

Dodging the flying phlegm

Charles Gains

Given recent editorial comment and other expressions in this magazine reflecting on the decline in endurance running I would tentatively like to offer a more lighthearted perspective. I flag this up early so the discriminating reader can quickly turn to something more interesting ...like forthcoming fixtures. My somewhat bedraggled running career staggered across several decades but I was, laughingly, at my peak in the 1960s. I had migrated to the Black Country and was with the Halesowen club that continues to occupy the picturesque setting immediately adjacent to the old Abbey ruins. My lack of ability in distance running had been cruelly exposed in the early 1950's with the Liverpool Pembroke club where I can't even recall making a counting team of any description. I was without doubt a monumental failure, enthusiasm not compensating for a patent lack of talent, although the Pembroke magazine of the time did have the kindness to refer to me as 'Cheerful Charlie Gains'.

At the Manor Abbey on training nights I fell in with the normal training patterns of the day, remarkable, I suppose, for their crudity but undoubted effectiveness. We gathered in a wooden changing room where a few keen souls might venture outside to warm up, a handful might practice a desultory exercise or two but the rest simply sat and gossiped. When sufficient numbers had presented themselves a brief debate would ensue as to which group would do what and where. Two courses predominated a 5 miler around Illey and Lapal or an 8 miler round the rezzers(reservoirs) at Bartley Green. It was usually decided by the person with the biggest mouth and greater ambition on the night.

Invariably there were two groups, or three if you counted those who simply jogged a few miles in order to justify consuming excessive amounts of ale in the bar later. The principal group contained the hard men, the second was the remedial group. I favoured the latter which, nevertheless, contained interesting characters like Len Yorke whose subsequent book on living with the result of a serious mountain accident is both moving and inspirational. We ran at a reasonable 6 minute mile pace and would mostly converse except for the final 'burn up' down Manor Lane to the club gates. The macho mob ran at least 30 seconds a mile quicker and didn't talk much at all except for the occasional grunt or oath. No opportunity here to discuss the finer points of existensialism. Occasionally ambition would get the better of me and I would join them and try to hang on, dodging the flying phlegm but rarely surviving the modest slope out of Illey a mile later.

Additionally there were other individuals, often of considerable talent, that most clubs kept hidden away in the attic who were pathologically incapable of any form of discipline or constraint. They were characterised by their staring eyes, bizarre life styles and a penchant for hitting 5 minute mile pace before clearing the car park. You avoided them because they had no pace judgement whatsoever and often ran themselves into a pool of vomit. Most clubs had a few of these but nothing compared to the legendary Tipton Harriers a few miles down the road where there were sufficient numbers to fill the psychiatric wing at Dudley Guest Hospital. Some were talented enough to comfortably run 10 miles in 50 minutes but rarely bothered racing seriously in competition. They saw their prime function on training nights as burning off the current club number one, usually an international, and then bragging for months about it. Contemporary coaches reading this will no doubt scoff at such unsophisticated regimes but before doing that go check the Tipton record. I suspect the Ethiopians referred to recently by the editor of AW would recognise one or two facets of the above in their current training schedules.

Most people in my group only trained twice during the week but at a fairly decent pace. We raced Saturday and did the traditional long, up to 15 mile, steady canter over the nearby beautiful Clent Hills on a Sunday morning. This was the only time the whole club would stick together, the star performers circling like vultures, returning to the plodding pack to shout words of encouragement but more frequently abuse. The sad band of losers I fell in with were referred to disparagingly as 'scrubbers' a term with a different connotation then. I never rose above being a boring six minute miler and although I could sustain this for up to 10 miles before disintegrating it was still considered something you would not discuss in knowledgeable company for fear of provoking unbridled hilarity. Eventually I graduated into administration where my talents were better appreciated.

The Halesowen club was a pretty useful outfit that yo-yoed between Division 1 and Division 2 of the Birmingham Invitation(don't you just love that?) Cross Country League, a tradition they have proudly maintained down the years. The top division was then not just the best competition in the country it was almost certainly the best in the world. The first 20 home in a Division 1 race would read like a who's who of distance running at the time. Internationals were commonplace. You can capture some the flavour of this by reading Bill Adcock's excellent Road to Athens, a few copies of which I guess he is still trying to shift out of his garage. For my part I didn't care what league we were in or who won what, there were always vastly more important private

duels to be fought somewhere down the field. For example, there was a ginger headed lad who wore the blue and white hoops of Small Heath who loathed me, probably for my accent, but it was reciprocal inasmuch as I had trouble with the nasty and decidedly ungentlemanly attitude he had towards fellow competitors when approaching the serious obstacles we used to encounter in proper cross country courses. We never spoke but in the funnel could be seen bobbing up and down like meerkats trying to assess where the other had finished. Everybody I knew seemed to be involved in a personal vendetta of some description either within their own club or with rivals elsewhere. In short my three digit finishing tally was irrelevant, I was only bothered with what the clutch around me were doing.

There were coaches of course and Halesowen boasted the indomitable Taff Hier. Taff spent most time with younger members but would cheerfully advise anybody of any age or ability. I can't recall him saying anything that wasn't sound and eminently practical. For example, whenever someone was injured, a surprisingly rare thing given the somewhat manic style of training, he invariably retreated to the soundest advice of all time, take a few days off and a gradually return via jogging on grass. I offer gratis this startling piece of information to the legions who automatically head for physiotherapists, medical support and possible counselling at the first twinge they get. I have to confess though we did have one overriding advantage, viruses hadn't yet been invented. Taff had a typically powerful Welsh voice that carried miles and would galvanise even the most tardy runner. The nearest he ever got to robust language was to bawl S-O-B (you work it out) in your ear when you were flagging. He was to be avoided though at the start of cross country matches where he would insist on rubbing a home made embrocation on your legs to keep out inclement weather. All very well but if some of it worked up your shorts it could have disastrous consequences. You could pick out these unfortunates by a sort of wild flamenco they were performing that currently would rattle up useful points in Strictly Come Dancing.

I trust nobody will take this tarradiddle too seriously but you never know in these days of performance indicators. Clearly times are completely different. However, my sneaking suspicion is that if standards are to improve aspiring distance runners will have to spend considerably more time in the pain domain and, metaphorically speaking of course, 'dodging the flying phlegm'.

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