

Barnet and District Athletic Club Newsletter, March 2009

THE MARATHON AND ME

The two people who inspired me to run marathons were the two people who inspired me in running generally – Jim Peters and Emil Zatopek. By the end of the 1052 Olympics, when I was seven, I was determined to run the marathon when I grew up.

The chance first came when I was a research student in Cambridge, 1966-9, with the Boundary Run, an off-road marathon then run round the city boundaries. I did it in 1967, on wildly inadequate training. Predictably, the wheels came off at 22m (on the A10 – I still shudder when I drive past it). I did 3:30 next year, and then thought ‘Been there, done that’.

This lasted till the launch of the London Marathon in 1981. Lots of my friends did it. So I did it, in 1982 (3:30 again), 1984 (3:20) and 1986 (3:15). By then I had two kids, and thought that with family and career commitments that was the best I could do. My friend and fellow mathematician (and runner) Richard Smith told me otherwise. Then in 1990 I spent a semester at Iowa State University, where I ran with a grand bunch, whom I called the Hard Men – who told me all I needed to do to break 3h was buy a book and do what it said.

My wife’s best friend had just moved to Abingdon, so it was agreed I would run the 1990 Abingdon Marathon, as a good excuse for the two families to have a weekend together. I had bought a book, and done what it said (400m training in 12 weeks). I did 2:58, aged 45 (just ahead of Richard, who also broke 3h).

I joined Barnet in April 1991, and got training with Howard Aiken, whom the old hands will remember (shuffling action, but a marvellous runner – ran like a machine). I bought and read another book – this time by Bruce Tulloh, which said that while 3h was OK, nothing slower than 2:50 was worth mentioning for a serious athlete. That did it – 2:50 or bust became my aim. I did 500m in 12 weeks, and did my PB of 2:46:52 at $46\frac{1}{2}$ (again, just ahead of Richard).

That set me up for London 1992, for which I did 600m of training, and made the M40 elite start. I was very fit and full of confidence, and had a new PB in the low 2:40s as target. The first mile was very comfortable. I looked at my watch as we approached the 1m mark, thinking ‘6:15 plus or minus 5’ – it was 5:40. I immediately slowed down to target pace – but the

damage was done. I fought a determined rearguard action for 25 miles - and did 2:53:15 (which turned out to be my second best). It took me weeks to work out how I'd misjudged the pace: I'd subconsciously been taking my pace from the pack around me - but I'd never been in an elite pack before. It taught me that the marathon is an unforgiving distance - the slightest misjudgement of pace can be fatal. Abingdon that year was 2:55 - which showed me that the tide had turned: even though I knew what I was doing at last, I was getting on.

Richard's first words after Abingdon 1991 were that that was the tenth consecutive year he'd done a sub-3h marathon. I immediately adopted this as my ambition. I was injured for Abingdon 1993 - so went for St Albans 1993 instead, despite it having 1250 feet of climbing. I didn't know the rule of thumb then - that every hundred feet of climbing costs one a minute - so was devastated by 3:08, a perfectly respectable time for a 'marathon-plus'. Then came Abingdon 1994 and 1995 in 2:58 and 2:56.

I was injured again in 1996 - I'd developed bone spurs on both heels, which I still have. I thought my marathon days were over, but by 1999 I'd learned to live with my heels, and did Abingdon again. I'd picked up from the Hard Men in the States that the time to aim for is 2 hours plus number of minutes equal to one's age in years. This seemed to fit me well from my PB at 46, so at $54\frac{1}{2}$ I aimed at 2:55 - and did 2:55:05. The race and training went like clockwork - everything worked. I think my body liked the three-year rest. I remember Dave Spencer saying he thought that was a better run than my PB.

I had two very nice woman students doing statistics projects on running times under me, and that led to my being talked into London 2001, for which I got a Club quota place running for Derek Wood's charity. The congestion of London never suits me, so I decided to be unambitious and settle for anything sub-3h. I passed Cec and Tom at 25m on track at 2:52, and thought 'Just hold it - steady as she goes'. I held it steady - and missed by 19 seconds (running time - 33s officially). 'You must have been gutted', Alun said - I was. I hadn't updated the target of 2:52 at 25m to allow for slowing with age - and might have broken 3h if I'd realised I was at risk and needed to speed up.

It was downhill all the way then - 3:03 for Abingdon 2003 (foul conditions, on track at 20m), then 3:12 for Abingdon 2004 (just had a bad run - I'd break 3h in the 1990s if I'd done the training, even if I did have a bad one).

Of course my dream was sub-3h as an M60 - or close, which I thought was

realistic. In a search for that extra something, I switched training methods on Alun's suggestion, focussing more on speedwork and less on very long training runs at near-race pace. But 2005 was a re-run of 1992: London had switched from clock time to chip time, which I didn't remember in the heat of the moment; at 1m I thought I was off the pace (I wasn't), speeded up in mile 2, found myself running the rest of the race as a rearguard action – and did 3:11. I was so mortified I told my family at the finish that I was packing in marathons. I'd always had to do them against family resistance, so they held me to it. So that was it – 17 marathons (8 Abingdon, 6 London, 2 Cambridge, 1 St Albans), 7 inside 3h.

My favourite distances are 10 miles and the half-marathon, but the marathon was my best distance judged competitively: my marathon PB is better than that of a number of much better athletes in the Club (including Des, who took over from Howard as my main marathon training mate – many thanks, Des). I used to think one's best distance was down to psychology and training habits; Steve Nunn says it's biomechanics, and I suspect he's right.

I used to love the long runs: marathon training was an excuse to do longer runs than I ever did otherwise. And I came to realise that the real benefit of the marathon was not one's time in the race, but the great surge of extra fitness that the training gave one for months afterwards. I was flying as a new M60 in the summer of 2005 – until I got injured that August (in my last Race the Train: I found out the hard way that my heels will no longer tolerate cross-country studs). This ended my cross-country career, after fifty years. It also marked a discontinuity in my times: I'd nearly always break 90 for a half-marathon and 40 for a 10k, but haven't done either since.

But that's part of coming to terms with brief mortality. What the marathon really gave me was not so much the times as the memories.

Nick Bingham