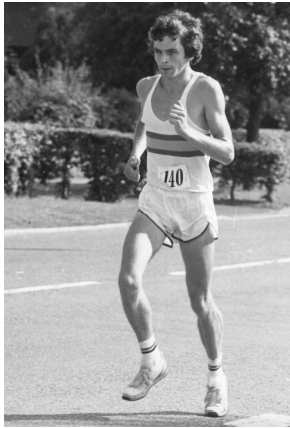


Running Out of Time

Bob Forster, now a youthful sixty one and a bit years old, and still lurching around the Wychwoods, looks back in this second light-hearted article about his running career.

Part Two: The Years of Plenty

Early days were now a thing of the past, those days of running around the streets of Birmingham with my dad, shod simply in white pumps, the cross country races bathed in mud and the various disasters that befall any athlete whose ambition outweighs his talent. Now, having left university and teacher training college, with finely honed thighs like knotted rubber bands - easy there, Lolita - I was ready for fresh challenges.



beyond the barrier. The matting underwater was slimy, preventing a swift getaway, and the runner behind couldn't see my misfortune with the result that he virtually straddled me in his attempt to prevent his spikes puncturing my potential. His verbal explosion managed to deride both my cranial deficits and my parentage.

Everyone Needs a Willie

Cross country running had less scope for disaster although in the annual National Championships disasters were never far away. On the starting line at Parliament Hill Fields one year was the hallowed Dave Bedford (thank you for pointing out that I must go back a long way!) As the gun started, he slipped in the mud and the excitement, laying down his body as an exemplar of those little perforations so beloved of teabags. Then there was the almost prehensile mud at my home town of Milton Keynes when I jogged home after the race only to find my doorway blocked as Lynda insisted that I sluice myself down in a bucket of cold water before going inside. Most unfortunate of all was the fate of the appropriately named Willie, a college friend, who, determined to show the world his finishing sprint, hared around a tight corner into the straight, impaled his shorts on a marker and ended up revealing rather more than just his finishing sprint. Road races were a happy hunting ground. I shall never forget the first prize I ever

Water Jump; Or Not?

These next years encompassed a wonderful mixture of cross country races, road races, athletics tracks and exotic endeavours, all achieved with a smile on my face. I ran for several clubs, depending on where my career took me - Rugby, Nottingham and Milton Keynes. The satisfaction was enormous and sometimes the rewards. Perhaps I wasn't fully cut out for track running. 'Tedious' could be used to describe 5,000 metre and particularly 10,000 metre races so even though I had my share of success, it could never match up to road running. Occasionally I was persuaded to run in the steeplechase but this seemed doomed from the start. One race at Sutton-in-Ashfield summed up my discomfort. Arriving at the first water jump I leaped it with the grace of one who recognized his limitations and, sure enough, I landed on all fours in the water

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won by finishing third at the Wrekin 10 mile race. All the way back to Birmingham on the train I clutched my newly-won eiderdown like the crown jewels, feeling as if I had the eyes of the nation upon me even if the reality was that fellow passengers wondered what on earth this dishevelled young man was doing with his bedding on the 5.46 from Wellington.

Prizes soon became a regular bonus and if you ever come to our house you will no doubt be fascinated by all the glasses and stainless steel dishes that resulted. There was even a heady five day period in 1977 during which I won two races, one the inimically named MONC 10 (Muck O' Nettles Club – no, don't ask) in Sheffield and then the Flash Dam 7 at Matlock but it's a sign of the times that not only has the dam now disappeared but so has its reservoir so the echoes of twentieth century trainers are a thing of the past.

The Finishing Line and the Floozy

But it is perhaps the marathon distance that leaves the most lasting memories in my mind. After the abject collapse in my inaugural race at Windsor (see last article) my fortunes improved considerably. Everyone knows of the London Marathon and although I rather scorned its brash appeal, misguidedly thinking of myself as a 'proper' runner, it didn't stop me running it on three occasions. My two favourite memories were firstly sitting in the Festival Hall straight after the race where I was joined by a glum faced colleague from Milton Keynes. "What's up, Mike, what was your time?" "Two forty seven, thirteen," came his reply. "Sounds pretty good to me," I said reassuringly. "Yes, but I was overtaken by Father Christmas on Westminster Bridge." That hurt. And then there was

my first attempt at the race when runners were numbered in just a few thousand, unlike today's massed throngs, and medals were given to every finisher as they crossed the line. One of the dolly birds approached me, hung the medal around my sweaty neck and I received a sexless suck from a bored floozy.

Time of My Life

I can't forget the Olympic trials race - no, anyone could enter, at Rotherham in 1976 when, for the second time in my fledgling career, I 'hit the wall' at 22 miles, dropping down the field like a stone before finishing back in 110th position, totally spent, to be presented, as I crossed the line, with the sponsor's wonderfully appropriate black tie. It became my funeral tie for many a long year, reminding me of the day I nearly died, or thought I did.

Without doubt, my favourite marathon was the Snowdonia race, billed as '26 miles 385 yards of agony and ecstasy.' The scenery was spectacular as the course encircled the mountain, starting at Llanberis, climbing the Pass, descending to Beddgelert before climbing steadily to Waunfawr, over an old mining track and steeply downhill back to Llanberis. For whatever reason, this race was a happy hunting ground: three consecutive years in the top ten in the 1980s with a 7th place (no prize), 7th again (still no prize) and 6th, after which I did receive a prize, namely a free race number for the following year's race, 006. Oh, I mused, would that I'd been given a free number on either of the previous years (you might need to think about that!) But whatever the outcome, these years of plenty were the time of my life.

Bob Forster