

My Career in Athletics

By Bill Mutler

I could hardly walk. Wearing long, sprinter spikes on a hard grass track, I had finished tenth in the school One-Mile race: 6:04 – over two minutes behind Sydney Wooderson's British record. I was exhausted, and I had failed miserably. My friends said that I was a middle distance runner, as I could not sprint.

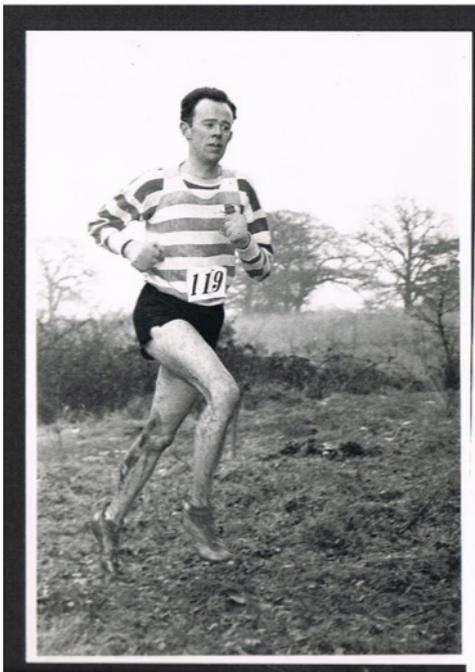
Maybe, then, I wanted to prove to myself that I could achieve something. For two years, I trained by myself. Come rain, fog or cold weather, I ran around the streets of north London. In the summer, I ran in Finsbury Park. My mum thought I was mad.

I had no ambitions of joining a club; I didn't think I was good enough. However, I did run in the 1952 Stoke Newington Borough Youth Club One-Mile race, and finished second (5:30-ish), a long way behind Roy Beaumont – who later won the AAA Junior 880yds on two occasions.

In August 1953, my sprinter friend persuaded me to join Highgate Harriers in Parliament Hill in north London. I won the Youth (Under-17) One-Mile championship in 4:54. I began to think that maybe I was not a failure. (To get things in perspective, a boy (Under-16) was six seconds ahead of me.)

There were highlights

Being in the 1959 six-man Highgate team to win the Watford Road Relay (I held off John Baldwin of Blackheath on my leg) / Winning the Sutton and Cheam Youth 3 x Two-Mile Road Relay – in the third and final leg (I thought I ran to exhaustion) /



Making the Middlesex Junior (first-year) 880yds final, having won my heat in a PB / Making the Highgate Road Relay team in the Worthing, fourth place just behind the classy Achilles team (combined Cambridge and Oxford – all internationals)

There were some amusing moments

We had qualified for the London to Brighton Road Relay by winning the Leyton to Southend Road Relay. I was selected to run the last leg. As I lined up, I noticed that Derek Haith, the Thames Valley Harriers National One-Mile Youth champion, was on the same leg. Some competition! I knew I would have problems: our team had been decimated by influenza and lost six athletes – and there was one absentee. I began the three-mile trip into

Brighton thirty minutes behind TVH and Brian. He was out of the showers as I finished.

National Service (1955-57)

The Royal Artillery 64th Reg, Oswestry were the Army Championships. The Regiment had built the only cinder track in the country (red shale). Chris Chattaway and Brian Hewson were there before me. It was here that I met my best mate Roy Fowler. He encouraged me in training and a 'do or die' attitude to winning. Roy had been known to collapse after a race – he usually ran himself out, and never gave in no matter what the opposition was. Later, his heroism produced great success: International CC champion, AAA 6-Mile and National record holder, and Inter Counties CC winner.

The John Hovell Squad

In 1955, I was invited to join a group trained by John Hovell of Finchley Harriers. We met in the Wigmore Harriers changing rooms below The Freemasons Arms in Hampstead. It was thought that the group could win the National if they were allowed to compete as a team. The group included Eric Shirley (Olympic Steeplechase, 1960), Frank Salvat (1960 5k Rome Olympics), Dennis O'Gorman (Olympic marathon) and some good quality county middle-distance runners: George Harrison (fifth in World Vets Five Miles), Mike Marlow, Ron Lambert, Ron Gomez and later on Roy Fowler came down a few times, both before and after his Inter Counties win. I think the intensity of training with some of these athletes helped me in the road relays and in my 165th-placed Southern Counties (Aylesford) and 286th at the National CC (Peterborough) in 1959.

Racing abroad

The Hovell group ran in a road relay in France in the spring of 1958, and the 'Le Soir' sportspage mentioned the 'international' Finchley and Highgate team. We did not win!

In retrospect, I should have trained and competed in two- and three-mile events rather than training for the half- and one-mile.

1966

Having moved to Paddock Wood, I needed to join an athletic club. Tonbridge AC was the obvious choice, where I ran between 1966 and 1972. The chairman was a Dudley LeMay. I considered that my serious athletics was over. However, I could train lunchtimes in St James Park, Hyde Park and Green Park with a friend who had an office near Buckingham Palace. A lunch break allowed me 20-to-30-minute runs. The best middle distance athletes at Tonbridge were Richard Slinney, John Turner, Reg Mephram and Ray Curtiss. Richard was a junior and went to the States on a scholarship. In the Kent League, I was third for us. Later on, I beat Ray and finished 15th at Mote Park (Peter Brenchley won the race). There was a very happy and relaxed atmosphere, and no jealousy shown, when I, as a second-claim member, received a prize for the fastest 880yds for the season.

Seniors

As a senior, I never ran more than 37-40 miles a week in the winter. In my career, I only ever achieved a moderate standard of performance. All of the above is just about my involvement in the sport – not my success, but my enjoyment. It meant everything to me. All that mattered in the end was the club and the performance – in that order.

I also met my wife-to-be at Highgate Harriers (it was like a marriage bureau: seven couples met and married from the Men's and Ladies sections!). This was especially fortunate for me, as Sheila lived in Kingsbury and I lived in Stockwell – 15 miles apart. Without Highgate Harriers, who knows where we would be now?

Bill's PBs:

Boy

1 Mile 6:04

Youth

880 yds 2:14

1 Mile 4:54

Junior 1st Year

880 yds 2:04.2

1 Mile 4:38.6

Senior

660 yds 85.7

880 yds 1:58.8

¾ Mile 3:11.8 (58' first lap)(Solo Time trial)

1 Mile 4:23.8



Many of present day members know Bill for his clear timings being called out as you finish a rep exhausted!!!

Bill Mutler, January 2016