

TWENTY BERKHAMSTED HALF-MARATHONS

Ten miles and the half-marathon have always been my favourite distances, and I've always loved the countryside. So when my brother-in-law Tim and his family went to live in Berkhamsted, in the Chilterns, and the local Rotary started the Berkhamsted Half Marathon, this promptly became a good excuse for the two families to meet for the weekend.

My first was in 1985, when I was (just turning) 40. Although I'd always reckoned to build my running week round a run of an hour and a half plus at a decent pace, the pressures of parenthood (James was then 3, and Ruth was on the way) had whittled that down to 7 or 8 miles. No surprise then that my first time was 90:30, over that course – beautifully scenic, but very hilly. The real shock the next year was doing 95, a truly awful time – but by then we had Ruth (and she was quite a handful – still is!) I took myself in hand, and did 92, 92, 91:15 over the next three years. Then we were in the US in 1990.

I joined the Club at Easter 1991, having done my 6th Berky Half in 85:37 the month before. Everyone improves beyond recognition for their first year, but I didn't do Berky in 1992 (I was in training for the London Marathon, and taking it very seriously – I think I must have opted for one more long run instead). But by 1992, I'd turned into the me my clubmates know, and 20 years is a nice round number, so I'll reckon age from then. The runner's Rule of Thumb is that once one is over the hill -- from 40 on, say -- one can expect to lose a minute a year over the marathon through ageing alone (and pro rata for shorter distances), so the age-adjusted times below add half a minute a year pre-1992 and subtract it post-1992. No surprise that I did my best time in 1993 (84:54, turning 48. Phil beat this time comfortably when a few years younger, so we had a private bet on whether he'd match this at 48 – but alas, his heart problems took him out of contention.)

I did 1994/95/96 in 87+, and then had a gap till 2002 (no doubt a combination of reasons – the family link was lost, the internet hadn't arrived, so getting forms was awkward, and I had plenty of other races to do). I failed to break 90 for the first time in 2002, but got below twice more, in 2004 and 2005, my best times age-adjusted. Then it was fighting for low 90s, the nearest I got being 91:23 in 2008, and now fighting unsuccessfully for 95.

This piece was triggered by Dave Fereday's superb piece on his marathon experiences (he is an Ever-Present – he's done all the London Marathons since they started in 1981), and his table of times and analysis. He beats me hollow at my best distance, so is clearly the superior athlete. The one respect in which I out-perform Dave is in ageing better. I thank my late parents for their good genes. I wonder also whether my years out of serious competing – because of the twin pressures of family and career – might in fact have helped here. Mulling it over, it occurred to me that all the old guard that I admired on joining the Club – Derek Wood, the late, great Laurie Foster, Howard Aiken, Dave Wilson, Mike Sawyer, Alan Harvey and co – are no longer competing seriously. I am, and so is Des, who came to serious running later in life than most. I'd be interested in other people's opinions here, and indeed in comments from the medical profession (must ask Dean Creer).

For those who haven't done the Berky Half: try it! The first mile is through the town, flat or downhill. The second mile is flat, down the London Road. One then turns left and over the Grand Union Canal, and the third mile is all uphill, taking one up into the Chilterns. Then it's flat to Potten End at 5m, and down to Nettleden at half-way. The steepest hill (though only half a mile) is just after halfway, and then it's flat through Little Gadsden and into Ashridge at 9m. The highest point is Ashridge College at 10m; then one more hill in mile 12, and downhill all the way for the last mile plus.

Ageing has forced a change of tactics. I used to track the leaders, and get my position in the field by counting runners coming off the sharp right-hand bend at half a mile, then use that to keep track of my current position throughout the race, to motivate myself. I've learned by experience to start counting at 3m (alas, it's largely a count of those who overtake me – I hold it to maybe five a mile). The other change is over the last mile, where I always throw discretion to the winds and attack hell for leather. I used to gain position very nicely here. I now lose it, despite going flat out – I can't match the young for speed. I console myself that I'm doing OK against my peers.

The strategy now is to keep going as long as possible, and to slow down as slowly as possible – not much, but it's something.

In case any of the young wonder what ageing feels like: one feels just the same. I know I'm ageing almost entirely from my times – the stop-watch doesn't lie.

In the table below, OM = order of merit, AAT = age-adjusted time, AAOM = age-adjusted order of merit.

Number	Year	Age	Time	OM	AAT	AAOM	Pos
1	1985	40	90:30	9	94	18	
2	1986	41	95	17	98	20	
3	1987	42	92	13	94:30	19	
4	1988	43	92	12	94	17	98/540
5	1989	44	91:15	10	92:45	16	
6	1991	46	85:37	2	85:07	6	
7	1993	48	84:54	1	84:24	4	51/516, 15 th M40
8	1994	49	87:53	5	86:53	13	67/425, 22 nd M40
9	1995	50	87:53	4	85:23	8	25/222, 7 th M40
10	1996	51	87:34	3	85:34	9	29/
11	2002	57	90:15	8	85:15	7	38/458, 2 nd M55
12	2004	59	88:24	6	82:24	1	36/434, 1 st M55
13	2005	60	89:27	7	82:57	2	
14	2006	61	96:23	20	89:23	15	153/847, 1 st M60
15	2007	62	94:37	15	87:07	14	134/943, 1 st M60
16	2008	63	91:23	11	83:23	3	71/933, 1 st M60
17	2009	64	93:20	14	85:50	10	Miss the start!
18	2010	65	94:03	15	85:03	5	124/1151, 2 nd M60
18	2011	66	95:23	18	85:53	11	185/1207
20	2012	67	96:20	19	86:20	12	198/1247, 1 st M65

Nick Bingham