

Just last June I was rushing round to complete all the admin jobs and leave work as professionally as I could – being forced into retirement. Deleting all those pestering eMails I tended to get I was lucky to spot one from England Athletics which I decided to open it with the intention of unsubscribing before deleting it.

It was an invitation to run the marathon for Team England at Chester, against the Celtic nations, in October as part of their V65 team. I must admit I thought it was a wind up but I sent an email back accepting the challenge and ordering my kit.

I decided that this would be the challenge to put the redundancy bitter feeling away and to have a great memory and experience I could savour for the rest of my life. Alas my family didn't think much of this. The kids just took it that anyone could run for England and the missus was not very pleased I'd be doing training for another 3 months after running Manchester. So, no support or understanding there! I wanted to do better than I did at Manchester and target 3:40. To feel proud and successful. A new wireless head-set was ordered to allow me to train in the light and hear the traffic. A new playlist would be needed – what to start with?

*I look into the window of my mind
Reflections of the fears I know I've left behind
I step out of the ordinary
I can feel my soul ascending
I am on my way
Can't stop me now
And you can do the same
What have you done today to make you feel proud?*

I decided I couldn't let the club members know as I felt that there would be more and more pressure building up on me as the days went with the possibly members might keep asking how it was going; and saying how good I'd be on the day without realising the last two marathons I'd run had caused me great pain for 50% of the courses. The biggest worry I had, apart from going too fast, was falling apart in the last 8 miles and hobbling home in an England shirt.

So my story was that: this would be the only time I would have to try and run a fast marathon, with age slowing me down; and I'd be able to train in better weather conditions and in the earlier parts of the day. No dark icy January/February/March sorties into the night all wrapped up: gloves, tights, hat, layers! Great.

I was hoping to have some training company. Would Gareth be running Chester – he often did. Unfortunately, he was running along canals or something! Louisa I discovered was supporting her husband who'd done London this year in that heat and now wanted to run Chester to get his 'time'. She had been doing long runs herself and would be doing the 20 miler in September – same as me.

I learned that the England team was chosen from the Chester, Brighton, Manchester and Bournemouth races. So, I thought Mick would be there too with his fantastic Manchester time. But whilst running with Mick shortly afterwards I tried to find out if he was running another like Chester. He said not. He wouldn't do Chester as one marathon a year was enough. London this year is his goal

Concern was now creeping in. How had I made it onto the team? being 26th in my category on the EA website. Was it a mistake. Would the other team members be much quicker than me! Doubts began to form. I would be last in the team miles behind everyone else!

Still things looked good with training in the day for a change –in the sun. And with the support I'd hoped to get on the day from my marathon partner the Lioness of Theoule for this local event. I felt much better about it. I could see it in my mind. I went on a cruise to the Fjords redundant but feeling great with the challenge.

But alas the gods were not kind the Lioness was holidaying in France with family and friends a member of the three pumpkineers with Cat, Kate. Still I'll have my songs.

*The gods may throw a dice
Their minds as cold as ice
And someone way down here
Loses something dear*

*The winner takes it all
The loser has to fall
It's simple and it's plain
Why should I complain*

Oh well! Chin up. Might need to rethink the playlist! Now only training to manage. Not many people do long runs in Summer. Plus, the Summer Races make it hard to get a long run in. Still I pushed myself and tried to add on mileage before and after the Thursday/Sunday Club runs. At the end of May trying to squeeze everything in I added a run to the Saturday parkrun as I was going to the Tatton Flower show next day! I finished with a sore quad and hip flexor which I still have not been able to get rid off.

On Thursdays I started running the handicap route prior to the Club run. On Sundays I'd tag on a run before and after the Sunday run.

There were runs with Peter, Simon, Roy, Stephen, Rob on Sundays. Louisa and Paul and Peter on Thursdays plus a couple of interesting Sunday runs towards the end of July: one with Simon where he felt the need to run with me for 10 miles on a very, very rainy Sunday when he perhaps should have stayed in bed. After that run my clothes had put on an extra 4.5 lbs - I weighed the sodden bundle before a welcome warming hot bath. Conversely there was another run was when Nicky surfaced from her sick bed at midday, to run with me, It was sunny, it was hot and would have been good practice had I being doing the Le Marathon Des Sables – I'd lost 6.1lbs in body weight that day in 2hrs 40 minutes by the time I got home!

Helping my son move some shrubs put by back out at the end of August.

*Pressure pushing down on me
Pressing down on you, no man asking for
Under pressure - that burns a building down
Splits a friends in two*

Now I was finding it hard to get long runs in. What with the Summer Series and Park Runs, Holidays and Family events! The Cheshire GP 20 miler – I'd hoped for a 60 pointer and to catch Colin up but this had to be missed as did the long runs replaced by regular trips to the physio to fix my body.

It was now much hard to get long runs in. Niggles began to occur. Problems with Quads, hamstrings, Calves, Hip flexors! Regular trips to the physio to fix my body.

*When you try your best but you don't succeed
When you get what you want but not what you need*

When you feel so tired but you can't sleep

Stuck in reverse

Lights will guide you home

And ignite your bones

And I will try to fix you

In the end my longest continuous run was in early August just over 17 miles. With 10ks and half marathons afterwards!

The kit delivery kept going back and arrived with about 10 days to spare. I didn't look at it in great detail. The shirt looked good the shorts OK. With a few days to go my wife pipped: "You are not going to run in those shorts?" I perceived it wasn't a question but a problem. The shorts belonged to an era of the 118 telephone directory advert! Or to young 20 year olds. Or ladies?! I did momentarily think of asking our lady members if any had a pair of red shorts that weren't so revealing! But thought twice, tried Amazon Prime, but the decided to phone a friend - Running Bear - where to my delight they had a medium and a small pair of red shorts in stock. I chose small.

Race day arrives. Having decided not to get my son up at an unearthly hour to take me to Chester before returning home for breakfast before going into Manchester. The missus obliged me. . I would get dropped off near to the racecourse and Jan would return home.

Traffic was fine to the outskirts of Chester. I was directing: "Straight on." I said as we hit our third roundabout.

"Why did you go left?" I uttered in disbelief as we went left down a dual carriageway.

"You said straight on!"

"I know I did but you turned left!" The atmosphere in the car changed dramatically.

"Why did don't you make yourself clear!". came the vitriolic reply.

I decided on diplomacy. "Let's see if we can find a place to turn round." Eventually we found a place to pull in and go back. The traffic was now nose to tail when we hit the roundabout. It was very slow progress. Looking at my watch I realised it was going to be difficult to get to registration for 8:00. I decided to say goodbye and get out of the car so Jan could go home. Using google maps on my phone I began running through Chester. Eventually spotting other runners walking in the general direction I was heading and stopped looking at my phone and followed, overtaking them.

I got to registration just after 8 and signed in and picked up my M65 indicator which had to pinned on the back of my vest. "You need to run and get in the team photo" she said as she gave me the pins. I ran found them, stripped off my jacket and tops and ran towards the team, pulling my shirt on as I reached them which amused the crowd! Thee photographer said "All smile" and took his photo. Shame it has one half of me on!! My better half? They did release a second one which I can just see myself -[a right wally]? 😊



Then it was back to find where I threw my bag and clothes somewhere near the photographer. A nice lady had kept her eye on it for me. Next – find the massage area. There was no one there except one masseur. He gives me a good loosening up. Worth £5 just to de-stress myself. The guy at a table close by is talking into a phone a lot. I realise I am hearing the words twice!! Oh! He's the announcer! It's strange him talking to the crowd whilst sat alone in the massage area and my hearing the outside broadcast a second later!! He is repeating: "You need to drop your bags off and make your way to the start".

Better get off and do that says my masseur. But I need to do things first! Have my beetroot juice, go to the toilet, get my hat, gloves and running belt out. Put away phone. Rushing around, stress building up again.

There are a lot people on the way to the start. I hope the baggage drop off is not behind me as I am stuck in the crowd which is only going one way. We get through a gate and I see a large tent with BAGGAGE on it. I break out of the throng and drop it off, walk to the start and get let into the elites pen at the front! I spot some runners from Stockport and lady from Altrincham/ Stockport who I often see at Cross Country. EA bods want us to huddle together to get a group shivery photo! It's a bit cool! The mayor goes on and on, trying to tell some jokes and make fun of some of our Celtic contingent – the Welsh! And suddenly we are off! From a walk, to a brisk walk to a jog to a fast jog I follow my team mates and elites. Crossing the start line after about 7 seconds!



Haven't thought of a strategy except that the 3hr, 3:15 and 3:30 pacers should pass me sometime. Hopefully after a number of miles. My immediate worry is that I have been overtaken by a MV70. Normally that wouldn't worry me. I don't know how fast these guys are. But he's walking! I double check, yes he's walking fast. I up my pace, trying to get my breathing right. It takes 400 metres before I catch and pass him. Out of the race course ground and into the street. Not very scenic here. We turn and are presented with a steep climb. Don't like that right at the start. Runners pass me, but I expect that and don't worry. I continue to push my way up the hill. But half way up the walking MV70 passes and pulls away from me. Dark thoughts begin to enter my mind so early. This is going to be a disaster. I struggle to get up the hill. Thinking positively - it must be downhill on the way back which will be good.

We level out and proceed over the river Dee and out of Chester. I settle into a pace, keeping up with a group from the team. It's hard to judge pacing. The faster runners are going past me – but I seem to be in a small group of LV50/55s and MV60/65s. I feel good considering the poor preparation and ignore the first water station. Afterwards I do take o water at alternate stations. It seems a long way to Wales. My pace is supposed to be around 8:25 mile pace = slightly quicker outward and some

slowing on the return. At 4 miles I look at my watch which is race mode and I can't read the screen – but clearly but am running sub 8! About 7:35 well ahead of schedule – 4 minutes. I slow it a little but realise the damage is done and it will be costly for me towards the end. My LV50/55s companions slowly pull away. Not too much though as I can still see them. At 10k I am still 3 mins over. Through Belgrave and towards Pulford where we veer towards Lavister and into Wales.

It is sunny now and. I am now about 6 minutes ahead of schedule at the half way mark. Ominous, but I ignore that and keep a positive spin on things. Soon I begin to wonder when my 'hot-foot' problem will surface. It has usually happened by now. Perhaps I have cured it by stretching under my foot after running.

*Cause holy cow, I love your eyes
And only now I see the light
Yeah, lying with you half awake
Stumbling over what to say
Well, anyway, it's looking like a beautiful day
So throw those curtains wide
One day like this a year would see me right*

Taking Gels every 5 miles I seem to be OK. The Welsh element is looping through and around country lanes allowing us a view of runners ahead and runners behind. The sound of pounding filters through my ears and merges with the music that is coming through my cheek-bones. The only good thing that has happened recently is that my earphones - lost before the GNR run - surfaced a week ago. It's a pacer and his group. They pass me just after 15 miles. It's the 3:45 pacer! I stay with them for a mile or so before it begins to dawn on me that my legs are getting tired! I will now pay for it with lack of miles – the missing long runs – and the fast start. The next 6 miles go nicely, a little bit of a struggle, but the scenery is fine. A couple of nice villages Holt and then Farndon and we are back into England. We cross the river again and I get to 20 miles. Looking at my watch I have 55 minutes to achieve my dream time of 3:40 and hour to beat Manchester. It still feels on. Suddenly there is a bunching of runners ahead which is confusing. A stream of runners approaches us and then do a u turn to merge with us.

I now remember there was a metric marathon being run too! Those runners who are joining us to presumably run back to Chester. So this must be 13k to the finish - the last leg then. I am not really liking this bunching effect. Some runners are going slower than me and some are continually passing me. For a mile or two it's a bit crowded I keep having to adjust my pace as slower runners block my straight running.

When it finally clears, I now realise I am really feeling tired. Still enjoying it. No hot-foot effect. But now the legs are missing the miles I couldn't do. With 5k to go we are closing in on Chester. Some inclines on now are beginning to hurt and form is going. It's getting hard now. Watch wise I have 30 minutes to beat Manchester. The 3:40 dream has gone. It's very hard now. We get into town and then I hit an incline which becomes a steep hill. Half way up and I am actually struggling not to walk. Over the top and I feel awful. I try and recover and push a bit. But now it's so hard. Suddenly we turn left and there's a descent. I'd like to run fast down here but the legs are a bit like jelly and I feel it would be a fall or cramp or both if I do. We run along the river – it's beautiful for onlooker - but lots of runners are passing me. The legs won't go any faster and it is hard going every step now. Photos are being taken and this will show me looking awful!

At the end of the path we come into the race ground and now have to run around the course like a race horse. No for me, make that more of an old farm horse on its way to the knacker's yard. Turning

into the last bend I see the finish line. I can make out the clock – just. It's 3:49 something. I kick, or my mind tells me to, I want to get under 3:50 and I don't have a jockey's whip to urge my glutes on. The crowd are cheering everyone. Having an England vest on gets me lots of cheers. In the noise Louisa is screaming her head off when she sees me. Her husband is running after all! I get over the line with some seconds to spare. The feeling of cramp is returning. I get water, goody bag and bump into other England athletes. People take some pictures of us. Pity I never got see how pleased and/or knackered I was. A few minutes later Louisa's husband Phil would come in behind me- happier and less tired than me. The music still reverberates through my cheeks.

*Light up, light up
As if you have a choice
Even if you cannot hear my voice
I'll be right beside you, here*

I decide to go see about a massage. Dreading the wait and contemplating how bad it was at the GNR the previous month. I get into the room I was in before. Lots of runners already sat down. An England lady runner, who passed me and gave encouragement around mile 23, calls me across and instructs her partner to stand so I can sit down. We chat about the race, the nice weather once we'd started, the crowds, the atmosphere. She tells me I need to register to get a massage. It's hard to stand but I manage it. I report and register – 20-25 minutes wait I am told. I return to my new friend and tell her I'll use the time to get my baggage. Her partner can sit down again now!

I get my bag in seconds and then bump into the England runner who finished a few minutes behind me. He's run a few times for England but will pass the age group category and won't be able to run again for England until he does a qualification time when he's 70. Apparently you have to do the time when you are the age of the category you are running for! He enthuses about my time and says I'll get selected again! Wow! Can't believe that. [Still as I discovered rules are rules!]. He bumps into other team runners who he knows from previous races and chat about it. Most people are saying they ran slower than they wanted. Not a PB course they say. Anyway, I wish them well and scuttle back to the Massage room.

There are no seats now. I stand close to the entrance which is also close to the Massage administration point. I feel cramp coming in my toes and ease off my right shoe. A chair next to me becomes free. Unfortunately, I can't sit down. I bend a short distance to try and get my other shoe off and have to straighten otherwise I collapse with cramp. I try this several times. The guys opposite find it funny – but apologise that they can't stand up themselves. A kind lady has witnessed this and comes to help me by taking my shoe off. I can now fall onto my seat and spread my legs as best – to reduce potential cramp.

*If I lay here
If I just lay here
Would you lay with me and just forget the world?*

*Forget what we're told
Before we get too old
Show me a runner that's bursting to run*

*All that I am
All that I ever was
Is here in myself, they're all I can be*

Whereas the GNR post-massage was pathetic. The Chester one was great. Two ladies working on all my niggles and cramp. Getting off the table I get cramp! So back on for another session. They even put my shoes back on so I wouldn't have to bend and get cramp again.

*I sit and wait
Does a masseur contemplate my fate
And do they know
The places where to go
When we're tired and old
'Cause I have been told
That salvation's when my muscles unfold
So when I'm lying on the bed
Thoughts running through my head
And I feel the spirit is dead
I'm loving angels instead
And through it all she offers me relaxation
A lot of care and attention*

I hobble to the presentation.

England won 58-23. The men 34-14, the women 24-9.

The best age graded performance of the day was in the F60 age group, with Linda Hembury (Tring RC) clocking a superb 3:17:59, an incredible 91.5% WAVA score! Nicky would have probably been 3rd in that category. I wouldn't have a chance at a medal with the first M65 coming in 3:17:31. Nor would I have beaten the first M70 he came in 3:35:0. Sadly I was 6th in my category though Iran the qualification time for next years race. However, when no email was received, I read the rules more closely and discovered only the first 5 count! Oh well Manchester 2019 was to be the challenge. And my M70 walker/stalker – did 4:03 and got a medal!

Until injury hit me the end of January and Manchester and Now London will be missed.

Still if anyone wants encouragement about running marathons. At Chester there was a nice lady, Jacqueline Millett, a LV65 who ran 4:06. Jacquie started running 8 years ago at the age of 58 and has now run 181 marathons!

I take my hat off to that!!!

Well done to the Manchester marathon runners and good luck to the London runners. For those running their first. Trust me go slower than you want for the first 5k. Nearly everyone will start too fast around you and its so easy to be sucked in. You'll be surprised at passing them easily in the last half. And it's a much better feeling crossing the line feeling great as to struggling across and dying in a heap next to the marshals. 😊

If you can dream
And not make dreams your master
If you can think
And not make intellect your game
If you can meet
With triumph and disaster
And treat those two imposters just the same

If you can force your heart
And nerve and sinew
To serve you
After all of them are gone
And so hold on
When there is nothing in you
Nothing but the will
That's telling you to hold on!
Hold on!
.....—you will be a Marathoner runner!