the only marathon in England. So it was, that five brave men and true went south to represent St. Peter's College against the cream of the country's running clubs; it was, to all intents and purposes, a disaster. After just a few miles, a motorcyclist marshall overtook the field of runners, informing each bunch in turn that we had gone off course and we had to go back the way we had come. And so it came to pass that 'the last shall be first and the first shall be last.' This was too much to take for the best runners who promptly dropped out. Oxford students lacked their judgement and we ploughed onwards, having added around two miles to the total distance and that was two miles too far; at the twenty four mile mark i.e.

twenty six miles covered, I leaned against a shop window, hands on knees, utterly spent, from where I was helped into a car by a little old lady - oh, the ignominy.

Glory by Association

The drive back to Oxford was a mournful journey. The other members of the team had at least managed to finish, but we were all shattered. So in that Mini Traveller, packed with comatose runners, Jim was sick in the front, Joe was sick in the back and I lacked their discrimination. Several weeks later, there was to be a happy ending: early one evening in the dining hall, the Master banged his gavel, the prelude to saying grace, but instead held up the largest gold cup I had ever seen, announcing that after the equivalent of a stewards' enquiry, St. Peter's College running team had been awarded the race victory in the Polytechnic Harriers' Marathon. So even though I had dropped out before the end, there was glory by association and I had, entirely by chance, discovered my cherished event; there was clearly more to come.

Bob Forster

The Wychwood Workshops

Local artist and writer, Jan Harvey, will be running a series of events in the New Year called **The Wychwood Workshops** covering topics including - *Life Drawing for the Terrified*, *Sketching from Life*, *Writing for Confidence* and *The Reading Experience*. They are aimed at those who are looking for a new creative direction. Jan is also organising regular sessions for artists to have access to a life model. For more information email Jan Harvey: jan.harvey1@virgin.net or call: 01993 832357.

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Come and join our team! It will only take you an hour or so every two months to deliver to the area around Frog Lane, the Sands and Green Lane in Milton-under-Wychwood. You will be replacing the inimitable Linda Lewis, who has 'retired' to keep a closer eye on Tony in the allotments! (see page 41). If you might be able to help telephone *The Editor*, Christine Halliday on: 01993 831134.