

Striders of Croydon

JUNE 2019 MAGAZINE



**Andrew Aitken becomes the first Strider to win the Croydon Half-Marathon
(photo by Mike Fleet)**

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DATES FOR YOUR DIARY

Mon 10 June – Southern Veterans Track & Field League – Walton
Sun 16 June – Ranelagh 10K – Ham (Surrey Championships & Road League)
Wed 3 July – Goodall Trophy – Sandilands
Mon 8 July – Southern Veterans Track & Field League – Croydon (Striders co-hosting)
Sun 21 July – Elmbridge 10K – Walton (Surrey Road League)
Sun 11 August – Wimbledon 5K – Wimbledon (Surrey Champs & Road League)
Wed 14 August – Jamieson Trophy – Lloyd Park
Sat 7 Sept – Surrey Steeplechase Championships – Carshalton
Sat 21 Sept – Surrey Road Relays – Wimbledon
Sun 29 Sept – Switchback 5 – Lloyd Park (Striders marshalling)
Sat 12 Oct – Surrey Cross-Country League Division Two – venue tbc
Sat 9 Nov – Surrey Cross-Country League Division Two – venue tbc

2020

Sat 11 Jan – Surrey Cross-Country League Division Two – venue tbc
Sat 8 Feb – Surrey Cross-Country League Division Two – venue tbc

(The Surrey Women's Cross-Country League dates and venues will not be finalised until
after the League's AGM in June)

CHAIRMAN'S CORNER JUNE 2019

Welcome to the summer edition of our newsletter.

Many of you will have been relatively resting up following recent marathon endeavours and perhaps looking forward to some shorter summer runs and races.

Of course, nowadays 'marathon season' never really ends and its great news that this year we have a full Sunday autumn marathon training schedule in place including where possible an additional 'pre-run run' from 7:30 to 8:30. Thanks to Hannah, Ally and all the other run leaders involved in planning this and making it happen.

I'm particularly looking forward post London Bridge run to the afternoon Summer Social and BBQ on August 25th down the Oval Tavern. With perfect timing this will be my last long run before the Richmond marathon three weeks later ... 😊.

In this edition of the newsletter Rachel Lindley runs the perhaps surprisingly flat but highly scenic Kilimanjaro marathon and Michael Bassett takes in the varied scenery at six different parkruns across Western Australia and Singapore.

Closer to home, Myles McCarthy, Ally Whitlock and Debra Bourne have different but still hugely challenging goals to take on in the Thames Path 100 mile, South Downs Way 50 mile and Devil's Challenge three-day event respectively.

Read on to see if they achieved their goals and I'll leave the last words to Ally,

'Sometimes you simply don't know what you are capable of until you try, you may fail, but you may also fly'.

Enjoy the sunshine.

Tony



THE KILIMANJARO MARATHON (by Rachel Lindley)

With a work trip to Burundi in March ending 2 days before the Kilimanjaro Marathon in neighbouring Tanzania, it was meant to be... So I hopped over the border (well, took an overnight flight via Rwanda as that seemed to be the only option on a Friday night) and met Ben at Kili airport around 3am.

We had one day in Moshi, the race HQ town, to collect race numbers and acclimatise. Moshi is only about 850m/2,800ft so not stupidly high, but it was around 35°C and far too hot to contemplate a shake-out run. Thankfully it was much cooler (at least below 30°C) the following day for the race.

Gun time was 6.45am, so it was an early breakfast before we joined a race bus which dropped us all at the end of the sports stadium drive, along with hundreds of other people in cars, minibuses, tuktuks and on foot. It was all rather chaotic, with a marathon, half and 5k fun run all starting at different times and from different places in the stadium complex, with no signage or sign of where we were supposed to be. Also no loos in evidence, so as we walked through a teacher training college whilst trying to find the start we found some unlocked pit latrines, and used those... Half a dozen other similarly lost people did the same but the queue was at least way shorter than most race loo queues.

We eventually found the start line, with the bag-drop tent (literally a 2-man tent) and a VIP portaloo in a corner which we blagged our way into for the obligatory LMW (last minute wee). There were around 500 runners for the marathon and by far the majority were Kenyans and Tanzanians; the results show around 20 runners from the UK altogether, and the top 50 finishers were all Kenyan or Tanzanian bar one American. Despite the elite finishers, however, there were also a lot of Tanzanians running recreationally, which was really cool to see, and a great atmosphere.



The first half was a relatively flat 10km out, 10km back, all on road with some incredible views of Kili in the distance. At the halfway point we joined the half marathon route, which was much more scenic, beginning with around 250m/800ft of ascent over 5 miles, then winding through some woodland before a downhill 5 miles to the finish. The downhill was hard on the quads but easy on the cardio, which was good as it was getting hotter by now. There were plenty of aid stations and it's here I discovered my new go-to aid-station drink for ultras of coke-water mixer. The crowds were all super-supportive too.

The final kilometre to the finish line was as chaotic as the start; we finished on the stadium athletics track but the entry was one narrow gate down a single lane, and everyone who'd already finished was milling out as more runners tried to get in – not great for a sprint finish, but we weren't racing so it was all part of the fun.

We enjoyed the party atmosphere in the stadium until the sun got too hot, when we retired for lunch of a local speciality, chipsi-mayai (chip omelette, yum) with added salt. Next morning, we set off on a four-day trek up Mount Meru (4,565m/14,980ft) to get in a bit more elevation (training for SDW50 and NDW50!) as the Kili Marathon is actually pretty flat, despite the name. (Talk to me if you are interested in doing this combo as we found a way to book it for about half the official price...)



Meru is Kili's little sister, so much less touristy and a glorious route: a mix of woodland, rock and shale, and a descent through a mini safari park where we wandered through a field of giraffe and buffalo (with a ranger). Meru Summit day was way harder than the marathon (tired quads from the run probably didn't help), but the views were stunning and we were so well looked after, with 3 course meals every night in the mountain huts. So many stars to see at night too, just beautiful. It was a tiring holiday but lots of fun; highly recommended if you ever get the chance.

PARKRUNS OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA (by Michael Bassett)

On a trip Down Under it seemed only right to squeeze in a parkrun or two. We flew into Perth, a lovely city with a number of parkruns, and took the opportunity to visit a couple whilst we were there, and some further afield elsewhere during our stay.

CLAISEBROOK COVE, CENTRAL PERTH

This run is through the lovely Mardalup Park that runs alongside the Swan River and a man-made inlet. On the opposite bank stands the impressive Optus Stadium, the new home of Aussie cricket in Western Australia (having taken over from the WACA which has hosted the game since the 1890s) and has another parkrun, Burswood Peninsula, that you can wave to across the river. The Claisebrook Cove parkrun is out and back for 4k, fairly flat and fast, with flowers, plants and some much-appreciated shade from trees either side of the path. There is a sting in the final 1k, which passes the start and takes you around a smart concrete dock, passing new apartments built in lightly coloured stone that bounces the light and heat back on to you. You have to pass a series of cafes and restaurants with the rich smell of breakfasts and coffee bombarding your senses before going up a small, almost hidden path to the finish halfway up a shaded slope, affectionately known by the locals as Heartbreak Hill. There are plenty of places for that post run coffee including the coolly named "KINKY LIZARD".



CARINE GLADES, NW PERTH

This one starts on the side of a slope meeting a flat path on the lower side that winds its way past a series of sports fields full of children playing and then clockwise around a hidden lake. Start at the top of the slope and you have to go further but gain momentum, or choose a lower starting position and try to be ahead of those coming from your left. It's a mix of tarmac, grass and trail, a 2-lapper curving gently through trees and scrub, giving shade from the tall trees for most of the run. We met a welcoming set of volunteers and a runner whose brother lives in Caterham! We didn't find the post-run coffee shop but had brunch not far away at "REGULAR COFFEE".



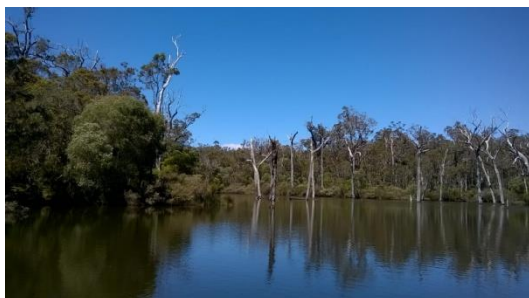
GEOGRAPHE BAY, BUSSELTON

Our trip then took us south and we stayed at Bunker Bay, set in a beautiful area with a beach where the sand arcs almost into a half circle offering the chance of spotting whales at the right time of the year. Geographe Bay at Busselton, about 220k south west of Perth, was the nearest parkrun back around the coast. Plenty of space and no problems with parking, we made our way to the east of town where the run begins just beyond the Busselton Marine Rescue Group clubhouse, home of the local running club, Busselton Runners and Triathlon Club, some members of which joined in as part of their preparations for an Ironman Triathlon in the town the following weekend. It was spring, and despite the heat encountered in our earlier runs this one along the coast behind the sand dunes was even hotter. It's an out and backer on a tarmac path, and on the return a large part of the bay is visible, with beautiful views, incredible turquoise waters to admire and a wooden jetty originally built in the 1850s which still hosts a train to take you, or you can walk, about 1.7k (1 mile) to an underwater observatory out in the bay.



MARGARET RIVER, WESTERN AUSTRALIA

Reluctantly we moved on from Bunker Bay, but we were not to be disappointed as we headed south and inland to the well-known wine region of Margaret River. The Bussell Highway, the main street, runs downhill towards the river and has numerous restaurants, cafes and the odd bar. On the slope on the north side of the river is Rotary Park, the venue for the local parkrun. The start is close by the entrance, as is "KATE" a preserved engine, and former workhorse of the timber trade which played such a big part in the development of this area of Australia. The run takes you deeper into the park parallel to the river, beginning with wide trails protected by very tall Yarri trees with few side branches, before turning back and crossing a bridge over a beautiful lake with a mini waterfall, then slipping outside the park briefly before returning to a narrow switchback path to the finish. Coffee is available close to the finish at the "HAIRY MARRON". There are alternatives. To the right of the entrance is a craft brewery, "THE BREWHOUSE", with extremely friendly staff, set in nice grounds and also serving coffee, although our favourite at the bottom of the High Street was "THE BAKERY" with excellent brunches and coffee in the most "shabby chic" setting imaginable.



MANJIMUP, NEAR PEMBERTON

Our next base was the Karri Valley Resort, set on the side of a lake in the Beedelup Forest. From there it was a 35 min drive on almost deserted roads through the forest and more wine growing estates to our next parkrun, in Manjimup. This is the home of the annual Cherry Harmony Festival which includes a 'pip spitting contest', with tickets to New Zealand as the first prize!

The parkrun takes place on the outskirts of the town in the King Jarrah picnic area, where the mighty 500-year-old King Jarra tree stands around 45 m tall. The run, organised by a really friendly group of volunteers, takes you through woodland on the narrowest of switchback paths before leading on to a long downhill pavement towards town, crossing a river before you start the return, climbing 'Puke Hill', as it is known locally, then back into the woodland, around the mighty King Jarra before the finish, a chalk line drawn on the tarmac. We then headed into Manjimup to the "TWO LITTLE BLACKBIRD" for brunch – always with 'avo' (avocado) on the menu – with the core team, who made us extremely welcome.



BISHAN, SINGAPORE

Previously, Singapore had only been seen from the inside of an airport terminal, but on this occasion we took the opportunity of staying over. Bishan parkrun starts at 7.30am, and is a taxi ride from the City Centre (about £5). With the temperature already in the high 20s and humidity 85% despite the early hour, perhaps we shouldn't have been surprised that there were many people in the park at 7.00am, already exercising. The car park was full and there were numerous groups of 'tai chi' followers spread all around the park enjoying their flowing dance like movements. It was ladies' day at the parkrun, with each role being undertaken by a female volunteer, and there was a fair sprinkling of UK tourists, including a couple who had just arrived and wanted a stretch after their long flights from the UK. There were few marshals out on the course and the runners soon became well spread out, so apart from the odd inconspicuous arrow we were left to find the right path as they intertwined the park, gaining a little help as the sun rose and streams, ponds and many exotic plants came into view. Post-run coffee is offered at the McDonald's cafe in the park.



At all six events, we were warmly welcomed by runners and volunteers alike, fascinated to be joined by tourists from afar. Some runs have quite small numbers taking part, so low-numbered finishes are possible, and a good addition for those looking to add to the parkrun challenges (<https://running-challenges.co.uk>).

THE CENTURION THAMES PATH 100 (by Myles McCarthy)

First a few scene setters:

- Following a business trip to Lima where I witnessed the city's marathon, I started running in Summer 2014 – grabbing a charity place for the 2015 London marathon. My first run was a one mile (!) run around Purley Way playing fields (it's a big field!).
- I spent the next few months enjoying weekly parkruns and slightly longer runs – building up to a Dec 2014 half (MK Winter) – I couldn't imagine doubling the distance in the coming April.
- Miraculously I found Striders at Christmas 2014 – just in time to join such a friendly club in its winter marathon training plan – my first run being the Wandle run back from Clapham Junction – all expertly organised by Robin and team.
- In the following four years I have tried a few more marathons, had a go at some of the shorter and faster distances, and, in the last two years, got into the ultra races. (2x successful 50m, 2xDNF 100m attempts, a DNF 24hr track).
- You will notice I am becoming a bit of a DNF specialist at the longer distances. This is nothing to do with desire to complete – rather a complete failure on my behalf to train properly. I am naturally lazy and disorganised. 'Life keeps getting in the way' is my excuse. But fundamentally, and when I read about others' training progress towards a race (Ally – that includes you!), I am ashamed of my pathetic training attempts.
- And finally, as some of you will have noticed, my love of food and beer refuses to allow me to evolve in to a svelter runner despite always planning to – I can't face the scales but I know I'm looking at three digits on the kg scale.

So, we come to 2019. In my last DNF – NDW100 in Aug18 (next excuse – it was 35°C!) I realised that if I was going to achieve my 100m ambition I should stop adding hills to the challenge. Centurion organise 4x 50m and 4x100m races each year: one of which follows the Thames Path from Richmond to Oxford. So, I grabbed my place on this race for May 2019 and planned on a 6-month training plan (which never happened!).

Being involved in the Striders marathon training calendar this past winter enabled me to get a regular long run in on Sunday. I also tried to do a couple of 8-10km runs in the week. Even at that low level of training I routinely failed. I also popped out to the Thames Path for a couple of longer runs and to check out the route. I absolutely love the Thames especially around Maidenhead to Marlow – I know why. Back in the Summer of '72 the maternity ward at High Wycombe hospital was closed for decoration so that summer births were moved to the Royal Canadian Red Cross Hospital in the woods surrounding Cliveden estate. (Hospital now gone). So, I was born on the River's banks near Cookham and this must be why I have this love of that stretch?!

Race Day

The first thing I had done to minimise another embarrassing DNF was to tell absolutely everybody about my upcoming challenge and send them all links to live tracking (including the GPS/mobile tracker I had specifically hired to keep the pressure on). If I was going to fail I wanted it to be maximum embarrassment.

My greatest anxiety on the morning of the race was ensuring I had all my gear in the right backpack, drop bag, etc. and that I got to the start on time and prepared. So many things to think about. Delays on trains at Clapham found me hooking up with another runner in an Uber (and her telling me of her own DNF the previous year at mile 58 – and she looked like a proper runner!!).

Centurion events are super exciting. Such a fun buzz in the build-up week and, of course, getting to the start with 300+ runners getting through kit check, portaloos and generally faffing. Seeing the mad queues at the portaloos, I popped to this very posh restaurant (Ivy Café) and the maitre d' kindly allowed me to use their very posh facilities – I was already winning knowing all my competitors were battling outside in the portaloos hell.

Now I can see this is going on and on so I will try to summarise the race in 14 easy sentences (being the hops between aid stations) – here we go:

Richmond to Walton (12 miles) – we set off 9:30am Sat - always the best leg(!) – settling into a day of running and checking pace (not too fast), start the drinking and just generally relaxing.

Walton to Wraysbury (10 miles) – oh! I'm already feeling tired. Now this is what I was worried about. In marathon training and my last long training run – by the end I was always knackered. How the hell am I going to get even half-way. Myles you're well and truly going to embarrass yourself again. I am walking some of this FFS!

Wraysbury to Dorney (9 miles) – start to feel a little more energised. Perhaps just not warmed up (haha!). Massive hailstorm which was fun, but generally the weather is good for running. (Arriving Dorney 4:12pm Sat).

Dorney to Cookham (7.5 miles) – love this stretch – passed by the woods I was born in. Got into a good rhythm and made sure each and every km I was banking a good slug of time against the forever-creeping cut-off time.

Cookham to Hurley (7 miles) – another big favourite of mine. Through my original home town of Marlow. But due to a dodgy footbridge we had a good km extra added here via a prearranged divert. I was not even stopping at Hurley aid station – I want to get to Henley drop bag in 12 hours (original plan 11 hours, but that tiredness after 15 miles this morning impacted that!).

Hurley to Henley (7 miles) – this was great – non-stop running and feeling like I've got some new legs. Just about get to Henley before it is too dark (Arriving Henley 9:26pm Sat). Henley was the only aid station where I stopped for more than 2 mins the whole race – 8 mins to put some warm layers on, head torch on and a quick bowl of pasta/cheese. Then out in the dark across the weir.

Henley to Reading (7 miles) – great to get into the night. Love it. But the temperature is dropping and it is clear it is going to be a cold one.

Reading to Whitchurch (9 miles) – pre-warned of drunken youth attacking tired runners last year I was ready for them. No sign this year – too cold. Hooked up with a runner and his pacer here (I knew the pacer – she is an expert at these events). I hope they wouldn't mind me following them for a little (turned out I stayed with them until mile 86). Plenty of good running here through the water meadows at Pangbourne.

Whitchurch to Streatley (4 miles) – gnarly and hilly (!) stretch – lots of taking it easy along here. But great to get in to Streatley village hall, which is the second drop bag. Don't even bother opening the drop bag. But on my way to quickly use their toilets (and to check urine is looking good – sorry – it gets to this!). Straight out into the very cold early morning (arriving 3:10am Sun).

Streatley to Wallingford (7 miles) – another nice running stretch through water meadow type stuff. Dawn chorus starting up, frost on ground, mist off river. Beautiful time.

Wallingford to Clifton Hampden (7.5 miles) – starting to flag a little. Getting fed up with bits of grit in my shoes hurting the balls of my feet. Still feels like a long way. Still holding 2 hours lead against cut-offs. But really fear losing it after all this. (Arriving CH at 07:28am Sun)

Clifton Hampden to Abingdon (6 miles) – lots of power walking along big fields by the river. Great to pass a few runners along this stretch – people are really flagging.

Abingdon to Lower Radley (4 miles) – very peaceful stretch. No public. No runners. Quiet little stretch through some woods. But then, oh my, across the river there was this massive

field of 100s of motocross bikes scrambling. The noise for about 20 mins. Amazing how you can get wound up when you are tired and struggling.

Lower Radley to Oxford (5 miles) – I loaded up with jelly beans at the last aid station. I knew I was going to make it. But 8km is a long way when you are moving pretty slowly. I just wanted this to finish. As I approached Oxford I passed a couple of other competitors. I thought I was ‘death marching’ it home but when I passed these guys I suddenly realised what death march can really be. They were properly shot. Turn off tow path and see the blue inflatable finish line. I managed a run to the finish. Handed my buckle and then I just staggered in circles. In pain. Saying ‘never again’. Collapsed on the floor – where I stayed for two hours. Couldn’t move. My parents had to drive the car onto the playing field to me so I could climb in and fall asleep.

102.2 miles – 164.4km – 26h16m28s. (28-hour cut-off).

175th finisher. 309 starters. 225 finishers.

So I best wrap up:

- ‘Never again’ I said – well probably never.
- One week on – I’m still feeling tired in the day. Toes are a little numb. Right knee feels a little stiff. Legs almost back to normal. No plans to run for another week.
- I am so proud of my finisher buckle. I really was not confident of finishing. My mum told me today (after she had gone to a family 80th birthday party), I have gone into family legend!
- As I have experienced in 50 miles ultras – when you are knackered early on in a race (and when you have many miles still to go) be confident that your legs will keep working and you can’t get any more tired.
- Keep eating and drinking – I did this and other than 5 mins of dizziness at mile 87, had good energy levels throughout.
- Ultras are fun (I promise). A great challenge and so supportive (other runners and volunteers) and beautiful routes.
- I am sure this is controversial but, I don’t think you have to get carried away with training. A good Striders marathon training attendance puts you in good position
- It is 90% mental. Never give up.
- That’s all. Now to shake some of this training weight off ready for the beach!



THE SOUTH DOWNS WAY 50 (by Ally Whitlock)

With 5 miles to go I thought I'd blown it.

I had a goal time in my mind for the South Downs Way 50 but at the bottom of the final hill I just couldn't see how I was going to do it. I was tired, my knees were in agony, my stomach was churning with every faltering movement. Every step was a painful effort and I still had what seemed like a mountain to climb.

I knew I had to keep moving, I hadn't come this far to not, at the very least, get to the finish line. In my head I began to let go of Goal A and make peace with Goal B. I was desperately trying to pull myself out of the dark hole my mind was dragging me into. Where had I gone wrong? What could I have done differently to be flying up this hill rather than near crawling, hands on knees, wincing in pain?

25 miles earlier I was having the running time of my life, a party for one at Ditching Beacon down into Housedean, across the river and into Southease. I'd slipped my headphones in for the first time at a Centurion race and was happily trundling along singing to the tunes in my ears (apologies to anyone who might have had the misfortune to overhear my dulcet tones). I felt GOOD. I was happy. I was doing what I loved and I was smiling. I ran into Southease check point (CP) at 33 miles and loudly declared to anyone who would listen that I felt 1000 times better than I had at the same point in the race 12 months ago.

I'd somewhat surprisingly gone through half-way 20 minutes ahead of target. Psychologically this gave me a massive boost, it was almost as if a switch was flicked in my mind. I went from uncertainty to confidence in a matter of moments and it showed. My head lifted, my step quickened, my smile grew bigger. I knew that those 20 minutes gave me a relatively comfortable cushion for the inevitable fade in the tough latter miles. Or so I thought.

Back at the bottom of that final hill, hidden deep in those final miles, I was wishing for a larger, squishier, more comfortable cushion, whilst at the same time berating myself for having gone off too quickly. If only I'd slowed at the start I'd have more energy for the finish. Every single time.

45 miles ago at the recreation ground in Worthing I'd stood among the crowd of nearly 400 runners listening, but not listening (sorry James), to the pre-race briefing. No matter how hard I try to focus on it my mind wouldn't stay still; all I could think about at that point was the upcoming journey.

My preparation for this race could not have gone any better. Whilst I had followed a loose training plan, for the first time I trained intuitively and responded more to how I felt than what was written in the squares of my plan. I abandoned sessions when I realised mid-way though I was too tired to complete them properly. I took a week off when I was ill, rather than pushing through, and came back stronger running my fastest ever 10km only a few days later. When my calf was tight I swapped a run for cross training but also, on the days that I felt good, I added on a few extra miles, did a couple of extra hill reps and swapped a swim for a run because it was a beautiful day and I didn't want to be indoors when the sun was shining. I rested when I was tired and capitalised when I was bounding with energy.

Knowing that in all previous ultras I'd crashed and burned at marathon distance I deliberately ran longer in training than I had done previously: 28, 29, 30, 31 miles. I took myself to the wall and climbed over, hoping that on race day I would hit the magical 26.2 miles and be able to go past that psychological barrier with confidence.



On the start line. The ONLY photo I took the whole race. This was a deliberate decision because I wanted to focus on running and I can often get distracted by trying to take the perfect photo.

I ran the XNRG Amersham 50km as a training run, knocked 30 minutes off my time from the previous year and finished second lady – my first ever ‘podium’ placing. Two weeks later I knocked 68 seconds off my 5km PB, running a 21:34, a time that I never in my wildest dreams thought I’d be capable of. I wasn’t training for speed, I can’t actually remember the last time I went to track or did any kind of speed work. I was training for strength and the two come hand in hand. The stronger I am, the faster I am; the faster I am, the stronger I am.

I’m not a naturally fast runner. On club runs I will often look on with envy at some of the ladies who run effortlessly at the pace I want to be running, laughing and chatting whilst I am putting in 110% effort and struggling to breathe. I may not be naturally fast but when I have a goal, a dream, I will work my backside off to achieve it.

Standing on that start line in Worthing I knew I was in the best shape of my life, stronger, fitter, faster than I’ve ever been and that today, with pretty good running conditions to boot, was the best chance I was ever going to have of hitting my lofty and ambitious 50-mile goal.

And yes, I did have a goal for the race. A secret goal. When people asked me, I smiled and said it would be nice if I could beat last year’s time. I was lying. My goal was way bigger than that.

I wanted sub-9 hours and a top ten (female) finish. To put into perspective and show the enormity of what I was aiming for, in 2018 I ran 9:36 and finished 21st lady. Was I being cocky? Maybe. But I sure as hell was going to give it a go.

The starting gun went. (Actually, was there a gun, a horn or just a 3, 2, 1 go...? I can’t remember). We were off.

Do not go out too fast.
Do not go out too fast.
Do not go out too fast.



(photo by Stuart March)

The first few miles I ran alongside Chris. We'd 'met' on Twitter two years earlier & in person at the NDW50 in 2017. He found me in a near crumpled heap on the last South Downs hill 12 months ago & to all intents & purposes dragged me to the finish line. This year his goal was the same as mine (well not the top ten female finish, obvs).

Mile 1, not too bad.

Mile 2, there's a hill to climb, Chris & I went our separate ways.

Mile 3, damn, marathon pace.

Mile 4, f**k, faster than marathon pace... Slow the f**k down girl.

I started too fast.

Again.

It's hard to slow freshly tapered legs that are eager to run.

I gave myself a few miles grace. My plan was to run to heart rate & it always takes 4-5 miles for me to get into my groove & for it to regulate. My aim was to keep it below 150. I'd successfully run the Amersham 50km with this strategy & saw no reason to change a winning formula.

After a few miles I'm in my running rhythm. Run the flats & the downs, hike the ups. Legs are feeling sweet. Eat every 4-5 miles. The conditions are good, the temperature near perfect. I chat briefly to Rachel, a fellow Strider, & her partner Ben. They too are aiming for sub-9 hours. I have a moment of doubt, Rachel is a 3:08 marathoner, my PB is 3:53. I wonder about hanging onto their tails but sensibly decide that I have to run my own race, at my own pace. Also, I needed a wee & when I came out from behind the bush they'd disappeared off into the distance so the decision was made!

11 miles in & a hi-five from Stu the photographer, I knew the first check point was just around the corner. Whilst I'd remembered this (pro tip: always remember where the food is), I'd forgotten about the bastard of a hill that is immediately after the check point. I ran in full of enthusiasm, within moments of leaving that enthusiasm has dwindled & my run had slowed to a march. A 600ft climb in 2 miles. That was about one tenth of the total course elevation.

A little aside here...

There's a road near where I live called Cypress Road. I call it Cypress Hill, after the band. It's 0.17 miles bottom to top & 95ft elevation gain (I measured). I called my Strava segment 'Insane in the Brain' after the Cypress Hill song, because to run up & down it you must be 'insane in the brain'.

Puts hand in air.

I've run up & down Cypress Hill 67 times so far this year. Most of them whilst carrying 2kg bags of dried rice in my rucksack. And it showed. I felt SO much stronger on the hills than I did 12 months ago. I was able to run/jog more of them & those that I couldn't run my 'hike' was faster, stronger & easier.



Maybe not so insane in the brain after all.

Along the ridge at the top of the hill, completely exposed & with no shelter, it was windy. This was the section I was least familiar with. Head down, plod on, try not to get blown off the hill. Down to CP2. All the check points are at bottoms of hills. I was still feeling strong, happy & content. I filled my bottles, grabbed a couple of PB & jam sandwiches & marched on up the next hill. It goes without saying that if all the check points are at bottoms of hills they all have big climbs just after!

In the climb up to Ditchling Beacon the first few doubts start flirting with my positive vibes. The hills are tough & relentless & I think back with longing to the ease of the first few miles. Because the only stat I am monitoring is my heart rate, I, by choice at this point, do not know where I am time wise. My mile splits have been popping up, the last few miles have been slower than target pace. My mind starts playing games, I think I'm dropping behind target. I could just look but I am determined to trust my heart rate strategy & not to be a slave to the Garmin. I know how my head works. I know the minute I switch my watch screen I will become obsessed with pace & all aspirations of running to effort will be discarded.

And then my 25 mile split pops up. This time, as well as glancing at the mile time I do steal a quick glance at the elapsed time. 4:08. Four oh bloody eight! That's a whopping 22 minutes ahead of target. And we're going downhill... Weeeeeeeeeee.... I cannot tell you what that did to my mind, to my mood & to my smile. I flew down the hill into CP3 at Housedean Farm,

was tempted momentarily by the beer on offer by the Bad Boy Running Crew but opted for the far more sensible tailwind instead. The headphones go in, let the party on what was my favourite section start!



(photo by Stuart March)

So after telling the volunteers how great I feel, I come out of CP4 at Southease & start the next big climb. This is the part I could run with my eyes closed. In fact I almost had to one day last autumn when the mist was so thick I could only see about 50 feet in front of me. I know the mile out of Southease has 450+ ft of elevation gain. I've measured. I know I won't be running any of it so happily eat my snacks & sing along to a favourite song as I climb. I get near to the top, I say near, this is one of those hills that goes on for ever & EVER & I'm beginning to feel a little weird. I run along the ridge but my stomach, never usually an issue, is unsettled & churning. Having heard many a story of stomach issues curtailing an ultra I start worrying. I have to slow to a walk for a while. Sod's law this is one of the most open & exposed parts of the trail & there are no bushes to hide in should I need to (disclaimer, thankfully I don't).

I remember this section from Southease 12 months ago. Between CP4 & 5 I pulled out of all upcoming races, declared I'd never race again AND gave up running all together in the space of seven miles. I remember the pain I felt then & reflect that although I am uncomfortable, my stomach is churning, my legs ache & my knees are becoming increasing sore I am in a much better state than I was a year ago. Both physically & mentally.

I say that, the long decent into Alfriston & CP5 is torturous & I begin to waver. This is a mile I usually enjoy. I'm strong on the descent & have no inhibitions on letting go & zooming down a good hill with a reckless abandonment, allowing gravity to take me from top to bottom as fast as I can. Only today I can't. My stomach doesn't feel safe & my knees, now very sore, won't let me. Every downhill step on the hard uneven ground jars them & I wince. I lament my shoe choice, the trails have been so hard & dry I wished I had worn cushioned road shoes rather than light trails.

I roll into the Alfriston check point just after mile 41 to be greeted by Nikki & Jane. Jane & I met for dinner before the race last year & Nikki & I are doing the same race later this year. They fill my bottles, pour me drinks & do all the wonderful things the volunteers do for runners throughout the race. As I'm drinking some coke Chris runs in. I'm kind of pleased. I'm at the stage where I need some company. We leave together, both feeling a little despondent, sure we're off target & knowing we've got the hardest part to come.

Just outside Alfriston the trail forks in two. When I run here by myself I always take the right hand fork down to the Seven Sisters. The sisters have become my haven. I run to them when I need some peace, some calmness & some time to think & reflect. Today however we take the left hand path, the one that leads up & down another hill to Jevvington. Chris & I stay in close proximity until the just before that final CP when I tell him to go on. He's looking strong & I don't want to be the reason he misses his sub-9 goal.

So I'm back at the bottom of that final hill. I pause, look up, I can't see the top. I'm tired, I hurt, I just can't see how I am going to do it. Every step is a painful effort & there is this insurmountable mountain to climb.

As I made peace with Goal B I knew that whatever happened I wasn't giving up. Having not been able to stomach any solid food, bar some fruit, for 3+ hours I brought out the emergency Mars Bar for a last boost of energy, took one bite & started the climb.

Cypress Hill was for this moment.

Every hill session I'd done in training I would get to the end, go back to the bottom & add on another two reps especially for this. I'd run up Cypress Hill two more times on tired legs, bags of rice on my back, visualising a successful climb from Jevvington to the final trig.

It's NEVER-ENDING.

Half way up I was over taken by another women who looked strong, confident & WAS RUNNING as opposed to my hiking. Don't get me wrong, I was hiking strongly whilst saying a quiet thank you to Cypress Hill, but she WAS RUNNING! Having not seen another female in 20 odd miles, she was the second lady to overtake me in the last few. The dream felt as if it was floating further & further away.

Eventually I spotted the trig point at the top of the hill. I knew from that point on I was on the home stretch. A handful of meters away from the summit my watch beeped 47 miles. I glanced at the elapsed time & saw I had 30 minutes to run the last three miles to hit my target. On a normal day 10 minute miles are easy like Sunday morning, today I wasn't so sure.

I disregarded my heart rate, switched my watch screen onto pace & through gritted teeth started to run as hard as I could, stumbling down the last rocky descent my knees screaming at me with every jarring step. I had to pause two, three times, take a deep breath & refocus my mind for the next step. I was cursing. I wanted to hop, skip, jump & fly down like I usually do. I love technical downhills, you know, the ones where you have to watch your feet & jump over rocks, tree roots, branches & uneven ground skipping from side to side as you fly with speed unable to stop until the trail levels out. Today I was tip-toeing, stopping, starting & stumbling in frustration. I eventually made it to the bottom, convinced I was slower than I had been on the ascent.

Onto the final section & for once I was happy to see flat tarmac, the last few miles winding around the roads on the outskirts of Eastbourne.

Head down, this was it. Breathe in, breathe out, ignore the pain, just run.

I run the last mile faster than the first.

Entering the sports stadium to claps & cheers from the Centurion crew, for that final 400m around the track my smile reappears.

I'm grinning. I hadn't blown it, I WAS going to do it.

I cross the finish line.

8:50:31

10th lady

49.1 miles*, 8:50:31, 6,300ft of elevation gain, 10th lady, average heart rate 142bpm.



(photo by Stuart March)

Stuart captured my finish line joy perfectly and Chris, who finished six minutes ahead of me, videoed me crossing the line. From thinking I'd blown it an hour earlier to realising I'd done it with time to spare you can just hear my disbelieving 'oh my god' at the end! I'm still smiling now, three days later.

Laura, who I ran with at last summer's Serpent Trail 100km hands me my medal and Stu gives me a hug of congratulations. A volunteer hands me my bag and someone else offers me a cup of tea and something to eat. I'm reminded what a brilliant community Centurion is. From the RD who cheered me by name as I ran into the sports stadium for my victory lap, to every single volunteer who gave up their time to look after us at the check points throughout the day. The crews of other runners who cheered as I ran past them out on the course, to the other runners, those I know as friends and those I met on the trails, there is something very special about the Centurion family and I'm proud to be a part of it.

I can't shout loud enough about Centurion races, I've now run four, volunteered at three and paced at one. They are brilliantly well-organised races, run by runners FOR runners. No airs, no graces, no pampering of elites or so-called influencers and whether you're first over the line or last, everyone's victory is celebrated.

And for my end? I think it's often sadly frowned upon to sing your own praises and shout about your own achievements, but I'm sorry, I am going to.

I worked harder for this than I have ever worked for anything, and for someone who often lacks in confidence and doubts her abilities I am bloody proud of myself and what I have achieved. Two years ago I would NEVER have thought I was capable of a run like this. I would never have contemplated running a 21:34 5km, of podium-ing at a 50km or running sub-9 and finishing in the top ten of a 50-miler. I've pushed, challenged and tested myself over the last four months of training. I've grown in confidence and self-belief and moved so far outside of my comfort zone, I don't know where that comfort zone is anymore.

Sometimes you simply don't know what you are capable of until you try, you may fail, but you may also fly. On the South Downs I flew and by doing so I proved something to myself.

I proved that I can.

So am I going to rest now?

Hell no! Summer is on its way and there are lots more adventures to be had. I'll give my body the immediate rest it needs and then I'll be back out on those trails!



(photo by Stuart March)

**An aside, many trail races and ultras are not an exact distance. The SDW50 measures short at 49.1 miles, the NDW50 long at 51 miles. After running mile 49 in 9:15 I know I could have done that final 0.9 miles in 9:29 to still bring me in under 9 hours. In my mind this is important, I feel as if I can justifiably say I ran a sub-9 hour 50 miles. If I'd crept in a few seconds under the nine, that claim would have felt slightly disingenuous to me.*

THE XNRG DEVIL'S CHALLENGE (by Debra Bourne)

The Devil's Challenge is a 3-day, 97-mile ultramarathon along the South Downs Way, starting near Winchester and finishing at Eastbourne. Along the way are about 4,000 metres (13,600 ft) of ascent and descent. Back in 2013, when I ran five 50-mile races over the year, I was still nervous about the idea of running an ultra and then getting up and doing it again the same day, so although I had seen some 2-day races such as Pilgrim's Challenge (also organised by XNRG), I hadn't dared to enter any.

This year my key races were the Samphire 100, North Downs Way 50, South Downs Way 100, Lakeland 50, Ridgeway 86 and Wendover Woods 50. I always prefer to recce the routes if I can (although I ran the Ridgeway 86 last year 'blind'). I entered the Devil's Challenge for two reasons: to take part in a stage race involving sleeping overnight communally in halls, which I hadn't done before, and to recce the SDW, as apart from running a bit near the end in the Beachy Head Marathon (a great race – everyone should experience it!) I hadn't run the route since 2013 and had never run the first 50 miles of the course.

My plan for 2019 was that in the middle of January I would start increasing my weekly mileage, adding speed work and hills, and running with a backpack to get ready for the long point-to-point hilly races. However, instead I caught a horrible cough, strained all my chest muscles coughing and lost about 10 weeks of training time – I managed to run during some of that time but only slowly, never running hard enough to make my legs tired, as I had to run within what the chest would allow.

Three weeks before the Devil's Challenge I ran Boston Marathon (Lincolnshire!) and it took me 26 minutes more than two years previously – a whole minute per mile slower, so I had to revise my expectations for the Devil's Challenge. A week before I ran the Ranscombe Spring Challenge, and that was the first race since January in which I felt I'd run well, and I dared to start thinking I might not be -quite- so slow on the Devil's Challenge. However, the week leading up to the Devil's Challenge was really busy for work, and I didn't manage any early nights. Not ideal!

Friday evening I got home from work, got everything ready for Lloyd parkrun and took the kit down to Lloyd Park. Then I got everything ready for the long weekend's running, including digging out my sleeping bag and sleeping mat, filling my soft flasks with water and electrolytes, deciding on running shoes, windproof jacket and everything. I also looked up where Winchester parkrun was, as we thought my husband could probably go and run that after dropping me off to get my race number and so on.

Saturday morning the alarm woke us horribly early, as planned, and we were soon in the car heading towards Winchester. Halfway there I started wondering whether it might be possible for me to jog round Winchester parkrun, which would bring the mileage for the three days up to 100... So after I had registered and handed in my duffle and sleeping bag, we hopped back in the car. 30 minutes later, having failed to find the parkrun, we returned to the start point for the ultra. Oh well! There were several people running whom I knew from other events, particularly SVN events but also some I had met at Comrades.

The walkers were sent off at 9.30 and the rest of us were briefed and then set off at 10am. It was a bit cool, and I was glad I'd chosen my full-length Skins and had my arm warmers and gloves on, although my jacket remained in my backpack. Day 1 was about 32 miles. There was a fair amount of both ascent and descent, but although I walked the steeper uphill sections, a lot of the trail was runnable. There were some tricky sections with flint-laden

chalk underfoot, and one flat section of twisting trail that would have been runnable except that it was excessively supplied with tree roots to be stepped over every stride or two – with almost no ground between the roots. The wind got quite brisk on the tops, and I was very glad of the arm warmers, as I could push those down to my wrists when it was warmer and pull them up (and occasionally put my gloves on) when the wind cooled me down. We were maybe 8 or 10 miles from the end when a large grey cloud came over and started raining on us. Having had previous experiences of how cold I can get if wet I stopped under a tree and put my waterproof coat on, although thankfully the shower only lasted about 10 minutes so I soon took it off again. For the most part we were following the National Trail signs – either an acorn and an arrow or small signs saying SDW or larger fingerposts pointing out the South Downs Way. The organisers had supplemented these with their own race arrow in a few places, and particularly where we turned off from the SDW to head down to the first day's finish point. Given all the lost training, I wasn't sure how fast to go, so I pushed on a bit, but not too much. Initially I was running near a Vegan Runner I know, Jonathan, but later either I speeded up or he slowed down and fell behind. For about the last third of the day a runner called Tara and I repeatedly passed each other – she was using poles, in preparation for CCC (part of the UTMB weekend) later this year, and gained on me on the walking uphill, while I was a bit faster than she was on the downhill. On the final section down to the Day 1 finish, I suggested that we could finish together, but she declined, and I ended up finishing a little in front of her.



There was tea and coffee and cake available by the finish, and a chance to watch a few more runners in, including Jonathan – and note a sharp shower, including hail, and be glad I wasn't still out in that – before getting onto the minibus to be taken to the school where our bags were waiting and where we would spend the night. Everyone had to pick out a spot for their sleeping bag etc. Some people had ordered camp beds. I had a sleeping mat that was only a few cm thick when fully inflated, while some people had brought really deep blow-up mattresses. I managed to get a space by the wall, although the guy on one side of me turned out to be a snorer (not TOO loud, thankfully). Showers were hot, which was great. Half the toilets were missing their seats, but otherwise it was all pretty good. Lots of cake available for refueling, and I had taken my protein recovery drink with me, so I made that up, plus tea (hot water was available in tea urns), and then as I wanted something savory, an instant soup. Several people were sporting scrapes and bruises from falls, and one poor runner appeared late, after a trip to hospital, with the fingers of one hand strapped up – he had smashed them on a flint when falling and would be off to get the broken bones pinned the next day.

Dinner was lasagne, including meat, vegetarian, vegan and gluten free options, with salad and bread rolls available, and desserts including fruit salad. Afterwards, we had a

presentation about the importance of getting a good night's sleep – the irony of this before we all trooped off to the hall to sleep poorly was acknowledged!

The day's results were available on a laptop and much to my surprise I discovered I was leading the VW50 group! Second in that group was the lady who had finished just behind me. Before the talk, the organiser announced the start time groups for day 2, and we had both (together with everyone else who finished in under 6 hours 5 minutes) been put into the 'elite' start, at 9am, with the main group going off at 8am and the walkers/slow runners at 7am; the minibuses would collect us 30 minutes earlier to transport us to the start for the day's briefing. I was a bit apprehensive about that 'elite' start, as I knew I would miss having Jonathan and the others to run with, but at least Tara and I would be able to encourage/push each other.

Lights went out at 10pm and snoring soon started. After a poor night's sleep (despite an eye mask and ear plugs), I finally gave up trying to sleep at about 7am. When I had dressed and was about to head off to breakfast, I noticed that Tara was already packed and ready to go. She told me she had asked to be changed to the 8am start as she expected to be slower that day.

Breakfasted (in a bit of a rush as they were trying to clear away the breakfast things) and packed well before 8am, there was little to do except sit around and wait. Finally we got into the minibuses. At the start point we were briefed about that day's run, and set off, making sure our tags flashed as we passed the detector.

The first miles were steadily uphill, and the faster people rapidly ran away from me. I did some running, some walking and looked forward to the downhill that surely had to follow. Eventually it did go downhill – but it was rather steep and the path was so flinty that I found it impossible to settle into a running stride. That rather set the tone for the day. Lots of ascent and descent, less runnable than the previous day, and although I tried to enjoy my first 'elite' start, I failed and, dropping further and further back, didn't really feel good in the running the whole day. However, I did manage to get some nice photographs on my phone.



Part way through the day we reached the section that I had run previously, and we also started passing people who were running the Three Forts Challenge, which was partly on the SDW but in the opposite direction – I had run that the previous year, and seen people running the Devil's Challenge! I looked out for Striders, didn't see any but I did see a couple of 100 Marathon club people I recognised, including Gareth, who organises the Vanguard Way Marathon and Woldingham Marathon. By now we were onto more runnable areas again and I managed to get moving a bit better. The final bit was downhill. When I spotted the finish arch and checked the time I realised I had a chance to finish in under 7 hours, so I put on some speed, practically sprinted for the line – and came in a few seconds over the 7 hours. Oh well! All in all, I was glad when the 35 miles were over and I could hop into a minibus and get back to base – another school, another school hall for sleeping in. The results were available on the laptop again, and Tara had finished six minutes faster than I

had. I felt very frustrated with how I had run and annoyed with having let being with the faster runners and dropping back from them get to me.

My legs were stiffening up after that day's ascents and descents, so I booked a massage that ended up starting just as supper was served, but my legs felt better after it and there was still plenty of food left. Afterwards we had an excellent talk from a very good ultrarunner, Anna-Marie Watson, about running 'flow' and how to improve your chances of running with flow – or 'in the moment', followed by a promotion of an amazing-looking multi-day event in the US, starting at the edge of the Grand Canyon. (The XNRG events aim to help people prepare for longer multi-day events, as well as being great events in their own rights.) This time we were split between two halls and the walkers/slowest runners were in a separate hall which must have contained most of the snorers, as snoring was much less evident in our hall on the second night, thankfully.

Day 3 was the best weather yet, definitely warmer than the previous days, and I chose shorts for running in. I also switched to my other backpack (which I'd brought along in case the other one rubbed) and got one of the other runners to put kinesiology tape (with no stretch) over the sore areas of my back, which made that a lot more comfortable – and I did the same for someone else.

From having started with no expectations, I now very much wanted to finish first in my age group – which meant I had to finish at least 6 minutes ahead of Tara. The third day was 30 miles – so gaining 6 minutes was not an impossible target, but would definitely take work. Back in the minibuses and to the start for the briefing, including warning us that where the SDW split into two we should go straight on and over the Seven Sisters and Beachy Head. As soon as the countdown finished and we set off, I started pushing myself to run just a bit faster, all the time. One guy in our groups (the main start) set off like a bat out of hell and was soon out of sight, but I and two other women found ourselves passing and re-passing each other repeatedly over the 30 miles. Sometimes one of us got a bit ahead, or trailed a minute behind, but we all used one another other to keep pushing on, and held gates open for one another, and although we didn't chat much, it was companionable.

At each aid station I refilled my water bottles as necessary, grabbed some fruit and on one occasion accepted the offer of some sun cream for my arms, but generally got out again as fast as possible. The long flight of steps I had expected, remembering them from Beachy Head Marathon, and I'd even semi-remembered that there were two flights, so wasn't too shocked to reach the second set. I pulled a glove onto my left hand and used the rail to help pull myself up the steps.

Starting up the Seven Sisters I was startled to be hailed by someone walking down – a guy who runs at Lloyd parkrun. I didn't dare chat for long, so after a few words I apologised and set off again power walking up the hill. Part way over the Sisters I started being overtaken by some of the faster runners who had set off in the late start that morning. It was amazing watching them, particularly a woman who was running day 3 only, who bounded up the hills like a goat (only more gracefully!), while I was most definitely reduced to walking. I was a little concerned that, while I knew I was on the correct route, I hadn't noticed the sign where the path split, which didn't augur well for navigation in the SDW100 in June, when I needed to take the other branch!*

Into the last checkpoint and out and onto the long pull up Beachy Head. Dropping down and suddenly the only SDW sign I could see said 'SDW footpath' and I didn't think that could be correct, but it said SDW so I followed it. One of the other runners I'd been running with was a little ahead of me at this point, and I thought she had also gone that way, but when I passed a man walking his dog he hadn't seen any other runners, which got me worried. I decided to put my faith in the sign I had followed, and a minute or two later the path re-joined what must

have been the main SDW track – and there was other runner, Laura (who it turned out had started on the footpath, decided she had gone wrong, and gone to rejoin the other route). We were both glad to see each other, and carried on more surely. Now I recognised the path down towards the end of the Beachy Head marathon, and sure enough, the final slope soon came into sight. I concentrated on keeping my footing, and missed the sign taking us off to the left just before the bottom, but soon we were back on track and running along a little path, then down the road, in through a gate, down a set of steps, across the grass and through the finish arch. Done! I stopped my watch, was given my medal and a bottle of water, and sat down to watch the next runners coming in. My watch had recorded 30 miles precisely (which is almost unheard of) and just over 5:40 for that day's run, which I was happy with.

The race clock wasn't visible at the finish line, and I was tired enough that I couldn't work out what the actual (clock, rather than race) time had been when I finished, and couldn't remember exactly when we had started! So when Tara came in and I cheered her through the finish, I wasn't sure which of us had finished sooner overall.

After watching a couple more runners arrive I walked into the hall on stiffening legs and got a wonderful cup of hot peppermint tea, and raided my bag for some warm clothes, and collected my race T-shirt, before setting off back out to cheer more people into the finish – it's always great to see people coming in. On my way out the hall I realised the laptop was set up again showing the live results. A bit nervously I scrolled down from the first finishers to see how Tara and I had done. According to the computer, I had come in at 5:40:04 on Day 3 and she had finished in 5:48:21 – which meant I'd finished 8 minutes faster on day 3 and about 2 minutes faster overall, out of some 18 and a half hours of running!

So, a while later, after a delay while the organisers made sure there wasn't anyone in the late start who could overtake me, I was handed a rather nice engraved trophy for 1st VW50. My cumulative running time of 18:27:46 also made me 5th woman – not too bad!



Looking back, I'm pleased with my running on days 1 and 3 – particularly day 3, when I dared to push on more than I usually do on an ultra. Day 2 wasn't so good, and I need to work on not being so affected negatively when I'm running with faster runners and they are going off ahead and I'm falling further and further behind. However, going from zero expectations to winning my age category was a real psychological boost, and a good indication that although I'd lost some training, my base fitness was good. The race also taught me that the worst of the climbs – and the descents with the most treacherous footing – were in the middle third of the route, which will be useful information for SDW100 – if I can get past about the 60 mile point, it gets better after that.

* Looking at the map, the routes diverge a lot earlier than I'd realised – which still leaves me the all-important turning down into Eastbourne to miss when I'm tired!

THE CENTURION NORTH DOWNS WAY 50 (by Debra Bourne)

The Centurion North Downs Way 50 (NDW50) is a rather special race for me: it was my first 50-mile race back in 2012, when I had a fantastic run, being 'in the zone' for large parts of the race, and came in 18th overall and 1st woman, in 9:52. Okay, I was first woman because they were still holding the NDW50 with the NDW100 back then and most of the fast runners were in the longer race and the fast women who had been intending to run the 50 were out with injury, but I still cherished it!

In 2013 I'd run this race again, as the third of my challenge to run 5 x 50-milers at age 45. I was struggling with injuries and it took me more than 11 hours. The following three years had been lost to some major injuries (mostly NOT caused by running. Having spent 2017 and 2018 getting properly back into my running, I wanted another go at the NDW50 – this was to be one of my key events in 2019

My plan was to start serious hill training and strengthening in the middle of January, after a few weeks of lighter running to finish recovering properly from the 50K a day for 10 days that I'd done at the end of November. Instead, I caught the worst cough I'd ever had, with repeated long bouts of severe coughing that left me with strained chest muscles, and for 10 weeks I was unable to run fast enough to make my leg muscles ache. So much for hill and speed or strength training – I'd barely managed to get out and recce the route in sections.

My original 'A' goal for NDW50 2019 was to run a PB for the course, with my 'B' goal being to run sub-10 hours. With the lost training, I'd started to accept that I was likely to be a lot slower. My running at the Devil's Challenge two weeks earlier allowed me to hope that I might manage under 10 hours 30 minutes, but under 10 seemed unlikely.

The race started at 8am, so at 5am the alarm went off and we got up, breakfasted and set off in the car down to Farnham, Aidan driving and letting me snooze a bit (I am very lucky to have a husband who is so supportive!), arriving just in time to get one of the last three car parking spaces at the Leisure Centre where registration was being held. Inside, we found our way to kit check, then I collected my number before going in search of the toilets – the queue was not too bad, and they were clean and well stocked with toilet paper.

I always wonder who I'll bump into that I know at these races. I knew Rachel Lindley would be there, and we saw each other soon after I arrived. Later I saw several other people I knew, mainly from Saxons, Vikings and Normans events. After a bit of waiting around and last-minute kit checks we gathered in the sports hall where we had registered, for the race briefing, then followed a couple of marshals down past the start point of the NDW – which is right on the A31 and into a quiet, tree-lined lane. A few minutes wait as we were a little early. I found myself next to Rachel and Ben and wished them good running – knowing I wouldn't see them again once we started until after the finish!

Finally the countdown arrived, and we set off with much beeping of Garmins.

As usual, Centurion had the route well marked with their arrows and with red-and-white tape, and along the whole course only a few pieces of the tape had been pulled off by other people. As far as navigation went I could have managed very well without the recce runs, but I was really glad I had done them and been reminded of the terrain – there were stretches that I really hadn't remembered from six and seven years ago.

I love the NDW and I was feeling good, so I tried to get a balance in my speed, running fast enough to enjoy it and not feel like I was plodding, but not too fast and risking blowing up

later. I rarely looked at my speed on my watch, running by feel instead. I had forgotten to write down the distances between the aid stations, but I remembered where some of them would be and as the weather was near-ideal – not too cold, not too hot, not raining – I didn't worry about running out of water. I was carrying two 500ml soft flasks on the front of my pack and one half full in my backpack as a backup, just in case. As usual for me I had the water spiked with Elete (concentrated electrolytes) and I sipped water often. I was fueling mainly with Kendal Mint Cake, half a piece at a time, supplemented at the aid stations mainly with fruit (orange, banana and watermelon) – plus at the first aid station one of the volunteers had both vegetarian and vegan jelly sweets – for which I thanked him profusely.



I settled into a comfortable rhythm, enjoying the runnable sections and the woodlands, listening to the birds and spotting them sometimes – always nice when I see a kestrel hovering, or a red kite or buzzard soaring overhead. It was warm enough that I was glad we were often in woodland shade (particularly as I hadn't packed any sun cream).

Running through one bit of woodland, I unexpectedly caught up with a friend from SVN, Gareth, who was a somewhat faster runner than me. He was walking, with his hip giving him problems. We chatted for a minute and I mentioned my sub-10-hour goal. "You're well on for that!" he replied – and I looked, really looked at the time on my watch and the distance covered and realised he was right – I was coming up to 17 miles, or a third of the way through, and would hit that at under 3 hours. That was really encouraging, even with the big climbs ahead. I wished Gareth luck and set off running again.



Going through Denbies, I remembered feeling rather down at the same stage in 2012. This time, knowing that I would have a long walk up Box Hill, I pushed on a bit down the road through the estate, making good use of the downhill section. Then it was time to trot down the road to the underpass (instant disqualification if you tried to cross the main road) and up again to the aid station. Then it was time for Box Hill. The stepping stones were out of use as one had been knocked out of place by a large branch during flooding earlier in the year, so we had the little diversion over the bridge instead – a last bit of running before the long, long flight of steps up to the top. At the viewpoint I paused for a moment to take in the view – it's a shame to do such great runs and NOT take in the views. Then onward, running where I could, walking the uphill.

I picked up a follower along this section, a guy who told me that I was going at a really good pace for someone this far back in the field, and asked if I minded him following. I said that would be fine and we set off. He mostly hung back a bit, so we didn't chat much, but the distance was sensible as it meant he wouldn't fall over me if I tripped and fell. Which was a good thing, because some while later I -did- trip and fall, thankfully managing to twist sideways into the greenery (having just enough time to hope I wasn't falling into nettles – I was lucky, and got away with no more than a slight graze on the side of my knee). It's funny how the mind plays tricks with distance – I remembered the route, knew what hills were still ahead and what runnable sections, for example, but I was expecting the big climb at Reigate Hill to arrive some time before it actually did.



For a while another guy joined us and said he would run with me, as he thought I was keeping a good steady pace which would stop him running too fast and then having to walk – but after a while he ran on ahead when I was walking an uphill section! (And yes, later I passed him again). So my shadow and I ran on. I enjoyed some more great views, took a moment to enjoy the bluebells – past their best, but still worth noticing, including while running down War Coppice Road just before Caterham – many Striders will know this section from some of the marathon training runs. We popped out of the woods and onto the open area at Caterham Viewpoint. No ice cream at the aid station this year – oh well! A quick refill of bottles, a couple of pieces of fruit and off again.



I knew I was slowing now, but did my best to keep running the flat and downhill sections (except where roots or stones made walking advisable). I spent a lot of time playing around with and repeating a running mantra I've developed. The basis is "I think, I am; I will, I can. I think I can, I will, I do!" – but I mess around with the order and the mental phrasing and the emphasis, which keeps the message changing slightly and helps the time to pass when I'm feeling tired! I also tried to concentrate on and 'breathe into' any area of particular tightness on my legs, which helped. I was using my Decathlon 10-litre backpack, which usually rubs less than the Montane one, but even that was starting to chafe, so a couple of times I took the pack off, took out the small Glide Stick and re-lubricated my back, hoping that would be enough (it wasn't, quite – I'll be covering my back up with kinesiology tape before SDW100).



This clearing in the trees was created at 5.42pm on 19 March 1945 when a B17(G) aircraft, a 'Flying Fortress' crashed into the side of Reigate Hill, killing all nine crew members on board.

These memorial wing tips, carved from oak, are placed exactly the distance apart that real B-17(G) wingtips flew.

Robert Stanley Griffin
Pilot. At just three months old he was the oldest member of
Herbert Seymour Geller
Co-pilot

After Caterham was the section that I knew best, from Striders runs and from recce runs, and although I was slowing I was able to mentally tick off the sections, and warn my 'shadow' what was coming up.



A long section across the fields and then down the little flight of steps and turn left to power walk up the long, long track to the final aid station at Botley Hill. We'd caught up another runner, and he was very pleased to know that we were approaching the aid station. Here I lost my shadow, as he was having a bit of a knee problem and stopped for a bit. I continued, along the long tarmac path, across the road, then finally back onto fields – a hill, but I knew that and was mentally counting off the hills now. Across another field – I'd forgotten this bit! Then more woodland, more fields.



Suddenly I realized I was on the last climb! I stooped for a moment and dug into my backpack for my phone, to call Aidan to come and meet me at the finish. Now I was really on the homeward stretch – although my legs were definitely getting tired. I'd caught quite up a few runners during the second half of the race, but I was slowing as well, and a couple of runners passed me back again.

I knew by now that I would definitely be under 10 hours, but would I PB? I hoped so, but my legs were tired and I was slowing.

Through the last few fields now – and a crowd of curious cattle between us and the next kissing gate. The runner just ahead of me was apprehensive and looking for a way to get out of the field and avoid them. Thankfully I know cattle well enough that I was able to talk to them firmly and encourage them to move out of the way, and he and another runner happily followed me. Another little bit of woodland, more fields, the last tiny bit of woodland and then the last couple of fields.

Finally, on weary legs, through the gate and turn left down the lane towards the finish at Knockholt Pound. Left again up the road, then left again – and who put this horrible loose fine gravel on this driveway – not nice for tired runners! Over that section and I gathered myself for a last run, being encouraged by Rachel cheering me in – and through the finish arch! I stopped my watch and looked at the time – 9:42 and some seconds!

I was given my medal (a lot larger than the last time I had earned a Centurion medal) and my race T-shirt. It was warm and sunny, but as usual I cooled down quite quickly once I had stopped, so made use of a chair – the organisers had provided chairs (oh wonderful people) – to put on the windproof trousers and top from my pack. I was able to get a cup of hot peppermint tea, and soon Aidan arrived (delayed by a road closure) and I donned my SVN zipped hoody. We sat and stood around for a bit and chatted with Rachel and Ben, and I made up and drank my usual protein recovery shake, then realized they were providing vegan hot dogs, so wolfed down two sausages in a long bun with ketchup and fried onions – heavenly!

We had agreed to give Rachel and Ben a lift home once Ben and I had finished eating. Meanwhile the good weather made it pleasurable to sit and cheer in the other runners. I was very pleased to see my 'shadow' finishing, and I spotted a couple of other people I knew.

Somewhere in all of this, while I was sitting on the grass, a lady in an official red Centurion sweatshirt came up to me. "Can I ask you what your number is?" I couldn't remember, and started to unzip my hoodie to have a look. "187" said Aidan, and yes, there it was, 187. "Here" she said, handing me a laminated voucher - £20 to spend in their store for having finished first VF50! "Sorry about the delay in giving you this – we've been looking for number 187 for a bit, but we'd decided earlier that it couldn't be you because you looked too young!" Well, that was a very nice way to end the day.

In 2012 I'd had a fantastic NDW50, running 'in the zone' for large parts of it. In 2013 I'd had a rotten run, nursing a sore ankle tendon and painful backs of heels. This year I hadn't felt the 'flow' nearly as much as in 2012, but despite slowing rather more than I would have liked in the last 10 or 15 miles I had achieved the 'A' goal that I hadn't dared hope for – a PB by 10 minutes. And the age category win was definitely the icing on the cake!



EDINBURGH MARATHON BAN RUNNERS FOR LIFE

(based on a newspaper article by Angie Brown)

Some runners are still not aware that many races take the 'no number-swapping' rule seriously. It's true that people sometimes run under the name of a different runner and get away with it. However, that is less likely if the person who runs ends up standing out due to, for example, placing high enough to qualify for a prize as a female runner – when male – or as an older age group runner – when they are obviously much younger. For example, in the second Croydon Half-Marathon which Striders organised, in 2012, the initial computer results showed a non-club runner as being the first woman finisher, but scrutiny of the photos taken at the finish showed that the number in question had been worn by a male runner.

The Edinburgh Marathon has banned two people from a Scottish running club from competing in the Edinburgh Marathon for life, after they were caught swapping entry numbers – with the man running under the woman's number. They were caught because the man finished fast enough to win a prize as one of the top 10 FEMALE runners.

Another member of their club noticed the time and knew it was faster than the woman could run – so informed the race's organisers.

As is the case for many races, this is against the rules of the Edinburgh marathon. The newspaper article quoted Damien O'Looney, the marketing director of the Edinburgh, as telling BBC Scotland news website: "If something had happened to the male runner we wouldn't have known who he was or who to contact because we would have had the details for the woman who had registered for the race.

"We decided to take action by banning them for life because otherwise Scottish Athletics were going to take action and we thought it would be better if they were banned from our race rather than every race in Scotland.

"We sent out letters to them last week and we hope they have learned a lesson from this.

"Some runners don't see it as doing something wrong but we do see it as cheating, although our main problem with it is that it is a medical catastrophe waiting to happen."

The article also quoted a statement from Scottish Athletics saying: "The use of borrowed competitor numbers not only undermines the integrity of results, prizes and rankings issued by the sport but potentially has serious implications in the case of medical treatment to an athlete and alerting next of kin."

This is not the first time that people will be banned after one person gives their number to someone else – and it won't be the last.

(Based on an article at http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/scotland/edinburgh_and_east/8120637.stm and reproduced in view of an email sent to the Striderslist by a runner who was apparently unaware of the Edinburgh Marathon's policy on 'number-swapping'. Note that some – generally smaller – races do allow people to pass their number to another runner – usually for a fee. To cover administration in these cases they require the medical and contact details of the new runner.)

COMPETITIVE HIGHLIGHTS: MARCH – MAY 2019

Striders produced a good team performance in their final Surrey Women's Cross-Country League Division Two match of the season, at Lloyd Park on 2 March. They were led by Jenny Rowe, who was 23rd, completing the five-mile course in 36 minutes 21. Steph Upton was 35th (37:40), Nikki Javan 44th (38:33), Laura Fell 45th (38:41) and Ally Whitlock 48th (38:56). They were sixth in the team event, and also finished sixth in the final league table.

In the East Surrey League cross-country race, at the same venue later in the day, Striders' men did well to place second of the eight competing clubs. They were led by Alastair Falconer who placed sixth, completing the five-mile course in 29 minutes 53 seconds. Tatsuya Okamoto was eighth (30:28), Krzysztof Klidzia 10th (30:59), Lee Flanagan 11th (31:08), Matthew Stone 12th (31:41) and Steve Corfield 16th (32:01).

The sixth annual 'mob match' between Striders and Croydon Harriers took place at South Norwood Country Park on 9 March. 60 Striders and 42 Harriers took part. Striders won the match by 2907 points to 2346. In the British Masters Indoor Championships, at Lee Valley on the same day, Sandra Francis was third in the W60 long jump, recording 3.37 metres.

Andrew Aitken produced an excellent run to win the ninth Croydon Half-Marathon on 31 March. He recorded 78 minutes 49 seconds, and became the first Strider ever to win this event. Tatsuya Okamoto was fifth (79:47) while Krzysztof Klidzia also ran well to place sixth overall and first in the over-50 category (81:10). Tom Lawson was seventh (82:20), while Matt Stone was 15th overall and first in the over-55 category (84:16). The women's race was won by Julie Pickering of Mornington Chasers, who placed 55th overall in 92 minutes 54. For Striders, Niamh Vincent was the fourth woman to finish, placing 81st overall in 96 minutes 58. Jenny Rowe was the seventh woman to finish, placing 96th overall (98:57) while Laura Fell was the eighth woman to finish, placing 98th overall (99:05). There were 413 finishers.

In the Manchester Marathon on 7 April, Graeme Drysdale ran 2 hours 54 minutes 02, while Lottie Nusca ran 3 hours 32 minutes 55 and Maria Gabriel set a club W50 record of 3 hours 49 minutes 37. In the Maidenhead 10-mile road race on 19 April, Krzysztof Klidzia set a club M50 ten-mile record of 59 minutes 18. At Battersea Park the following day, Matthew Stone set a club M55 ten-kilometre record of 37 minutes 25. In the London Marathon on 28 April, Niamh Vincent, in her first marathon, ran 3 hours 29 minutes 12.

The first Southern Veterans League match of the season took place at Wimbledon on 29 April. Striders' men placed third of the eight clubs in the match, while their women were fourth. Paul Cripps won both the M50 high jump (1.50 metres) and long jump (4.22 metres). Jon Dean won the M60 long jump with a club age-group record of 4.02 metres, and was second in the M60 400 metres (69.6). Sandra Francis won the W60 long jump (2.98 metres), while Lorraine Hunte set a club W65 100 metre record of 18.1 s, placing third in her race.

In the Ranelagh Half-Marathon, at Richmond on 5 May, Maria Gabriel set a club W50 record of 1 hour 46 minutes 32. Striders' men were led by John Summers who ran 92:39. In the Sutton 10-kilometre road race on 19 May, Striders were led by Martin Filer, who placed 43rd (38:08). Striders' women were led by Jemma Zakariyyau, who was the eleventh woman to finish, recording 41 minutes 42. Jenny Rowe was the 23rd woman to finish (44:21).

The second Southern Veterans League match of the season took place at Ewell on 20 May. Striders' men again placed third of the eight clubs in the match, while their women were fourth. Paul Cripps won the M50 triple jump (9.76), while Lorraine Hunte set a club W65 200 metre record of 38.5 seconds.

20 YEARS AGO: LOCAL ATHLETICS IN SUMMER 1999

In the third Southern Veterans League match of the season, at Kingsmeadow on 7 June, Striders' men did well to finish third, behind Epsom and Kingston but six points ahead of local rivals Croydon Harriers. Our women finished fifth.

The final match of the season was at Sutton on 5 July. Striders' men started the match equal fourth with Dorking in the table. We finished ahead of Dorking in the match, to ensure fourth place in the final league table. Our women also finished fourth, with second-claim member Maggie Statham setting a club women's 5000 metre record of 19 minutes 52.8 seconds. In the same race Paula Bongers set a club over-45 record of 20 minutes 32.1 seconds. In the final league table our women finished fifth.

Striders' annual club handicap took place on 9 June, on the original course (which was significantly flatter than the one we now use, but was replaced by the current course in 2002 to avoid having to cross the tramlines in Oaks Road and Addiscombe Road). 67-year-old Cecil Chisholm took advantage of a generous handicap to be the first runner home in 48 minutes 16. Tony Sheppard ran the fastest actual time of 27 minutes 41.

Two Croydon athletes competed in the European Under-23 Championships at Gothenburg in July. Natasha Danvers produced an excellent run to win the 400 metre hurdles in 56.00 seconds, while Yacin Yusuf placed eighth in the 1500 metres in 3 minutes 46.87. Croydon's Donna Fraser competed in the 400 metres at the World Championships at Seville in August. However, despite running a creditable 52.01 seconds, she failed to qualify for the semi-finals.

Jon McCallum and Yacin Yusuf helped Croydon Harriers to finish second in Division One of the Southern League, their best placing since being relegated from the British League five years earlier. However, they failed to gain promotion, being beaten by Bedford and Rugby in the British League Qualifying Match at Watford on 11 September. They eventually returned to the British League in 2018.

Of our other local clubs, Hercules Wimbledon placed 24th in Southern League Division Two and were duly relegated, while South London Harriers were 18th in Division Five. Holland Sports did well to place second in Division Seven. Their team included several Striders, with Eric Parker proving particularly versatile as he tackled such unpopular events as hurdles, steeplechase and pole vault. On 10 July at Guildford, Eric set a club 110 metre hurdles record of 22.6 seconds, while in the same match Tony Sheppard won the 5000 metres in 16 minutes 30.7. In the final match, at Wycombe on 31 July, Eric completed an unusual double. He won the pole vault with a Striders club record of 2 metres 40, and also won the 5000 metres in 18 minutes 22.0.

The Rosenheim League Final was held at Tooting on 18 August. Belgrave won for the sixth successive year, with Herne Hill second and Kingston third. At the end of the season, Belgrave withdrew from the league because of the lack of competition, but subsequently re-entered it in 2007.

During the spring and summer of 1999, a few of Striders' faster runners who all worked in Croydon had been doing regular track sessions at 6pm on Tuesday evenings. Having such an early start time made it impossible for many Striders to join in, and from September it was agreed to delay the start time until 7pm. The change proved an immediate success, with 19 Striders attending the first session on 7 September.

10 YEARS AGO: LOCAL ATHLETICS IN SUMMER 2009

On 7 June, Duncan Lancashire ran well to win the annual Beckenham 10 kilometre road race, recording 33 minutes 59 seconds. Justin Macenhill was third in 34 minutes 33, while Steve Starvis placed fifth in a personal best 34 minutes 58. This ensured that Striders won the team prize. The second Southern Veterans League match of the season took place at Ewell the following day. Our men placed fourth, while our women were fifth. Andrea Jeffries set club over-45 records in both the 800 metres (2:55.4) and the 200 metres (33.6 s).

The third Rosenheim League match of the season took place at Wimbledon Park on 10 June. Our women placed third, while our men were sixth. Natalie Osher was third in the 1500 metres (5:59.6) and fourth in the discus (10.97 metres). Karen Knight placed third in the 400 metres in a club women's record of 66.8 seconds. For our men, Eliot Osher placed fourth in the 100 metres in a club record of 12.1 seconds, and also fifth in the 200 metres in a club under-20 record of 25.0.

The third Southern Veterans League match of the season took place at Kingsmeadow on 22 July. Our men finished fourth, while our women were fifth. Our best performance came from Steve Starvis, who ran well to win the over-35 1500 metres in 4 minutes 37.5. Colin Cotton also ran well to place third in the over-60 400 metres in 72.7 seconds. For our women, Andrea Jeffries competed in four events, gaining 19 points and setting new club over-45 records in the 100 metres (15.9) and 400 metres (77.3). On the same evening Striders did well to take second place out of 18 teams in the Sri Chinmoy 3 x 1 mile relay at Battersea Park. Our team comprised Matt Morgan (4:56), Alex Aronberg (5:09) and Duncan Lancashire (4:46). The fourth Rosenheim League match of the season took place at Tooting two days later. Matt Morgan competed in five events, including a win in the 1500 metres (4:27.0), and gained 20 points, which exceeded the combined total gained by the rest of the team. The team finished fifth. On 27 June Matt again ran well to finish 15th in the annual Dysart 10-kilometre road race, recording 35 minutes 15. Our first woman was Steph Upton, who placed 204th overall (45:58).

The fifth Rosenheim League match of the season was at Tooting on 8 July. Matt Morgan placed third in the 1500 metres (4:23.5) and fourth in the 3000 metres (9:19.6), while Kevin Burnett set club over-70 records in the shot (5.27) and javelin (15.46). The final Southern Veterans League match of the season took place at Croydon Arena five days later. Both our men and women finished fourth in the match and in the final league table. Bob Ewen placed second in the 2000 metre walk (12:07.9).

The final Rosenheim League match of the season was at Battersea Park on 22 July. Both our men and women finished fifth in the match. In the final league table our women finished fourth while our men were sixth. There were second places for Eliot Osher in the 400 metres (55.35), Steve Starvis in the 1500 metres (4:44.07) and Matt Morgan in the 2000 metre steeplechase (6:38.33). Kevin Burnett set a club over-70 record of 15.13 metres in the discus.

The final Surrey Road League race of the season was the Belgrave 5K on 10 August. Duncan Lancashire finished 16th of the 193 finishers in 16 minutes 49 seconds, less than a minute behind the winner. In the final league table our women finished tenth, while our men were fourteenth of the 27 competing clubs.

In August Croydon Harriers' track star Martyn Rooney represented Great Britain in the World Championships in Berlin, and won a silver medal in the 4 x 400 metre relay.

BECKENHAM 10K: JUNE 2009



Duncan Lancashire with his individual and team awards

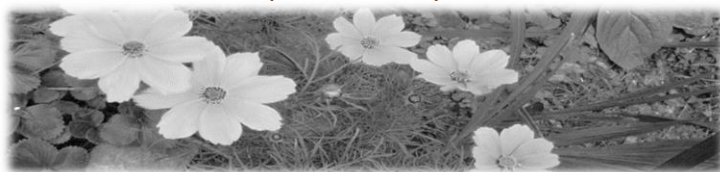
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