

## **Barnet & District Athletic Club Newsletter, Dec 2001**

### **RACE THE TRAIN AND ME**

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We spend our family holidays in North Wales (Dolgellau), and love the Tal y Llyn Railway, a narrow-gauge line that starts from Tywyn on the coast and goes inland past the lovely waterfalls at Dolgoch and Abergynolwyn to end at Nant Gwernol, near the lake at Tal y Llyn. (It was built to take slate from the Nant Gwernol quarry to the coast, closed when the quarry did, and was resurrected in the 1950s running steam trains as a tourist attraction – the first of the ‘Great Little Trains of Wales’.) When Tywyn Rotary Club started Race the Train in 1984 – a 14.2m cross-country race over mountains, always run on Saturday afternoon in mid/late August – we soon got to hear of it. But it remained one of those things I always intended to do – like joining a running club

In 1990 I tackled Race the Train as part of my training for the Abingdon Marathon (where I first broke 3hrs, aged 45). For those who don’t know the race – and this piece is a naked plug for it – it starts in Tywyn next to the Tal y Llyn Railway terminus. The starting gun for the race coincides with the start of the train’s journey inland. The round trip takes an hour and three-quarters by train, and this is the time to beat. We start by running through the streets of Tywyn, then head inland towards Brynchrug, turning off the road to the right and over the railway near the 1m mark. The next six miles or so are deceptively straightforward: along farm tracks and footpaths, keeping between the road to the left and the railway to the right; some gradients and some rough going, but basically an easy run on grass. We turn just short of Abergynolwyn station, and here the fun (?) starts. Almost at once, the way narrows, so one is in single file and risks being impeded by runners ahead. We cross the railway under a tunnel, and head back towards the coast, following a twisting sheep-track with the railway below to the right. The track itself is level enough, but only six inches wide; the hillside above and below is so steep as to be almost unrunnable, so if you’re stuck behind someone walking on one of the frequent steep inclines, you’re in trouble. By nine miles you’re high above Dolgoch, and have to lose all the height gained belting down a steep path – agony on the knees. Near eleven miles, you

suddenly turn left, and confront a viciously steep hill you vaguely remember having had trouble running down on the way out. By thirteen miles, you're back on tarmac, with Tywyn ahead, checking your watch and doing furious mental arithmetic about your chances of beating the train

I didn't know all this in 1990, of course. My wife Cecilie and (then) two kids James and Ruth (then 8 and 4) loyally turned out to watch. It hadn't crossed my mind that I might have trouble covering 14 miles plus in 1:45, so I'd told them I'd beat the train. By 10m, I realized I might be in trouble - and that the conditions were worth at least an extra mile. The vicious hill took me by surprise; everyone in sight was walking up it; my courage failed me, and I walked too - and missed beating the train (by 1:40) as a result. Both the kids were upset. Cec took me on one side, tore strips off me, and threatened me with Lysistrata tactics (yes, fellas - the ultimate deterrent!) if I put them through that again.

By 1991 I was made of sterner stuff. I'd joined Barnet that April - and promptly improved a lot, as everyone does. I knew the course, and charged the vicious hill with a year's worth of accumulated venom. I sailed up it, gaining six places - and beat the train (1:43:11). You get a nice certificate for that, which I've still got. I felt well set up for Abingdon that year, where I did my PB (2:46:52).

Of course, I thought the sky was the limit after that, and had to learn it wasn't by bitter experience. In 1992 the course was very muddy - but I ran in road-running shoes, predictably rolling downhill on the steep bit, and losing an argument with a gorse bush (moral: use cross-country studs - they're ideal). Still only missed beating the train by 2m. In 1993 I'd done my back in (playing cricket with James). In 1994 I again missed by two minutes, and realized that things stood to be downhill all the way, and I was up against the aging process like everyone else. In 1995 there was a heat wave; I was too gung-ho to drink properly, got heatstroke, and was pushed to break two hours. In 1996 I was out of action with Achilles problems. There was another heatwave in 1997; this time I drank religiously - and failed to break two hours. Then 1:53:08 in 1998 (behind Francis, ahead of Harvey and Noel), and 1:48:02 in 1999 (followed by 2:55:05 for Abingdon). In 2000 we were in London awaiting James' A Level results.

The ghastly outbreak of Foot and Mouth Disease meant that 2001 was going to be different. I expected the race to be cancelled - but the organizers distinguished themselves, and laid on an all-road course, crossing the River Dysynni past Brynchrug, then going up to Rhoslefain and round by

Tonfannau. They added on a mile, and there were hills, some steep and all unknown - but I thought it was on. Graham, Francis and I went off; Graham came past me at 4m (and took 2 min. out of me – never saw him again). I ran very even-paced, didn't go wild or bottle out (apart from letting four of the six ladies who beat me past, two at 5m and two in the last mile). I did 1:44:40, beating the train for the second time – something I thought I'd never see again. I came second in the M55-59 bracket, and won a prize – a power screwdriver. I now have my two certificates – 1991 and 2001 – as a nice matching pair, and a lot of happy memories. All I have to do now is convince Cec I'll use the screwdriver

The countryside is ravishing. The organization is superb, and raises money for a good cause. It's a very friendly race, and a great experience – come and try it some time!

PS. As an experience, Race the Train is unique. As a straight athletic challenge, the nearest comparison I know is with the Orion 15, a 15m cross-country race in Epping Forest in March. Underfoot, the Orion 15 is more variable, depending on the weather – anything from First World War mud to rock-hard ruts. Oddly enough, my times there are less variable (low 1:50s to high 1:50s). I'd be interested in other people's impressions of how the two compare.

Nick Bingham, 20.9.2001

Postscript, 2009. I ran Race the Train twelve times in all, finishing in 2005 as a new M60 in 1:55.14. I only found out after the race was over that I was injured – I could barely walk back to my car. I have bone spurs on the backs of both my heels – so each Achilles tendon has to do a detour round the spur. That's fine in trainers, but I'd learned the hard way years before that I could no longer race in spikes on the track, and I learned then that my heels would no longer tolerate cross-country studs. That brought my cross-country career to a stop (after fifty years – 1955-2005). The resulting months of layoff and then gradual recovery marked a discontinuity in my times. I'd nearly always break 90 for a half-marathon and 40 for 10k before, but haven't done either since.