



Thames Tales

Welcome to the first of a series of articles highlighting some of the recent fantastic achievements of Thames athletes. I have asked a few members to give first-hand reports of their sporting endeavors. The idea is to cover a few key events in more detail than is possible in a Captain's newsletter and also include some images. This will allow club members to appreciate the range of activities undertaken as well as the pure athleticism that may encourage others to attempt a repeat. Alternatively, the bravery (stupidity) of some of them means that they are best appreciated on the written page with a cup of tea.

The four pieces could easily be grouped under the heading, "What Thames did on their summer holidays". Clearly, Saltires aren't the sort that go for a week of sun in Marbella.

There is only one place to start and that is with the odyssey that leads to Josh Carr breaking the four minute mile. This is an athletic milestone that is still impressive and is close to Thames' heart given the links to that early evening at Iffley Road in 1954. Josh joins an elite group of Bannister, Chattaway and Bruce Tulloh.

Whilst Thames veteran athletes may not be able to crank out too many sub 60 second 400s they are absolutely on top of their game as the haul of bling from the World Masters Athletics Championships in Finland shows. Anna, Ben and Simon give their reports and we gain an insight into the mental preparations and absolute desire to win that it takes to become a champion. Medals are not enough for our trio.

As we increase the distance Matt and Ed write up their experiences in the World's Greatest Ultra Race, The Comrades Marathon. Both are hardened veterans of the event and their joy in competing and just experiencing the race after the two year gap is apparent.

Finally, Richard's report on a continuous sub 24 hour epic crossing of the country via the Hadrian's Wall Path shows us you don't need a race to provide a true athletic challenge. As the cross country season approaches it reminds us that perhaps a lap of Wimbledon Common for a mob match isn't too far.

Many thanks to the authors who contributed their pieces, I hope I haven't butchered your text too much with my basic power point skills. To the readers I hope you enjoy these articles and any feedback on topics to be covered going forward please get back to me.

It feels as if the summer is over and the fun of running across muddy fields is about to start, with the small matter of the London Marathon looming for a few. I look forward to seeing lots of you at the events and I am especially looking forward to the completion of the Bannister-Chattaway-Brasher bridge (perhaps we should add Carr to the name ?). As always feel free to get hold of me for any issues involving Thames.

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Josh Carr

For the past four years, running a sub-4 minute mile has been a somewhat elusive goal for me. Prior to 2018, I had run several tactical mile races, for example at Varsity Athletics, but had never fully tested myself against the clock over four laps of the track.

My first focussed mile attempt took place at the hallowed turf of Iffley Road in July 2018. In gale-force conditions I finished second in a PB of 4:05.84 after a close battle with Olympic steeplechaser Phil Norman. In 2019 my winter training was hampered by injury, but I found some late season form to run 4:04.08 at the Soar Mile in London and then a frustrating 4:00.98 at the Tonbridge Twilight Invitational in August. So close!

Lack of races due to pandemic restrictions meant that my next attempt did not take place until May 2021 when I ran 4:04.82 at the Stirling Monument Mile. Unfortunately, although I had come into the season in good shape, I struggled with a plantar fascia injury which curtailed my training and my form slipped away before I could get any more quick races under my belt.

And so to this year. I had held good fitness through the winter culminating in a 10km PB at The Isle of Man Easter Running Festival. I opened my 2022 track season with the Tracksmith mile, paced by Nick Willis. The race became tactical in windy conditions but although the time was off the mark (4:09.53) I had felt strong running a negative split.

Next up I raced in the US where typical Californian weather meant conditions were perfectly still. The race was exuberantly paced - in hindsight too much so and after 809m (in 1:58) I was alone at the front and ended up running a painful positive split of 4:07.12. Back in the UK I was on the hunt for more opportunities. At the Cambridgeshire Open in St Ives some friends graciously paced me for my third attempt of the year. We were off pace from the start, going through halfway in 2:03 but I held on to run a season's best of 4:06.92.

Disappointed but not defeated, I set my sights on the University of Birmingham Track and Field Festival on 9 July (to which I was lucky to gain entry given that my season's best mile time did not compare favourably to the 1500m times that many others had been running). The day itself was warm and gusty and I remember being frustrated that the race was scheduled for 6pm rather than later in the evening when it would be cooler and, most likely, less windy. I warmed up solo in the shade, focusing on my race plan: I was aiming to be mid-pack and then move up on laps 2 and 3 running as close to an even pace as possible. After a nervous wait on the start line, we were off! I came through 409m in 60 seconds, right on target and in about 7th place. At this point a gap to the leading three had opened which I was fortunate that Ben MacMillan, a 3:57miler, smoothly closed over the next lap. Going through 809m (in 1:59) I felt fantastic. On the third lap, which so often puts paid to attempts at fast times, I moved up a couple of places and I came through the bell at 2:59 still feeling strong. At this point I began to believe that this could be the time I finally ran sub-4. On the back straight I moved up further, making it into 3rd for the final bend but in the last 150m the effort began to take its toll and I tired. The home straight was a battle and I slipped back a few places, crossing the line in 6th.

There followed a few moments of uncertainty - had we, hadn't we? Then it was confirmed that the top 7 had all broken 4 minutes and it dawned on me that I had finally done it, my time: 3:58.97.





WMA champs (World Champs for old boys and girls)

For those of us past 40, for whom vets' races are a surrogate for the sharp-end races of days of yore, the logical pinnacle is the World Masters championships and the 2022 edition was held in Tampere in Finland in July. While the winners are not always the best on the planet in their age group, they frequently are. If someone is in shape to win a world title, then if time/money aren't a constraint then they will probably make the trip. For most, the champs not only give purpose, focus and shape to training but they are also a great opportunity to forge friendships with fellow athletes (both Brit and non-Brit) and are a great excuse to travel to places one would not otherwise venture. With a prevailing atmosphere that is generally less self-obsessed and tense, they are generally more supportive and friendly than senior competitions. That's not to say that there aren't some genuine world class performances by masters athletes who are as dedicated to their craft as seniors but on the whole people are there to enjoy themselves. If perchance one can get on the podium, the 'world championship medallist' bragging rights are significant and that's no bad thing!

Ben's 5,000m. 3rd 16:44

The stand-out athlete was a Portuguese, who had already won the cross-country (and earlier in the year the indoor 3,000m) by some distance, but on paper I had a good chance of silver. My race plan was to let the Portuguese go and run in the pack until the closing stages. The opening lap was funereal after which the Portuguese duly took off and nobody followed. He soon had a 100m lead and we ignored him. I stayed in a group of 5 until I pushed on in 2nd with 4 laps to go. I dropped all but an Italian who duly eviscerated me in the home straight and so I finished a rather disappointed 3rd in 16.44, some 22 seconds slower than I had run 6 weeks earlier. It seems that the art of peaking is one I need to work at! The occasion was made memorable by the completely unexpected appearance of my son at the track who had used it as an excuse for a secret long weekend in Helsinki with a side trip to Tampere to see his old man underperform!



Anna's 5,000m (1st 5:56) and 8k XC (2nd)

Running in championships of any sort makes me very nervous. I had a small quad tear before Tampere which meant cross training and not being at my fittest for the biggest championships I was about to compete in. I am very competitive so I'm only really happy if I win gold and even then I'm still quite self critical.

For my first race, an 8k cross country, Michael Johnson (M80) and I went to check it out the day before. On race day, we left at 8.30am to get MJ ready for his race at 10.00. It was 34 deg C and searingly hot. He had tough competition and finished 5th.

I had to wait until 2.40pm and try not to overheat. I soaked my cap in water. I knew it was impossible to win however coming 2nd was going to be a competitive matter. The heat made the race tough and so the relief of reaching the run in to the finish on lap 4 was huge. I sneaked ahead of a determined Finn to get the silver in a sandwich with the tough Finnish champion.

Because of my quad niggle I decided to pull out of the 5000m in order not to compromise the 1500m. This meant a bit of a gap between my first and last race. I know I made the right decision.





I wrote a pre-race plan: 'At the gun, go off with the group; if I'm chopping my stride, pull out and increase speed a little. If a bit fast, keep steady in the pack. Check how I'm feeling at the end of each lap. Speed up if necessary to stay. At the bell, start to build with an eye on opposition and plan on overtaking on the final bend. Then come off the bend and increase my pace for a sprint finish.'

At the finish, the photographer was right in front of me. I turned to look behind me and the group still hadn't reached the bend....I was World Champion.



Simon Half Marathon (1st 71:34)

I headed into the championships knowing I was in good shape and that one of my main rivals was likely to be the Portuguese who had beaten me by a handful of seconds in a final kilometre burn up to win the 2019 World Half in our age group. Sure enough, after the start he was the only one of my 50-55 age group ahead of me and after 500m I tucked in right behind him deciding to hang there for at least the first 7km lap. A split second later, without a great deal of tactical consideration, I thought I'm feeling good so I'm going to take him on - and accelerated ahead. As the lap went on the sound of his footsteps gradually went from right behind me to a few meters back and then eventually, by the end of the lap, out of earshot.

4 or 5 runners from the younger age groups were a long way ahead up the road by that stage, so the last 13km was a completely solo effort - no one in sight in front and couldn't hear anyone behind. Delighted to have been let out of its cage so early and for so long, the chimp on my shoulder was having an absolute field day. "you've gone off far far too hard", "you're going to blow up and be utterly humiliated", "when they catch you, you're just going to fold", and so on. I tried to counter that with the thought that they were a long way behind so must have been feeling even more miserable than I was and that if I just got through each km one at a time eventually the finish would come. And every so often I asked myself what Ben Stokes would do or say in this situation before glancing at the answer scribbled on my palm before the race - "Run towards the Danger". And of course eventually the finish did come!





THE COMRADES MARATHON - THE WORLD'S OLDEST ULTRAMARATHON

The Comrades Marathon was first run in 1921 to commemorate the fallen of the First World War. Although its centenary was last year, this year's race was the 95th, four editions having been lost to the Second World War and two to Covid.

The race is run between Durban (at sea level) and Pietermaritzburg (at an altitude of about 600m). The direction alternates each year. This year was a 'down' run. Novices soon discover that there is plenty of climb and descent in both directions.

The route is not absolutely fixed but generally the up run is about 87km and the down run two or three km longer, due to the use of different finishing locations in Durban. Recent down runs have finished in the Moses Madhiba football stadium, built for the 2010 World Cup.

There is a strict cut off at 12 hours, after which no finishers' medals are handed out. Gold medals are awarded to the top 10 men and women, and there are various flavours of medals according to finish time: sub-6 hours, sub-7 1/2, sub 9, sub-10, sub-11 and sub-12.

Pre-Covid entry numbers rose to about 20,000, but this year they were capped at 15,000. Of these, 11,713 runners finished within the time limit. Those who complete 10 runs become members of the exclusive Green Number Club and are awarded a personal, permanent, race number.

Matthew's Day

This was my 7th Comrades, my journey having started in 2002. My preparation in the four weeks before the event was definitely sub-optimal - I ran just six times covering little more than 40km rather than the 400km I'd scheduled - and so my original sub-7 1/2 target was modified to sub-9. Not only did I think I'd be unable to sustain the required pace over 90km, I also was concerned that I would trash my legs if I went eyeballs out from the start. I adopted a run / walk strategy used with success by many Comrades newbies. My intention was to run for 12 minutes at 5min/km pace and then walk purposefully at 9min/km for three minutes. As the race progressed, I modified this to run for longer on the flats and downhill and walk more of the uphill. I also needed to take a little more fuel onboard, but the refreshment tables at approximately 3km intervals are stocked with a huge assortment of comestibles.

The race turned out to be one of the most enjoyable I've ever run: I chatted to my fellow runners from inside and outside South Africa; I had time to admire the scenery of the Kwa Zulu Natal Thousand Hills; and I basked in the encouragement of the thousands of spectators who line the route. Among the most enthusiastic are the pupils of the Ethembeni School for handicapped children (ca. 40km from Pietermaritzburg) who every year eagerly look forward to cheering on the runners. My best personal memory was reaching out to high-five as many as I could reach.

The run / walk pattern enabled me to keep up a good running pace - especially motivating towards the end when all around me were walking. After the last descent into the centre of Durban the route hangs a left and the Kingsmead cricket ground (a previous finish venue) comes into view. Spirits sank a little as I realised that there was a further couple of kilometres to go. But as I ran through the tunnel and into the Moses Madhiba stadium, it felt as if I was finishing an Olympic marathon and the extra distance was suddenly worth it. I crossed the line in 8hours 13mins.





Ed's Day

Standing on the start line I wasn't expecting great things; lack of sleep (the buses to the start had to leave an hour early because of roadworks) and training (a bad achilles for most of the winter) were playing on my mind. On the other hand the weather forecast looked ideal and the sheer wonder of being back in Pietermaritzburg after 2 years enforced absence - the camaraderie of the the start pen, trying to remember the lyrics to "Shosholozza" and waiting for the cock crow - had me determined to make the best of it. With reduced numbers the off was less frenetic than in some recent years and I quickly settled into a steady pace. Sunrise came early with the later date and allowed me to find a good pack to run with through the early sections of Harrison Flats, but as the hillier sections around halfway approached I could feel myself flagging and a toilet break saw me lose contact for good, turning the race into an individual effort though with plenty of (usually wordless) encouragement from the other runners, each tackling the course in their own way. The great hills of the descent into Durban took their toll, especially on my quads, but at the bottom of the last one my ears perked up to hear a runner informing his team-mate that they had "1m30 in hand". A glance at my Garmin confirmed that indeed we were at 6h48 with 8km to go, and with the worst of the hills over surely a 5min/km pace was sustainable for the remainder? A certain amount of grit would be required, but indeed we pushed through, picking up two other runners to cross the line hand-in-hand in 7h27 and receive my second-ever "silver" medal, of 8 starts and 8 finishes in what would have been 8 consecutive years but for the pandemic. No question I'll be along next year, and the one after to hopefully make it 10 finishes, and after that... who can say?

Richard Ollington

In June, my friend Jamie Giddins and I set off to run the breadth of the UK. Jamie had friends who'd run the feat in 26hrs, he was determined we should beat them in under-24. Our lack of ultra running experience or a formal race to enter were no deterrent, the allure of a 'win' and adventure were motivation enough.

Our 87-mile run encompassed three marathons and a crawl-finish, each section with its own scenery, each fuelled by a hearty meal, each faced with different challenges.

The first section took us from Bowness-on-Solway down the flats of Cumbria surrounded by chirps of birdsong and waking cattle. Starting any earlier than 4am would have meant waiting outside shops and cafes for their 6am and 9am openings, there was no pressure to run any faster than our 10 minutes/mile. Onwards we cruised, in high spirits and flowing conversation.

After a second breakfast at Gilsland we faced a long set of climbs across the Pennines. The strong prevailing tail winds pushed us up endless steps. Nods of acknowledgment were shared with the many ramblers, DofE walkers and bleating sheep along the way. The ever present Hadrian's Wall was celebrating its 1900th year with Roman scarecrows guarding its way. The Sycamore Gap Tree marked halfway; cold, tired and sheltering from the weather under its branches the enormity of the road ahead dawned on us.

At Chollerford we had ourselves a second seated meal, after inspecting already calloused blisters we loaded up on soup, sandwiches and whipped cream topped hot chocolate. As we set off on our third marathon the sun broke through the clouds lighting up the long straight Roman Roads ahead. As a distraction from tedium we settled into the day's underwhelming ENG-NZ Test Match Special and bet on the distance to markers on the horizon. Now conscious of the coming dusk and the seizing up of legs we ordered a pizza to-go to be eaten as we walked down towards Newcastle with a drained pain coursing through our bodies.

Newcastle was vibrant with party-goers two stepping out of the way of our shuffles. As we adjusted our pacing down from interspersed run/walks to a determined stroll the energy of town was alien to us. It was 8 miles to the coast, single-digits, and we had 5 hours left on the clock. Our glimmer of hope was shadowed by the dread of worsening legs and a slowing pace. The darkening A-roads slugged through North Shields' industrial and council estates. There was no excitement, just self-loathing pain. Finishing at 2am we were greeted by stiffening legs as we took our finishers photo. Fortunately, climbing into bed exhaustion overwhelmed our radiating pain and we soon fell asleep reminiscing on the longest day of our lives.

The next day, England overturned its losses to win its Test Match, and our achings started to give way to a warm long-lasting pride.



