

Striders of Croydon

SEPTEMBER 2020 MAGAZINE



**Kara Boaks and Rachel Lindley,
the first two women to finish the Vanguard Way Marathon on 2 August
(photo by Debra Bourne)**

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DATES FOR YOUR DIARY

Mon 21 September – Striders Annual General Meeting (to be held online)
Sun 4 October – Striders Marathon Training Day – Kenley Aerodrome
Sat 7 November – Surrey Cross-Country League Division Two – tbc
Sat 7 November – Surrey Women's Cross-Country League Division Two – Wimbledon (tbc)

2021

Sat 9 Jan – Surrey Cross-Country Championships – Lloyd Park (tbc)
Sat 16 Jan – Surrey Cross-Country League Division Two – tbc
Sat 16 Jan – Surrey Women's Cross-Country League Division Two – tbc
Sat 13 Feb – Surrey Cross-Country League Division Two – Lloyd Park (tbc)
Sat 13 Feb – Surrey Women's Cross-Country League Division Two – Mitcham (tbc)



**Niamh Vincent, Alastair Falconer and Conor O'Hara-Barrett
with their trophies from the Vanguard Way Half-Marathon**

CHAIR'S CORNER SEPTEMBER 2020

Welcome to the largest ever bumper edition of our club magazine!

An impressive undertaking considering the lack of actual running events over most of the past few months and my thanks to all of this quarter's contributors and as always to our editor and copy editor Alan and Debra.

I'm sure it's no coincidence in these times that many of the contributing articles reflect on the appreciation and joy to be found in the simple practice of running.

Sophia Sachedina provides a fascinating and eye-opening insight into the cultures of recreational and elite running in Ethiopia. (And good luck to you Sophia if you do manage to get a parkrun going!)

Ally Whitlock and Debra Bourne both take on the ultra-demanding North Downs Way 100 miles in temperatures reaching up to 44 degrees and where less than half the starting field finish.

Nikki Javan learns lessons from the next, next generation of Striders. I definitely agree with Libby that it's about the journey not the outcome (although that it is of course nice too when the cards fall right). I also agree that there is no such thing as too much ice-cream.

Michelle Klein and Jay Brzask-Makiela take on the 45k Race the Comrades Legends 2020, running with another 43,000 virtual runners from over 102 participating nations and both officially becoming ultra-runners in the process.

I was delighted to hear from our Wellington correspondent Susan Haynes, who was one of the first Striders I met upon joining the club. Numerous years later and still a Strider, Susan recounts her continuing parkrun journey since leaving these shores, along with some recommendations for New Zealand parkruns.

Next up it's the club AGM, which will be held on Monday September 21st. Due to the current circumstances this will take place virtually this year rather than in the usual packed clubhouse bar. No matter, in these uncertain times we'll continue to move forward and make the best of it and I look forward to seeing you (on screen) then.

Tony



RUNNING IN ETHIOPIA: AN HONEST PERSPECTIVE

(by Sophia Sachedina)

People who know me personally know that I am a keen runner. Running has always played a defining role in my life: it challenges me to push out of my comfort zone, explore new areas, set goals and motivates the hard work and discipline to achieve them, as well as being a lifeline to friendship. So it's no surprise that when I moved to Ethiopia, Land of the Runners, one of the first things on my mind was: Where will I go running? Who will I run with? What will the running be like? How will it affect my training? My performance?

The optimist in me imagined that I could just take my weekly running routines from the UK and execute them in Ethiopia with improved performance. My mind equated living in a country of running legends, to me somehow absorbing centuries of running culture and translating that into my own personal improved running times. And when I learnt that Mo Farah had been in Addis for training in early 2019, I thought "Wow!" I was going to be training like a professional! Living the dream!

Needless to say, the reality was very different. So, from terrain and altitude, to running culture and being a foreigner, what's running in Ethiopia really like?

The price of altitude

The centre of Addis Ababa sits at around 2,300m (higher than most ski resorts) but, other than being able to see mountains on all sides, there are no visible signs that you are at altitude. Therefore, I didn't think much about it. Boy, was I naïve!

I have experienced a lot of changes in myself (health, well-being and other characteristics) that I can't confidently attribute to life at altitude over simply living in a completely different environment. However, the one thing that I know with absolute certainty, is the impact of altitude on my running.

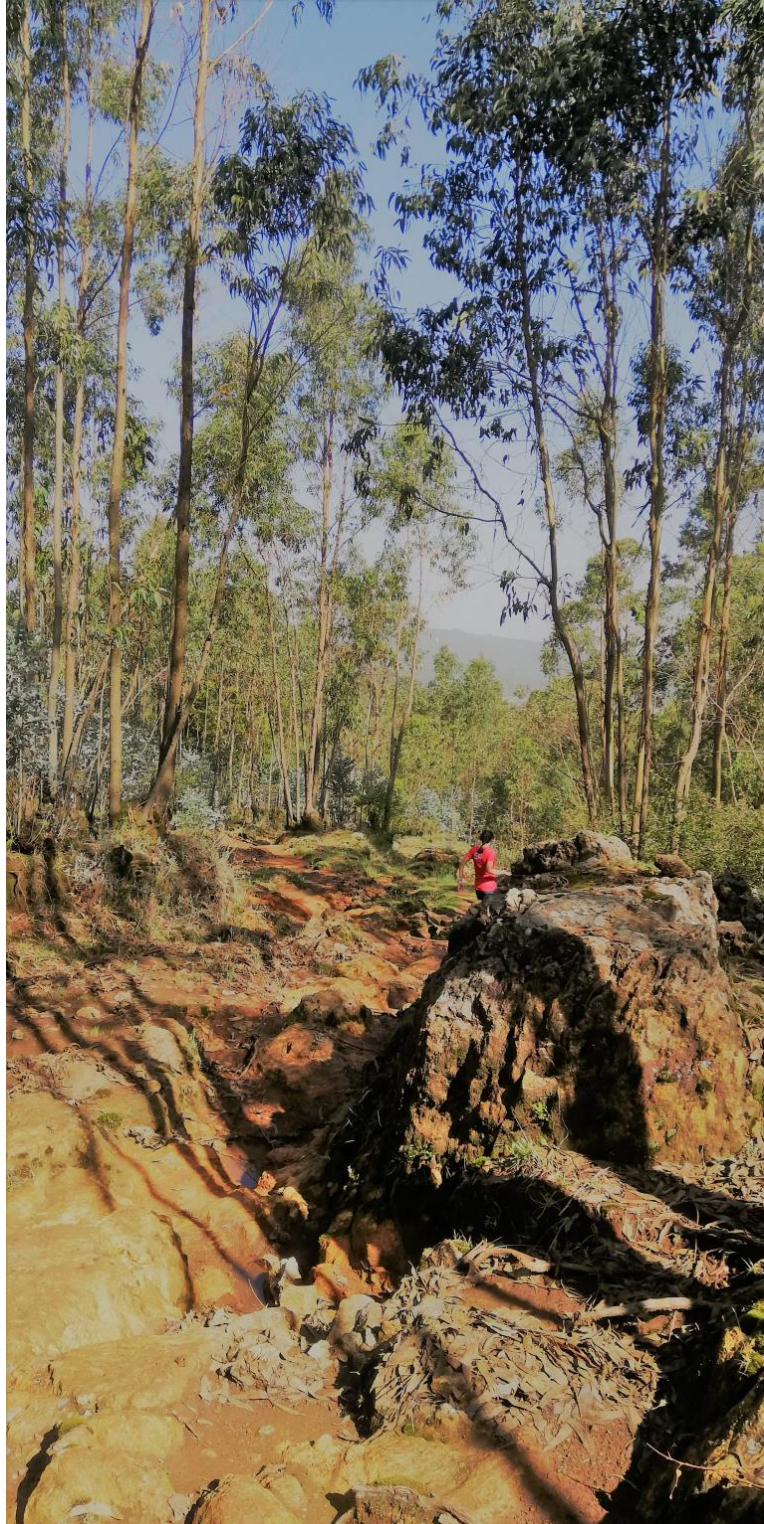
When I lace up my trainers and head out the door – despite always doing a lengthy warm-up – it more often than not feels like I've already been running for an hour. My legs are heavy, my lungs feel like they are operating at half the size, and the slightest incline (there are a lot of hills in Addis!) knocks the wind out of me! I do have the odd rare day where I somehow have the energy of my former self but, for the most part, my endurance and speed have plummeted.

I know altitude affects everyone in different ways. For me, it means exerting myself harder for slower results than in the UK. It's not just in running either – my office is on the fourth floor (no lift) and every day, without fail, I find myself short of breath when I reach the top of the stairs, something I rarely experienced before. Even a leisurely walk can nudge my heart rate up!

Although I have been able to build back up some of my strength in running, I have read that the majority of gains come within the first few weeks or months at altitude, meaning that I am likely as adjusted as I'll ever be and will have to make peace with letting some of my running goals be put on hiatus.

Terrain: the mountain perspective

The trails, however, do come with one distinct challenge. They are tough. Pure and simple. No escaping or avoiding it. The first time I ran in the mountains of Addis, I maxed out at a measly 7km, shattered and ready to conk out on the sofa for the rest of the day. A year later, and I'm pleased to have built myself up to steadily running 16km+ of trails – there may still be the occasional afternoon nap to follow, but it feels well earned!



A technical trail

Not only are you running at a higher than normal altitude (Mt Entoto reaches 3,200m), but the elevation running up the side of a mountain can be fierce! The terrain is also extremely technical in parts, with tree roots, rocks, non-existent paths and thick mud (in rainy season) to throw you off balance and really keep your mind sharp. Not to mention hearing *gəb*/hyenas howling into the morning mist, and sometimes even coming face to face with them (yes, I did freeze to the spot as the hyena ran in loops around us!). On very rare occasions, leopards can be found and recently a pet dog was sadly killed by one whilst out on a walk – not the normal challenges you come across in the tranquillity of the Yorkshire Dales!

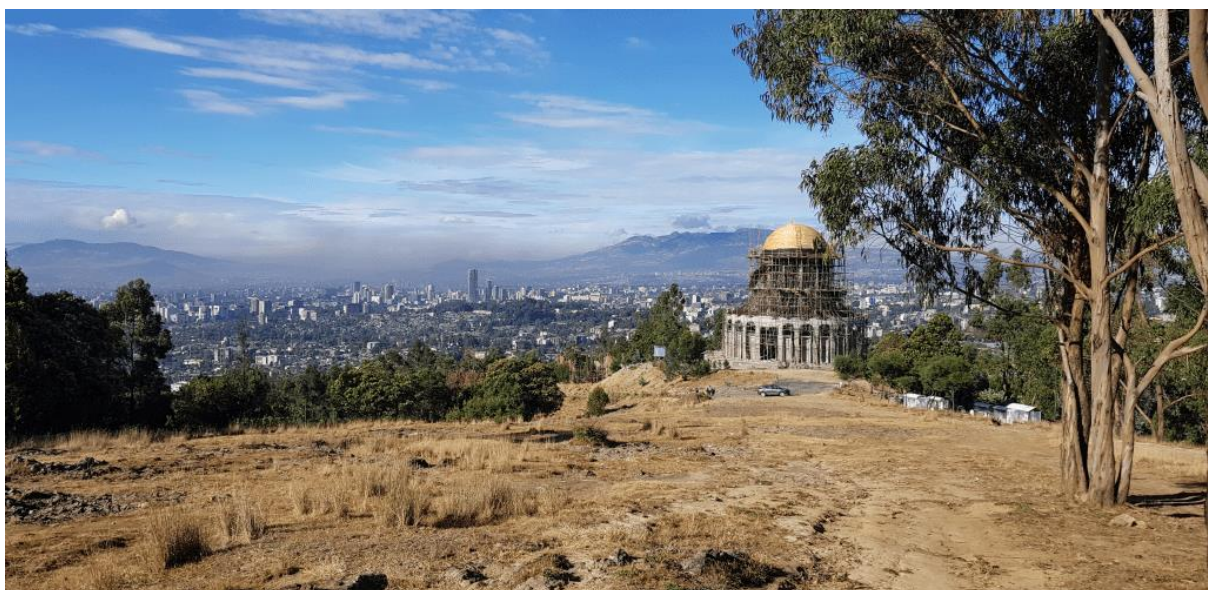
Terrain: the city perspective

You may now be thinking that running through the city itself is a much easier alternative. Not so. Sure, there are smoother roads and less of the natural obstacles, but Addis has found other ways to challenge and keep you on your toes.

For starters, the city can be incredibly dusty and has a lot of traffic. As there aren't always proper pavements (or not ones that don't threaten to twist your ankle), I mostly run in the road so avoiding high traffic times is a must, but seeking out the quieter streets can be tough. You often have to run over main highways and junctions, and Addis driving is notoriously dangerous. To avoid this, I always run first thing in the morning before the fumes or pollution have taken hold and, during rainy season at least, the air is much fresher and free of dust.

No matter the time of day though, you always have to be alert. Giant drains on the side of the road (that aren't covered) can fit an entire person in them! Run too fast or just be unlucky and the street dogs will suddenly start barking and chasing after you! You have to be an accommodating runner, sharing the street and giving right of way to herds of goats, sheep, and donkeys.

Unfortunately, the city centre does not have large, open parks or public spaces to escape from the roads, so running in Addis often feels like an obstacle course. However, there are plans underway to develop dedicated running trails within the city, including an impressive running and cycling track in Entoto Park, and I eagerly await their completion.



A view of Addis from above

Whether you run in the city or the mountains, running in Ethiopia is anything but boring!



Donkeys grazing in the morning mist

The biggest challenge

Despite all of these external challenges, for me the hardest part of adapting to running in Ethiopia has been being a female, *farenj* (foreigner) runner. Although there are still some threats or remarks made at solo, female runners in the UK, I am used to total running freedom. Exploring trails completely alone. Running any time of the day I feel like it. Running wherever takes my fancy. That is what I'm used to, and that is not what I get here in Ethiopia. I have had to adapt.

- I only run in daylight, which is generally 6am to 6pm year-round, so no more running to soothe any stress after a day's work.
- If I run solo, I carry a whistle.
- Running in shorts is completely out of the question (except in races), regardless of how hot it may get.
- I can't run on any trails alone, which means missing out on the calm of solo exploration.
- Every single run, without exception, I am stared at – I'm talking constant turning of heads, unashamed staring.
- I'm never ignored.
- Mostly it's innocent, but still unwanted, attention – men will clap, shout words of encouragement like *Gobez* or *Ayzosh*. Other times they will say *farenj* or *China China* (this is a common experience for all foreigners in Ethiopia), or shout out things in Amharic that I'm unable to (and probably would not want to) understand
- More recently, the onset of Covid-19 has led to some anti-foreigner sentiment, and myself and others have had people shout "Coronavirus" at us – a sentiment that the authorities are thankfully taking seriously to clamp down on

Running has always been a source of freedom and enjoyment for me, but here it can sometimes be daunting and restrictive – particularly for female foreigners. I miss running after work. I miss running by myself, without any worries. I struggle with this, but I am fortunate to be able to run still, and for that I am grateful.

Ethiopian running culture: from amateurs to elites

Given the quality and prominence of Ethiopia long-distance runners, people may think that Ethiopia has a large and active running community. That's surprisingly not the case. Sure, if you get up early enough and go to the right places, you will find amateur men running around. But it's not that common. The sad thing, though, is that the number of Ethiopian, amateur women that I have ever seen running in everyday life, I can count on one hand. Whilst the respect and pride for their countries' elites and legends is undeniably strong, recreational running is simply not engrained in Ethiopian culture. Although I think this is partly because running for fun and in your spare time is a luxury that not all Ethiopians can afford, I also think that for recreational running to take off in Ethiopia, a shift in the cultural and social mindset is needed. This is something that Haile Gebreselassie is passionate about and has had great success at the races he organises, but more is needed for an everyday runner to become an everyday sight.

Moving on from the fledgling amateur running scene, Ethiopian elites are a completely different ball game. In all my runs in the UK, I have never run with an elite, or even seen one doing their own training. Yet, on my very first trail run in Ethiopia, I ran with elites. In full disclosure, they were doing their warm-up run which is why I was able to keep pace with them, but I did eventually have to drop off. This is one of my most amazing running experiences! And this wasn't a one-time thing. If you go up to the mountains early in the morning, you'll be surrounded by so many elites running on the trails in all directions. It's a runners paradise!

It's very easy to spot the professionals or semi-professionals from the amateurs – they're the ones in long tracksuits, in single file, and running up a mountain as if it's a walk in the park. The way they run is so fluid and effortless that I often just look on in awe and respect. The women in particular are absolutely inspirational, and I only wish that more women in Ethiopia were empowered by these role models. I would also like to note that all the elites I've run past (well, they run past me!) have been welcoming and friendly. They don't seem to mind that they share their training space with amateurs plodding along, and very often they will shout out words of encouragement at me which always puts a spring in my step. I can't wait to see some familiar faces of my Saturday morning runs in the next Olympics!



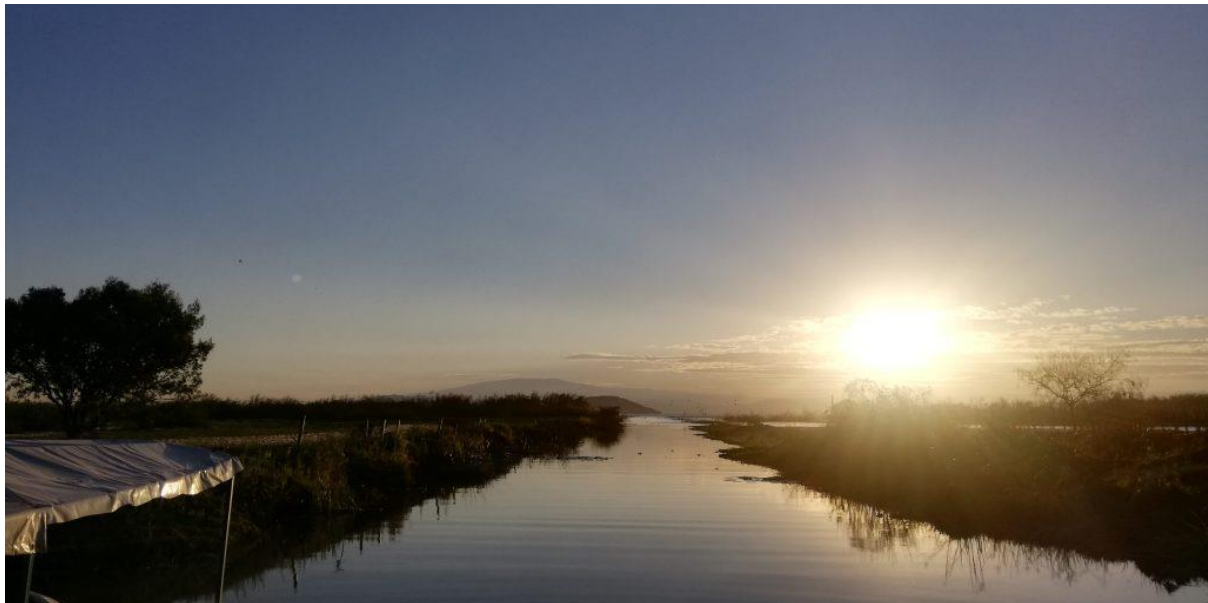
Running with elites - spot the amateur!

The racing circuit

Unfortunately, there aren't that many on the calendar. The mass running events that have bloomed in the UK and other countries over the last fifty years, have not yet infiltrated Ethiopia. We are not spoilt for choice with races going on every weekend across the country. In fact, you have to wait months for a single race to come around, but when it does it's certainly not a let-down. I have loved every single race that I've taken part in here!

It would be great if there were more running events for the amateur runner as this would help with the cultural shift mentioned earlier. Despite the reputation for producing legendary marathon-distance runners, I don't know of a single marathon race in Ethiopia that is open to amateurs! But even on the shorter race scale, there are only a handful of 5k races, and part of me has considered teaming up with a group of running friends and setting up the first parkrun in Ethiopia. Things would need to be well thought through to adapt the parkrun concept to the Ethiopian context, but if it opened up running to the masses, then that would be a great success!

Happiness in running



The beauty of running in the morning

Despite all the things about running that are so different in Ethiopia compared with the UK, there is one thing that is the same – running has gifted me friends. When I moved to a new town in the UK, I joined my local running group and met some amazing people whom I'm still friends with today. And here in Ethiopia, my closest friends are the ones where the friendship has formed over hours of exploring trails or chatting as we jog around the streets of Addis.

My present Ethiopian self may not run as often, as fast, or as far as my past UK counterpart, but I will still happily call myself a runner. I have accepted the need to adjust my expectations, am proud to have found new challenges, and happy to explore new areas. In short, I have re-learned to enjoy running for the sake of running.

No matter how much chaos there is, whether in my own life or in the world around me, running is the one constant that will always be there, much like an old friend – the friendship may change over time, you may go periods without having much interaction, but you always come back and the bond only strengthens.

Whether it's hard or not, I will always love running and it will always be worth it.

NORTH DOWNS WAY 100: THE RACE OF MY LIFE

(by Ally Whitlock)

My stomach turns in nervous anticipation as I see the sign 'this way to the finish'. Turning into the stadium grounds I hear the excited buzz of the finish area. I hold myself back for a moment and take a deep breath. A few quiet words as I compose myself.

I've done it.

Through the gates and onto the track. Helen waving and cheering me on. As my feet hit the cushioned surface I don't even think as I instinctively start to run faster. Along the back straight I move into lane one. Rounding the final corner, the finish gantry a mere 100 meters away. I break into a sprint as my smile widens. I'm trying to take it all in, to savour the moment. After 103+ miles, I am not simply running, but I am **sprinting** for that finish.

I cross the line, eyes closed in complete and utter exhilaration.

I had three goals for the North Downs Way; to enjoy it, to finish strong and run with a smile. I gave that race my everything. I cross the line knowing that I have just run the race of my life.

At this moment in time, there is no better feeling.



© Stuart March

I started planning for the NDW100 within days of last year's SDW100. You know the one, the one that I finished and said never, ever, ever again... No one believed me. I didn't even believe myself. But as race day drew nearer, NDW100 became more than simply putting the demons of the South Downs behind me. It became about survival.

For more than 16 weeks the North Downs Way has been my focus, my goal, the drive that has kept me going.

You see, 2020 isn't a normal year.

On the 23rd March, as the government announced a nationwide lockdown to try and combat the coronavirus, my life outside of running stopped. Within weeks I lost nearly a year's worth of work. When you specialise in photographing people and the directive is to avoid people... work is going to be impacted. I had shoot after shoot postponed and I felt myself sliding deep into a hole. Life as I knew it was collapsing around me and I simply didn't know what to do.

I kept telling myself that it could be worse. That I was fit and healthy. My family was fit and healthy and it was **only** work. But it wasn't only work. It was who I was. It was my identity. I'd spent six years building up my two businesses and I could see them slipping out of my grasp and into the Covid abyss. Without them, what could I do, what did I have?

I had running. As everything else crumbled around me, running was my constant. It was always there. I dreaded tougher restrictions on our movements like in other European countries. Thankfully that day never came and throughout the pandemic, we were allowed to exercise, once a day, from our homes.

So I ran, and ran, and ran some more. I ran to escape. To take my mind off of worries and questions that had no answers.

I fixed my mind onto NDW100 and put everything I had into it. I admit I became obsessed. But you see, when I was running, thinking about running or planning runs, I forgot about everything else. I forgot about what was going in the world around me. I forgot about the terror of the news reports. I forgot that I had no work. That I had earned no money since March. I forgot that my businesses may not survive, that the husband's business may not survive and that life as I knew it had disappeared.

When I ran, I forgot how it felt to see all my dreams slipping away.

So I ran, and ran, and ran some more. I ran for the calmness, the silence, the solitude.

I knew as I stood on the socially-distanced start line early that August morning that I was in the shape of my life. Fitter, faster and stronger than I had ever been. But more than anything, I stood on that line so very, very thankful that the race that had kept me going through the past four months was actually happening.

And for that, all thanks need to go to the Centurion Running team.

The start was like the start of no other race but was an indication of how much work Centurion had put into making this race happen.

I walk up to the start of the trail with Dan, who is running, and Helen (for future reference, Helen number one) who is there to see us off. I'm race-ready. Our bibs were posted to us and the race-briefing was done via video a few days earlier. There is nothing more we need to do. None of the usual race-morning chaos, rush or panic. Simply arrive and run.

We pause by the iconic trailhead sign to have our photos taken by superstar race photographer Stu. Helen snaps one for me for the 'Gram. Our temperatures are taken and we're waved on.



No fanfare, no ceremony. We jog across the starting mat, I wave goodbye to Helen and our 30-hour countdown starts.

To allow for social distancing, there is a two-hour starting window from 5 am to 7 am with the request being for faster runners to start earlier, slower runners later. With a rough time goal of 24 hours, I start a little before 6 am.

The staggered start takes away some of the early race pressure. I have none of the usual pre-race nerves, I feel as if I am out for an early morning run with a friend. And I quite like that.

Yes, I miss the camaraderie of starting with a large group. Of catching up with friends. The excited buzz of anticipation and the atmosphere of the start line. But I also liked starting at my own pace. I liked not getting drawn into other people's races, trying to keep up with the person in front and being swept along faster than planned in the eagerness to get going.

I start slow and steady and bang on target.

For the first half of the race, my sole aim is to keep my heart rate low. Run the flats and the downs, walk the hills and walk whenever my heart rate goes into zone 2. I'd trained like this and so have a good idea of what my average pace should be if executed properly. My only concern is that with the forecasted temperature I may not be able to keep my HR as low as I want.

Dan and I settle into a comfortable and easy jog. Sometimes chatting, sometimes silent. In the cool of the early morning the first ten miles speed by. It's effortless running. The trails are wide, well-marked and easy underfoot. The legs fresh and keen to get going. I may not have run this part of the trail since the NDW50 in 2018 but my feet seem to instinctively remember the way.



The cool of the early morning

The forecasted sunshine hides its brightness behind the cover of clouds, making the early miles slightly more pleasant than expected. But its heat and humidity soon make their presence known. By the top of the first significant climb to St Maratha's Church, I am drenched in sweat. I look as if I took a swim across the River Wey back in Guildford.



Running towards Newlands Corner and CP1

Just before 15 miles and we arrive at the first Check Point (CP) at Newlands Corner. We're guided in by a volunteer in PPE. Asked to sanitise our hands and wait in a socially distanced line until a space becomes available. It's a couple of minutes and then I'm directed to a table. I fill my own bottles. One water, one Tailwind. Peruse the snack selection and grab some banana and a cake bar. Sanitise again. I'm off and the next runner in line is directed into the CP.

Check Points are the area that Centurion has had to work hardest on to make them Covid-compliant. Usually, we all crowd in two, three, four, five runners at a time. We jostle for a place at the table, laughing and joking as we pass each other snacks. A volunteer would grab our bottles and fill them for us. The food would be in bowls; crisps, biscuits, cut fruit. Sandwiches, homemade cakes, dried fruit and nuts. Dip your hand in, help yourself. You get over the hygiene aspect of it after your first ultra.

Obviously, with Covid, this had to change. A funnel directs runners into the CP where there are three separate mini-CP tables. One runner at a table at a time. You fill your own bottles. The snacks are all pre-packaged. Crisps are left in their bags. The cakes are wrapped shop-

bought affairs rather than the lovingly homemade flapjacks and brownies of old. Biscuits, chocolate, dried fruit and nuts are in individual packets. Bananas and satsumas in their own skins are the only fruit. No sandwiches, no watermelon, no pastries, grapes, or cold boiled potatoes.

Volunteers are hands-off, masks on. They're there simply to guide, direct, instruct, refill the water canisters and replenish the snack table. It's different, it's not what we are used to but with the current conditions, I cannot fault a single thing. With every challenge and every restriction thrown at them, Centurion has found a way to make it work.

Dan and I say goodbye and I'm flying solo as I leave Newlands Corner. I feel really good but I am well aware that I'm **only** 15 miles into the race.



The section from Newlands to Box Hill is made up of relatively wide, flat, runnable woodland trails. Nothing too complicated or too technical. It's a chance to get your head down and get some solid miles in the bag. And this is exactly what I do. Trucking along by myself. The occasional few words with other runners as they pass me or I pass them.

My heart rate starts to creep up with the temperature, it's about 5 bpm higher than I would expect in normal conditions and a little higher than I would ideally like at this point in the race. But these are not normal conditions, the temperature is already fast approaching 30 and it's only mid-morning.

As the miles tick by I find I don't have to think about what I am doing too much, which I like. The trail is familiar enough that I only have to glance at the markings every now and again to know I'm on route. The underfoot conditions are good. I start to deliberately keep myself away from other runners, pulling back a couple of times when someone falls into step alongside me. Nothing against anyone else, but at this moment in time I am liking the serenity of my own company and my own thoughts and I don't want to share my trail with anyone else.

In my own little world, I start to pick up a little speed over some slight descents, my feet dancing over the exposed roots on the now uneven woodland paths. This is my kind of running. I like trails like this. I smile.

I'm happy.

I'm content.

Soon I'm running across Ranmore Common, crews lined up to my left. They shout, clap and cheer as if I am on the finishing straight about to win the race. I smile again. I love this feeling. I love this atmosphere, this makes it feel like a real race again.

I've never had a crew myself and wonder whether perhaps I might regret that today. Crews – usually friends or family – are there to give additional support throughout the race. There are eight or nine spots along the course where they can meet their runner with food, drink, kit, or on days like today, bags of ice! Sometimes it feels like those with crews have an unfair advantage as they get extra support. But also, it's so easy to waste time with a crew. I see many runners at crew points sitting down, shoes off, feet up taking a break. Does this rest benefit or hinder?

As I ponder the pros and cons of crews I catch sight of Jamie and Jaco in the distance so run on to catch up with them. I ran with them a few weeks earlier when we'd still been anxiously waiting to hear if the race would go ahead. A few words and then I leave them to it, they're a bit faster than I am and trying to keep up with them is causing my watch to beep frantically at me in alarm... I'd set it to alert me if my HR tipped into zone three and Jaco and Jamie pace is zone three!

As I say goodbye to them I spot Dai. Despite living a mile from each other, we've not run together since the equally hot Serpent Trail 100km in 2018. During that race I swore that I would never, ever run in temperatures over 30 again. Yes, well... We catch up as we coast easily down the hill through Denbies Vineyard and into CP2 at the bottom of Box Hill.

The race route around Box Hill takes a little detour off of the North Downs Way and onto some local paths. What could have scuppered the whole race was saved by Centurion's quick thinking and a long-standing relationship with the National Trust. The NT has banned all commercial activities from their sites due to an increase in visitor numbers during the pandemic, and this includes races. Centurion came to an agreement with them that we would use the bridge rather than the crowded stepping stones to cross the River Mole and instead of going up the steps to the top of Box Hill and past Solomon's Memorial, we would cut round the edge on some of the less crowded trails. It added no distance and no elevation to our race and you could even argue it was an easier path than 280+ steps up and the winding woodland trail along the top. It was also great not having to battle hordes of small children and summer holiday crowds on the ascent!

Even with the detour (paths I know from the Box Hill Fell race), I'm in my playground here. Box Hill through to Botley Hill is my part of the North Downs Way, I know it like I know the back of my hand. I've run it time and time again in every season and in every weather.

These are the paths that taught me about trail running. The paths of my first trail race, the paths of my first solo venture on the North Downs. The paths of my first ultra. The paths where I found my love of trails.

Today though, I'm struggling. It's 30 degrees and not even midday. A constant up and down, up and down on dry, narrow rutted paths. You need to be constantly alert, constantly watching your footing. Glancing up to take in the view risks a trip on an exposed root.

I try to keep to a slow jog in the flatter shaded areas to keep myself moving. A few runners pass me. A few doubts flirt across my mind. I'm not sure I'd appreciated quite how much the heat would affect me. Climbing up the vicious and never-ending Colley Hill I am once again drenched in sweat and running low on water. I drink 1.5 litres in the seven miles between Box Hill and Reigate Hill CPs and even that doesn't quench my thirst.

Coming out of the Reigate CP I take a little detour to the cafe, first to WASH MY HANDS. (OMG so good!). And second to buy Calippos. Plural. Two Calippos. One for each hand. Their ice-cold goodness gets me down the next hill and well into Merstham with a renewed enthusiasm and vigour.



Hotter than the Sahara

The hill out of Merstham is hotter than the Sahara. The dry ground is baked solid and with the now full sun blazing down on my back, climbing it is not an enjoyable experience. I debate a little lie-down at the top but my stubbornness makes do with a 20-second pause in

the breeze and pushes me on. My memories from here into Caterham are vague. I think I'm almost operating in survival mode with everything bar the essentials shutting down. Maybe because I know this path so well I run on autopilot?

38 miles and the Caterham CP. I have a quick glance at my watch and see that I am bang on target, almost to the second, for the dreamy sub-24 hour finish. I know though, that the next section is going to be harder than the preceding. Not because it's technical, hillier or tougher but because it's very hot and there are long stretches with no shade. (I ran out of superlatives to describe the temperature a long time ago. Very hot is just going to have to do.) I know I will be walking most of the way to the next CP simply to conserve energy. I know that by doing so I am saying goodbye to that time goal.

I am completely at peace with this decision. Because I know that if I chase a time, I will struggle even more in the latter stages and if I struggle I won't enjoy the race and I definitely won't be smiling. Finishing with a smile is far more important to me than any arbitrary time.

I queue for several minutes chatting to Lou Fraser and Sharon Dickson as I wait for my turn in the CP.

I reflect for a moment on the volunteers. Having been that side of the table myself on several occasions, the joy of volunteering is helping the runners. This new way of doing things is a very hands-off approach. I ask Lou how she's finding it and she says it's tough. Her natural reaction is to help and she can't. She's also a hugger and isn't able to touch the runners.

This sentiment was repeated time and time again by volunteers at all the check-points. They wanted to do MORE for us, not less. It pained them to see runners struggling and to not be able to help, whether that be filling a tired runner's bottles or helping a limping runner deal with blisters.

But this is simply the Centurion Army way. The races would not happen without the volunteers, many of whom, especially at the latter check-points, are giving up whole days and nights of their time to support us runners. And what a job they did under difficult conditions. Every CP was superbly organised, fully stocked and every volunteer cheery, supportive and encouraging – even those wearing PPE in 30+ degree temperatures for hours on end. They deserve a buckle for that to be honest.

After a three or four-minute wait, it's my turn. I'm beginning to struggle with solid food, it's just too damn hot to eat. I chew and chew and chew but the food is getting stuck in my mouth and I can't seem to swallow it. I mix a stronger Tailwind in the hope that some liquid calories will see me through until the temperatures cool down. Grabbing another banana I shout my thanks, wave goodbye to the volunteers and trot off into the woods.

Although the whole trail is familiar to my feet, the next couple of miles are my home turf. During Lockdown when we were only allowed to exercise from home, I would run to this section of the trail. From home. And then run back again. I needed my North Downs fix. The North Downs are where I find my quietness and solitude. Just a few miles along the familiar paths in the middle of a run was enough to ease my mind, calm my soul and make my heart happy. I could run these paths leading out of Caterham with my eyes closed. I know every twist, every turn, every lump, every bump. I know when to slow and when to pick up the pace. When to watch for uneven ground and when to look up and take in the view.

A few hundred metres along the trail I spy Stu. I jog slowly past smiling for his camera and stop for a few words. I miss his high-fives! Thinking I'm settling in for a tough and solitary few miles I pop my headphones in and put on some music to try and take my mind off of the "very hot" heat.



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Crossing the A22 footbridge I look up and see familiar figures, Hannah and Adam, OMG! I squeal in excitement! What an AMAZING surprise! Last year I'd surprised Hannah by popping up mid-way through her first ultra on the South Downs and today she's done the same to me – only she's got ICE COLD BOTTLES OF WATER. Absolute babe!



Running towards Hannah just past Caterham

I want to stop and chat but I also want to keep going. I trot on, a huge grin across my face. The headphones go back in as I jog, relishing a small piece of shade alongside the vineyard in Godstone. I cross the road at Gangers Hill and see another familiar face, Martin, one of my pacers from the SDW100 last year. I chat with him for a few minutes.

Another runner turns to me and asks how I know everyone on the North Downs? I look at him quizzically and he says, "you're chatting to everyone you pass!" I try to explain that this is my local section of the trail, that I live only a few miles away, that if I really wanted to I could run home from here...

But in reality, it's my amazing Striders of Croydon club mates who've taken time out of their days to come and cheer me, Debra and Tad. It's a good job that I was no longer running alongside this guy when I bumped into Rachel and her frozen bottles of squash a mile latter, Nikki and her ice cubes a few miles after that or Myles who was sat in the middle of a field just before Knockholt. Oh, and I didn't even mention Peter back in Merstham...

My running club mates rock!

Seeing them all along the trail gave me such a massive boost and it happily coincided with the really difficult few miles in the heat of the afternoon. Stopping for a minute or two here and there gave me a much needed mental break from the running (though at this point in the race there is no way I can justifiably call what I was doing 'running').

Back to the running. Or should I say, walking? There is no suitable vocabulary to describe the temperatures as I make my way around the fields at the bottom of Oxted Downs. The sun beats down, its scorching heat bouncing off the dry, chalky trail. Its rays attacking from every angle. There is not a single scrap of shade, nowhere to hide from its relentless heat. It's draining. I try to conserve as much energy as possible. No one is running. Occasionally someone will try to jog a few faltering steps before coming to a staggering halt.

After the race, a runner who was carrying a thermometer said he recorded 44 degrees along this section.

Let me pause for a moment and repeat that. Forty-four degrees. What the absolute fuck.

I have never before longed to reach Botley Hill. A beast of a climb on the best of days. But it's a hill with shade and it cannot come soon enough. Across the final field, I pull out my poles in preparation. The hill is not really that steep, it doesn't really need poles, but 40 odd miles into this race I want as much help as I can get.

I move faster up the shaded hill than I moved on the sunlit flats a few minutes earlier.

CP five. More of the same. Fill bottles. Drink a cup of coke. Look at the food. Again, nothing appeals and neither do the snacks in my bag. I grab another banana knowing I need to try and eat something.

We go again.

The woodland after Botley Hill, usually tall and lush, has been felled. The traffic on the main road, normally hidden by a mass of trees, screams past at full speed spoiling the silence of the forest. I know this work is being done to help maintain the area, to remove diseased trees and improve the health of the living, but it does make me sad to see it looking so desolate.

The music in my ears is keeping me entertained as I make my way from Titsey to Tatsfield. It's slow progress but I am looking forward with some relish to the shaded downhill that's coming up. Standing under the cover of that very shade I see Nikki, her daughter Libby and husband Ed.

Libby, who is five, recently did the Centurion One Community run and the One Up Challenge with Nikki. She ran a half-marathon and climbed Ben Nevis and now apparently has a love of hills and trails. And I absolutely love this. Centurion inspiring the next generation.

I stop for a chat and an ice lolly and they send me off with a smile and ice stuffed down my sports bra, down my sleeves and in my buff. Bliss. I trot quite happily down the hill, my chest, arms and head now nicely cool!

The fields on the outskirts of Westerham have been harvested since I was here a few short weeks ago. The bales of hay lining the fields look quintessentially English countryside. The roar of the M25 in the distance slightly spoiling the illusion.



English countryside!

Under normal conditions, it's fairly runnable from here through to Knockholt, the next CP and the half-way point. But as we have already established these are not normal times. I'm feeling increasingly weary. I pull out my poles again, this time on flatter ground, simply to help me hike with a little more speed and purpose.

Everyone I pass, and everyone who passes me is slightly dazed, almost confused, struggling in the heat. Hardly anyone is running more than a few steps at a time. I keep crossing paths with the same people as we have surges of energy and lulls at different

times. Rounding one field, I look behind me to a line of despondent, tired runners, simply trying to put one foot in front of the other.

I struggle to remember any of the miles I traveled between Botley Hill and Knockholt. Are they NDW100 memories or memories from another run? There are paths I know I must have run along, hills I must have climbed, gates I must have opened but I have absolutely no memory of them. Zero. I don't even remember if the cows were in the big field with the nice view. I don't even remember noticing the nice view. Was I that dazed in the afternoon heat that I wasn't looking, wasn't seeing?

Coming into Knockholt, the course deviates off of the NDW. It's one of those moments when it's good to know the route and good to know that when you leave the trail there is still about a mile to the CP. Many of those around me don't realise this. You almost hear their sighs of relief as they head onto the road and then the slowing of their feet and sinking of their shoulders as they realise the CP isn't immediately in front of them.

I run through the village. Throughout the whole race, I set myself little challenges to keep myself going. One of them is to run along Knockholt High Street. It's flat, it's smooth underfoot and it's in the shade. I might be tired, the heat might be oppressive but it's half-way, I'm still moving, still running when able. And more importantly, I have zero doubts. In my head, I'm at that finish line. Not a flicker of doubt in my mind.

11 hours 15 minutes. I arrive at Knockholt. Six minutes faster than my best time on the NDW50 when Knockholt is the finish line but an hour slower than I'd hoped to arrive here.

Swings and roundabouts.

But as I've already let my time goal drift away I don't dwell on this delay and focus instead on getting in and out of the CP as quickly as possible. I set myself a 15-minutes alarm on my phone as I grab the first of my two drop bags.

In my race day preparations, I had grand plans and had essentially packed an entire toiletry kit and a buffet dinner. In reality, I wipe a damp cloth over my face, change my t-shirt and splash on some deodorant. I take one bite of my lovingly prepared cheese and pickle sandwich and spit it out, drink a cup of coke, refill my bottles and leave. I felt good going into the CP but I feel quite rough leaving. Knockholt is an indoor CP and it is too hot.

I walk along the village high street sipping on a melted bottle of Tailwind – my GENIUS drop bag move – frozen bottles of drink in a cool bag, keeping the food I didn't eat cool but also then providing ice-cold refreshments when they were needed. It was a small bottle of deliciousness, and more importantly some much-needed calories.

I see Helen (Helen number two) and Spencer, my two pacers for later in the race. They are stood outside the village pub, with Chris, who currently has a pint in his hand but later on is crewing Dan, and another Helen cheering the runners on. Seriously, too many Helens.

I stop briefly for a chat. Helen number two is meeting me in five miles to pace me. That's my next target. Otford. 55 miles and Helen. And I know it's pretty much downhill to Otford – Woohoo!

I'm over half-way. The sun is dropping in the sky as daytime moves towards evening and it's cooling down (aka, it's not 44 fucking degrees anymore). After a minor incident requiring a bush just past Knockholt, I'm feeling pretty good. The bush incident removed the queasiness I felt coming out of the village and within minutes I gain a new spring to my step. Bar a

couple of small inclines and one very overgrown path, I run pretty much the whole way to Otford.

Similar to Rockshaw Road back in Merstham – which now seems days, not just hours ago – a line of crew snakes its way along Otford High Street. Cars parked up, boots open, a selection of drinks and treats laid out, a chair ready and waiting for their tired runners. I see the one and only JayZ, who's crewing Dai. He takes pity on me and hands me a Calippo – sorry Dai if you were one short, but that was a little bit of heaven in a cardboard tube!

Then I spot Spencer and Helen. We don't stop for more than a few moments as Helen starts her Garmin and joins me. When I'm moving, I'm moving. Spencer waves us off saying he'll see us at Bluebell Hill.

For those not familiar with Centurion races, you are allowed pacers from the half-way point of a 100 miler, as much to keep you company during the nighttime hours as to keep you moving at 'pace'. As with SDW100 last year I have two, Helen and Spencer. Both of whom offered their services without me asking. Before I even start talking about the miles I ran with them, I'm going to simply say I could not have done this without them.

When I speak of the ultra community, and in particular the Centurion Running community, this is what I mean. It's just not the same in road running. Helen has driven down from Warwick to pace me for 20+ miles through the night. Spencer from North London. Both arrived early so that they could cheer other runners on through Knockholt. Spencer spent half the day running around, giving lifts to other pacers and supporting those out on the trail. Chris came down from the Peaks to crew Dan, the third Helen from the Midlands to pace Sonny.

They weren't alone. Many others crewed and paced simply to support their running friends. It's not an exclusive club. You may not have a crew, as I didn't, but I know had I needed anything and I'd asked any one of the crews I passed there would not have been a single moment of hesitation in helping me out. I would do, and have done, the same. Simply, it's not I, it's 'us' out on those trails.

I don't run trails for the bling, for the glory, or for the kudos. I run for this. The friendship, the support and the community. This race wasn't really about me or my successes. It was all about the success of the whole Centurion Running Community.

Helen's first task is to get me up the hill out of Otford. All 350+ ft of it. I pause for a few minutes at the bottom to eat my Calippo. At that moment in time, the ice lolly is more important than jogging. Poles in hand we hike up the hill, chatting as we go. After many solitary miles, I'm relishing some company. Partway up it changes from concrete path to woodland trail. After a good few road miles through Otford, and whilst I at the time I enjoyed the easy running surface of the tarmac, it's nice to get back onto a proper trail again. Even if it is steeper than Everest.

Again I remember very little of the miles from Otford. I really do worry that the heat made my brain all fuzzy. We pause at the top of Kemsing Downs to take in the view, Helen's first glimpse of the splendour of the North Downs. In a way, I feel as if I am showing off something special. We jog, talk, walk, jog some more.

Dropping down the other side of the hill Allie Bailey comes steaming past me with her pacer looking strong. I then pass another lady who tells me her quads have given up. I reflect that this is probably the only time in the race so far that I have been surrounded by women. Three female runners, three female pacers. Up until this point I'd been very conscious that the majority of the runners I saw were male. With the staggered start, I had no idea what

percentage of the field was female and therefore no idea how I was performing in comparison.



The view from Kemsing Downs





Dropping down the hill towards Wrotham

There's a gorgeous golden glow to the evening light over the fields coming into Wrotham. I don't take a photo, I know my iPhone won't do it justice but it does make a pretty boring section of the trail a lot more interesting. I actually took very few photos during the race. During the hottest part of the day, it became an unnecessary movement that required too much of an effort.

In and out of another CP at Wrotham. My memories are still somewhat vague. Do I eat, do I drink? I honestly can't remember. We cross the main road and head up and across the fields, daylight rapidly fading. Into Trosley Country Park and under the cover of the trees darkness envelopes us. The head torches go on. Woodland shadows jump out from behind the trees at us. I tell Helen I am glad I am not alone. It's flat, it's runnable. We trot on and for the first time in five attempts I make it through Trosley Country Park without getting lost. Race day is always a good day to do that!

Slowly, steadily, I run as much as I can. I know where I am but I have no idea of how far I've gone, how far I've got to go, or what the time is. I've been quite stubborn (are you seeing a theme here) throughout the whole race by not looking at my watch other than to check my heart rate. By this point, it's become somewhat of an obsession. I don't want the added pressure of numbers. I refuse to look and I refuse to let Helen tell me.

I meet Gia for the first time. Our paths will cross numerous times as we share the next 20 odd miles. Round the Holly Hill field and up the steep steps, crouching to avoid the overhanging tree branches. I have a dip, a lull. A wave of tiredness overcomes me. It's a bad time to waver as I know the next few miles are going to challenge me.

There's nothing dramatic about them and I know it's all in my head. I had a bad training run – in the opposite direction – a few months ago. I bit off more than I could chew, went too far on

the out section and got beaten by the wind and rain on my return. My mind is playing games with me and is only remembering the negative things about the run. All it remembers is me sitting on the big metal gate across the trail just up from the Holly Hill CP, drained, out of energy and enthusiasm. Wet and windswept, not wanting to go on but knowing I had to as my car was ten miles away. At this moment in time, I seem to have forgotten all the things I love about the upcoming parts of the North Downs. I've forgotten all about the wildflower fields through Ranscombe and the views across the Kent countryside from Bluebell Hill.



The dark of the night

Thankfully today, my stubbornness is stronger than my mind and sees me step over that gate in defiance but I still falter. I still dread the upcoming miles to Cuxton. Your head can be a funny place at times.

We slowly make our way through the woodland and across the arid fields. I tell Helen all about the upcoming delights of the Medway Bridge. I also tell her that I am going to run across the whole thing. This might be a slightly ambitious statement to make when in the middle of Ranscombe Nature Reserve I close my eyes and lean on my poles, desperate for sleep.

I try to eat and force down a couple of bites of banana malt loaf. The sugar hurt my teeth. Looking back I am so annoyed with myself about the eating situation. Why can't I just get food down me? I'm ok until about 50km but every single time over that distance I've struggled, even more so if it's hot. I don't want to eat and the thought of food turns my stomach. I try to eat, I chew and chew and chew but I can't swallow. I sometimes wonder if it is more of a psychological barrier rather than physical. Every race I go into I'm determined that it will be different and every single time it ends up being an issue.

I manage a couple more bites of the malt loaf and wonder how much of my current lull is simply down to running on empty? I've literally used up all of my fuel.

We cross over the motorway and wind our way around the pathway to the start of Medway Bridge. A small group of guys, maybe five or six, runners with their pacers overtake us. They are running. Remembering my declaration to Helen a few miles back, this is the incentive I need to break into a jog. My legs start moving again. The first few metres stiff and faltering then they remember what they need to do and I get into a running rhythm.

The bridge is long, tedious and boring. To our right is the M2, six lanes of traffic screaming past at 70mph. To our left the dark depths of the River Medway. It's a kilometre north to south. It takes us eight minutes to cross.

One of the guys has drifted away from the pack and we fall into step with him and start chatting. It proves a welcome distraction. The group in front slow to a walk. I overtake the overtakers and carry on running. I'm getting into a groove and running starts to feel comfortable and good. Perhaps the sugary malt loaf is working some magic!

We reach the end of the bridge with a cheer. Helen persuades me to carry on running. So I do. Across the road, round the corner, past another line of crewing cars on Nashenden Farm Lane, boots up, chairs at the ready. I carry on running. A good mile and a half of running before hitting the bottom of the next climb. My mood elevated, mindset changed. I've forgotten the low of Holly Hill and Cuxton. I'm ready for Bluebell Hill.

Or so I thought.

We start the climb. The first section around the field is wide open. Kent spread out below us. We pause and look back towards the lit-up bridge, marveling at how we just crossed it. I can see all the way past it. The dark shapes of Ranscombe leading into Cuxton, across to Holly Hilly and beyond. We've come a long way.

The trail moves from open field to enclosed woodland. The tree coverage hiding the night sky from view feels like a blanket being thrown on top of us, trapping the day's heat at ground level. It's around midnight and still so humid. My body temperature rises with the climb, my heart rate increasing alongside it. I took the chest monitor off a few hours ago as it was beginning to chafe. But I know by feel that I am hotter and my heart rate higher than either should be.

And still, we climb.

Up, and up, and up. I don't remember this hill dragging on this much. I am exhausted. My eyes are struggling to stay open. So, so tired. I need to sit down. I see a concrete block on the side of the path. I lean on it. Stubbornness scolds me for being so weak. On I move. Up, and up, and up. Slower, and slower, and slower. I'm feeling very nauseous. And tired. So tired.

I sit down where I am. Right in the middle of the path. I'm not sure Helen knows what to do. I'm convinced I'm done. I want to lie down and sleep. My stomach churns. The familiar feeling. I jump up, I need a bush... There are no bushes, just brambles. I fight my way through a few, scratching my legs as I try to be at least a little discrete. For the second time, I leave my guts on the NDW.

Just like outside Knockholt the nausea instantly lifts. My doubts clear and I'm ready to go. I fight my way back out of the brambles, pick up my poles and carry on up the hill towards the next CP.

Spencer is standing, ready and waiting, in the road a couple of hundred metres before Bluebell Hill CP. The three of us walk/jog/stumble in together. I sanitise my hands.

Bypassing the tables. I drop my poles to the floor, take off my bag and slip into the comfortable hug of a chair. Barring the middle of the path, this is the first time I've sat down since getting out of my car in Farnham some 20 hours earlier.



I overcame my nausea and tiredness demons of a mile earlier but doubts still linger in my mind. I sit there in my quietness wondering if I really can do it. Am I strong enough, capable enough? Those last few miles took a lot out of me and I question if I have any more to give. I'm not really aware of what is going on around me.

I force down a sachet of baby food and piece of cake. I have no idea what type or flavour of either. My conscious mind might be wondering if I can go on but I'm filling bottles and making myself eat. This must mean that subconsciously I know I am carrying on.

After five minutes Spencer tells me it's time to get up and go. I put my pack back on. Pick up my poles and move. I don't remember saying goodbye to Helen. I hope I did.

I also don't remember the view from Bluebell Hill and this saddens me. Before one of my early races, my Dad told me to "run well, but don't forget to pause and take in the view". It's a phrase I have taken into every race since as a reminder to enjoy the experience. When I look back and realise I have no memory of looking out from Bluebell Hill I am sad. Even in the darkest of the night, the view would have been something special.

Ultrarunning is a funny thing. Going into Bluebell Hill I was in pieces, barely moving, doubting whether I had it in me to finish. Within a couple of minutes of leaving the CP, I break into a jog. I feel a thousand times better. I have energy, a renewed enthusiasm and a little bit of bounce!

Was it a five-minute sit-down? The cake? The baby food or just a subconscious shift in my mindset that after 76 miles I only have one option and that is to keep going?

I don't care what it was. I feel good and I push on. Through the woodland, along the road, down the steps. Spencer isn't interested in a little detour to look at the historical Kits Coty monument. I keep running, across one road, through the tunnel under another road, round the 24-hour garage that I had earmarked for emergency Calippo purchases (not required). I keep going until the next climb.

It's a steep one through the woods. But we keep on moving. One foot in front of the other. Eyes on the path watching for exposed roots and low branches in the dark of the night. I'm moving well again. Power in my legs, confidence in my step.

At the top, I take a moment to bring my heart rate and body temperature down. I realised after my little mid-trail sit-down that there's been a pattern to my bouts of nausea. They've all happened after I've become really hot or after a significant climb. I pause to see if I can try and avoid another spell of unease. It may be the early hours of the morning but the temperature is still in the 20s. I'm in shorts and a t-shirt and never once do I get cold.

I feel my focus changing. I've ridden the waves of doubt and I now know I'm going to do this. I'm going to finish and I'm determined to finish as strongly as I can. I run on. I'm actually running. I want to run. Not fast but I'm running most of the flats and the easy downs. I walk some of the more rocky and technical descents. This late in the race I'm not so sure of my footing and hesitate to fly down them with my usual reckless abandonment.

Into Detling CP. Sanitise, put on my mask and grab my second drop bag. I ignore all the toiletries. They don't even get a second glance. My frozen bottles are still icy cold, Spencer fills my race bottles from these. I don't want to eat my drop bag buffet again. But I grab my three emergency sachets of baby food, thankful that I threw them in at the last minute.

I don't think I even looked at the food on the tables other than to grab more banana. I wonder if it is possible to OD on bananas but decide that I'll worry about too much potassium later.

Toilet, wash hands and go. Zero faffing. I am on a mission.

82 miles. 21 to go.

By this point at last year's SDW100 my race was all but over. I may have finished but I didn't finish strong and I definitely was not smiling. I walked the last 35 miles. The final ten took over four hours and mile 97 took me 38 minutes with tears streaming down my cheeks. I think about those miles often throughout today's race. They are an incentive to keep going, to keep pushing, to prove to myself that I can do it and I can do it better.

This time, I am heading into the final 21 miles with confidence. I have no fear of what's to come, not even the upcoming Detling steps. A four-mile stretch that brings dread into the hearts of even the strongest of runners. I know they are there. I know they will be challenging. I am ready for them.

Up.

Down.

Up.

Down.

It's a rollercoaster of a ride along the narrow winding single track.

Steps.

Up.

Down.

Up.

Down.

It's relentless, it's never-ending. I'm enjoying it more than I expected. Up again, down again. A pause at the top to take in the view. The blanket of darkness across the countryside extending for miles around us. The moment there is a few metres of flat I break into a jog. Relentless forward progression. We cross paths with Gia again. Spencer asks him how far he'll be running on Monday. I believe I swear. As a run-streaker Gia doesn't let 100 miles stop him and will run on Monday as usual. I wonder if I will even be able to move on Monday.

Another lady hangs onto our tails for a few miles. She pushes my competitive nature. At the top of one climb, I turn to Spencer and tell him I've got a new goal. I don't want to be overtaken by any other female. I want to finish in front of the lady currently just behind us. There's a new fire in my belly. A new determination. So often I'm overtaken time and time again in the latter stages of races. That isn't going to happen today.

And just like that, Detling is done and we are running down the hill and into Hollingbourne. An additional crew point added into this year's race to help with the Covid restrictions. I run past JayZ waiting in his car for Dai who can't be too far behind me. I wave and shout out that I can't stop as I have to run. Jon tells me later that this made him smile!

90-ish miles. The big climbs, the tough miles are behind us. Whilst those who say Hollingbourne to the end is flat are definitely lying, the upcoming hills are more like little lumps than mountains.

There's a glimmer of light in the sky, dawn is breaking. There is something magical about running right through the night. Of seeing one day end and another begin. I'm disappointed that we didn't have dramatic sunsets or sunrises. I was deep in the woods of Trosley Country Park as the sun said goodbye last night and this morning the cloud cover hides its awakening.

From the narrow, rocky single track of Detling, we are now on wide, gravelly paths. Much easier underfoot. The climbs are gentle, the gradual descents a chance to take the foot off the gas and pick up a little natural speed. We pass the Lenham Cross war memorial to our left before heading into the penultimate CP at Lenham. I sit for two minutes. I think I ate something. Probably banana. Sitting proves to be a mistake as my legs quickly seize up. Standing and moving proves to be a little tricky and it takes me a few minutes to get going again. It hurts more to walk than run. So I ease into a run.

Throughout the whole race, I've not looked at time, pace, placings or position. I just don't want to know. To me, time equals pressure and I don't want pressure. I simply want to run and do the best I can. Just after Lenham, Spencer doesn't listen to my protestations and starts reading me some stats from the live timings.

He tells me that I'm currently 7th lady and 60th overall. That I've been gradually moving up the field from 126th at Newlands Corner to 79th at Botley Hill to 60th at Detling.

A tactical move. Him not me.



To hear that I am doing quite well is the push I need. There's a sparkle in my eye, a spring in my step and a smile on my face. I am doing this! I subconsciously pick up the pace as I feel the draw of the finish line. Spencer looks at his watch and tells me that 90 odd miles into the race we are clocking 10-minute mile pace.

I feel great. No, scrap that, I feel AMAZING! I keep on running. Running, running, running... I feel good enough to run some of the smaller hills. Gentle inclines that I was walking up in the first ten miles I'm running up in the last ten.

I overtake several other runners. Each time I overtake someone that fire in my belly is lit a little brighter. Spencer points out runners in the distance and goads me into catching them as a hint of golden colour starts creeping in behind the morning clouds.

Headtorches off. Sunglasses on.

Dunn Street. The final CP. Spencer fills my bottles for me. I rest on my poles eating a flapjack not wanting to sit down. In all honesty, I don't want to stop at all. I'm on a roll, I want to keep going. Stopping makes my legs stop working.

I take a moment as we leave the CP. Deep breath. Five miles to go. The finish line is pulling me in. I ease back into a jog as we cross a field, the movement back in my legs. Three weeks ago the crops waved gently in the evening breeze. Today the field is dry and barren. The crops harvested. The ground bare.

My watch clicks over 100 miles.

(For those who aren't regular trail runners, races are very rarely exact distances. SDW50 is 49 miles, NDW50 is 51. NDW100 is 103+. You run less, you run extra, you just get on with it and you never, ever show your Garmin to RD James at the end of the race and tell him the course was short/long!)

Still, I run.

One final field. Then the big yellow arrow directing us off of the North Downs Way and onto local roads through Ashford. The finish a mere three miles away.

Still, I run.

My feet remember the roads from three weeks ago. I walk an incline, the road levels out and I ease back into a jog. I pass another runner. I know I'm close. I exclaim time and time again that I can't believe I'm actually running as my feet pick up the pace.

I'm actually getting faster. Spencer tells me I'm running 10-minute mile pace again.

After 100 miles I'm running 10-minute mile pace. WTAF.

My Garmin beeps a mile split. I glance down wanting to see what it is for the first time in the race. 10:12. A 10:12 minute mile. I think back to last year's SDW100 race when my final three miles took me 90 minutes. 90 whole minutes. And one of those miles was downhill.



Running across the final field of the race

We're running through Ashford now. Along quiet residential roads. Past a pub. A school. Maybe a mile to go. I feel a lump in my throat and I begin to choke up. I fear for a moment that I am going to start crying again. At mile 97 of the SDW, it was pain and frustration that saw me cry. Any tears here would be tears of happiness as I realise the enormity of what I have done.

This is no one else's dream except mine. No one else's race except mine. And as I run into that last mile I know I have just run the absolute race of my life.

My goal was to run strong and I am finishing feeling strong AF.

There's still one more person in front of me... The last road, the last turning, Spencer spurs me into it and I overtake one more runner. We shout cheerful greetings at one another but I don't look back. I am flying.

The Centurion sign.

'This way to the finish'.

I can hear it.

I can see it.

And I'm in that stadium.

On that track.



Finish line © Stuart Marsh

TIME TO REFLECT

The North Downs Way 100 (+3) miles

26 hours 45 minutes


6th lady

48th overall

At half-way, 73rd overall, 8th lady.

At Detling, mile 82, 60th overall, 7th lady. I gained 12 places in the last 25 miles.

And I ran the final 5km in 34:26. Only one other woman has run this Strava segment faster than I did on Sunday morning.

48	52	Whitlock, Ally		F	Finish	Finished	26:45:09	
Split		O.Pos.	C.Pos.	G.Pos.	Pace	Duration	Time	
Newlands Corner		126.	5.	14.	11:04	02:42:46	02:42:46	
Box Hill		106.	4.	11.	10:53	01:47:49	04:30:35	
Botley Hill		79.	3.	8.	16:09	04:57:23	09:27:58	
Knockholt Pound		73.	3.	8.	15:20	01:47:25	11:15:23	
Wrotham		67.	3.	8.	18:24	03:04:08	14:19:31	
Holly Hill		61.	3.	7.	15:47	01:28:28	15:47:59	
Bluebell Hill		64.	3.	8.	19:13	03:23:43	19:11:42	
Detling		60.	3.	7.	17:56	01:44:03	20:55:45	
Lenham		55.	3.	7.	19:25	02:52:50	23:48:35	
Finish		48.	3.	6.	14:42	02:56:34	26:45:09	

My race splits

It's nearly two weeks post-race and I am still flying high with a huge smile.

I'll put my hands up and say that I went into this dreaming of a sub-24 hour finish time. My training had been spot on and everything that I did indicated that this was well within my capabilities. I ended up finishing nearly three hours slower than this. Am I disappointed? No. Not at all.

I very quickly let the 24-hour dream drift away as with the race day conditions, NDW100 2020 was not the year to push for a fast 100 miles. I have zero regrets. If I'd chased an arbitrary number, I wouldn't have finished. To put the conditions into a little perspective, the winning female time was 21:42. This is more than three hours slower than the women's course record. Only 17 runners achieved sub-24 compared to over 50 in 2019. And 54% of those who started the race did not finish. I was not exaggerating the effect of the heat.

If I didn't hit my goal time, why am I calling this the race of my life?

More important to me than my finishing time was to enjoy the race, to run strongly and to finish with a smile. As with any race I had my low points. I've talked about them. I had a good start, a shaky middle and a bloody amazing finish.

That finish means more to me than sub-24 hours. I usually fall down late in the race, struggle and stagger to the end. Here, strength and determination pushed me through the lows, especially that moment sitting down in the middle of the trail wanting to quit, and took me to the finish in style.

I climbed 12 places in the last quarter of the race. Running a large portion of those final miles. I ran the last five practically non-stop, including a 34 minute final 5km, and sprinted around the track at the finish. My mind can hardly comprehend this and I can't capture that feeling in words.

At the end of 100 miles, I felt stronger than I have EVER felt. I felt invincible. I felt able to achieve anything. The smile was guaranteed.

It's the race of my life because it proved to me just what I am capable of when I put my mind to it and believe in myself. I trained hard, I worked hard, I put everything into this race. On the day it all came together I ran better than I could ever have hoped.

Me, finishing 6th lady in a 100 mile race? Beyond my wildest dreams.

I now have a fire in my belly. I've felt what it feels like to have a successful race and I know I have more in me. That sub-24 hour, when the time is right, will be mine.

So yes, I am running another 100 miles.



© Stuart Marsh

MELTING ON THE NORTH DOWNS WAY: NDW 100

(by Debra Bourne)

I spent 2018 and 2019 running lots of marathons and ultras (mostly ultras) to finish qualifying for the 100 Marathon Club, which I achieved at the end of November 2019. I decided that my next goal would be to run ultras faster, with specific aims for 2020 of a marathon PB (getting my time down to 3:40 or even 3:30); a sub-10-hour Comrades Marathon (iconic 56-mile hilly road ultra in South Africa) and sub-24h-hour at a 100-miler.

In summer 2019 I started attending my club's speed sessions occasionally, and from November regularly, as well as starting strength training twice a week. Beginning in December I invested in online coaching, choosing Centurion coaching as I thought that, as they surely coached people who were aiming for the Centurion Grand Slam (four 100-mile races during the year), they would be better able than most to cope with my multiple race goals. My coach, Neil Bryant, had been setting me to doing more speed work and runs such as tempo runs and progression runs (increasing speed gradually during the run), as well as making sure that my easy runs really were at an easy pace that wouldn't impact on the harder sessions, and encouraging me to cross-train at least once a week.

With the whole COVID-19 situation, races were postponed or cancelled right, left and centre. Comrades didn't happen. Other races such as NDW50 and Wendover Woods Night 50K were postponed. Although I ran a number of 50K virtual events in the course of training, I was running them as training runs, on tired legs. Running 5-mile, 5K and 10K virtual races organised by Chris Morton from my running club, I had some proof that my speed at those distances had improved – I reduced my 5K to 21:20 (from my previous best of 22:24 set in 2012) and my 10K to 44:26 (from 45:30, also set in 2012). However, NDW100 would be my first chance to see how the training had impacted the ultras that were my real goal.

The NDW100 2020 edition was one of the first races to be held in the UK in an in-person rather than virtual format since the COVID-19 lockdown started in April. We were all pleased it was going ahead. Various adaptations had been needed to allow the race to happen, including a couple of course diversions – although James Elson assured us those would not affect the overall distance (103 miles). Gathering for the race briefing evidently wasn't possible, so that was pre-recorded and linked in the final pre-race email. I got distracted with downloading the revised .gpx and only remembered to watch the briefing at 5 am on race morning while getting dressed and eating breakfast.

Rather than a mass start, runners could set off from the trailhead at any time from 5am to 7am. We were asked to set off earlier if we expected to be faster and later if we expected to be slower, to reduce overtaking and hopefully, by increasing 'spread' along the course, reduce bottlenecks at the aid stations. I intended to set off about 6 am, but ran a bit behind schedule – with the nice result that I met up with my Comrades-running friend Amanda. After dropping off our drop bags (to go to the Knockholt Pound aid station at 50 miles and to Detling at 83 miles) with PPE-wearing volunteers, and a last trip to the toilets, we headed towards the start. Amanda went to pick up her tracker from the table, which was useful as I would probably have forgotten about mine entirely otherwise, wasting money and disappointing family and friends who wanted to follow my progress. Trackers taped to backpack shoulder straps (we had to do that ourselves, due to COVID-19), temperature checked by another volunteer in PPE, and just before 6.30 am we were off.

It's often been said that 90% of running an ultra is the mental side, rather than the physical. One aspect of that is that setting out to run 100 miles (or 103 in this case) is a big task. It's easier mentally if you chop that down into smaller segments. In the COVID-19

circumstances I was breaking this race down into four large sections based on where I would replenish my food: Box Hill (well, a little before: the crew point at 22 miles), Knockholt Pound at 50 miles, where my first drop bag would be, and Detling (82 miles) holding my second drop-bag. Besides that, I chopped it into sections between aid stations, where I would get water and maybe a bit of additional food.



NDW trailhead at Farnham, and overlooking Denbies vineyard*

The first section is really very runnable, and I reminded myself to take it easy, as there was a long way to go, although I also decided it made sense not to hold back -too- much while the temperature was still reasonable: only in the mid-70s to low-80s Fahrenheit. Despite running easy I found myself passing other runners almost from the outset (probably due to my slightly late start), and settled into a nice rhythm, walking the uphill sections and allowing myself to run – but not push – on the downhills. The aid station at Puttenham golf course wasn't active for this year, so it was 15 miles to the first checkpoint at Newlands Corner. I'd decided to hand-carry a 500mL soft bottle in addition to the two bottles on the front of my pack, as I didn't want to risk running out of water.

To absolutely minimise COVID-19 transmission risks at aid stations, each station had been split into three mini-stations (two later on the course), with water and Tailwind options, Pepsi, and some food in small plastic bags. When I arrived at the aid station there was a short queue. After sanitising my hands with gel I had to wait about three minutes before other runners finished and I could step forward to fill my water bottles. The food supply was pretty minimal compared to the usual amazing Centurion spread – half bananas, satsumas, bags of sweets, crisps, nuts/raisins and individual cheeses (Baby Bel or similar). As I am now to all intents and purposes vegan, I was basically carrying all my own food, because I couldn't rely on things like the sweets being eatable. I quickly refilled two water bottles, chose a satsuma and stepped away from the table so the next runner could come forward. Off to the side I stuffed the water bottles back into their pockets, peeled the satsuma, then sanitised my hands again (holding the satsuma in my teeth!) and set off. It was barely 9am and already hot enough that I could feel the sweat rolling down my face.

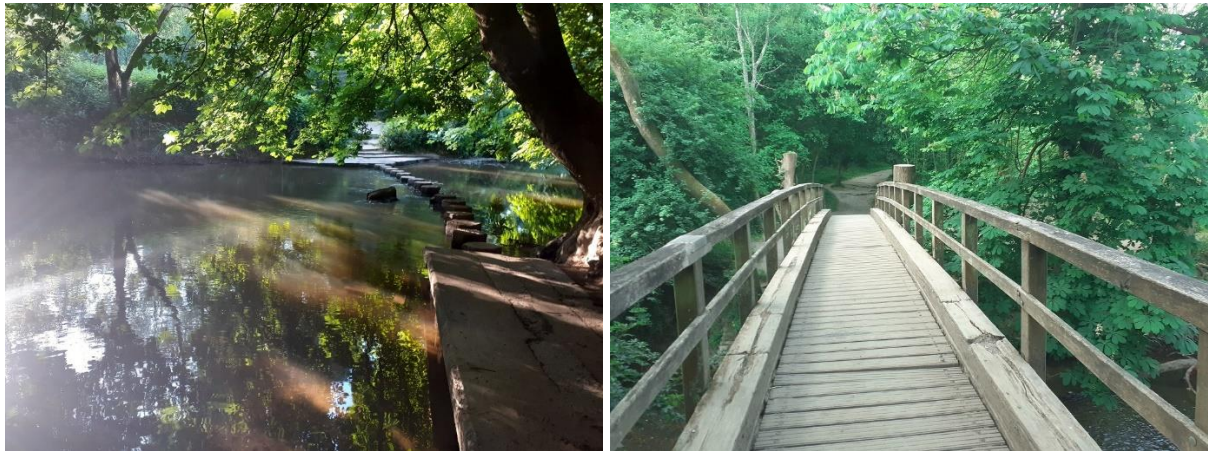
My preferred electrolyte additive is Elete – a concentrated salt solution without any flavouring or sweeteners. Often I put it in the water (how it's meant to be used!) but on this occasion I had decided to simply drink it neat at intervals, squeezing out a number of drops onto my tongue, swallowing then chasing with water. It worked fine except for the time I tipped my head back too far and got the concentrate on the back of my throat and going down the wrong way. That hurt, as well as setting me coughing, and my throat felt raw for the next hour or more, and still felt raw the next several times I ate satsumas at the aid stations.

The second aid station would be just before Box Hill at 25 miles. I had arranged for my husband to meet me at the 22-mile crew point at Steers Field, so I was able to replenish my

food supplies there to last me to Knockholt Pound, and I put some more sunscreen on my shoulders, neck, nose and ear tips. So far it had been reasonably cloudy, but the sun was starting to break through and the temperature was rising – my Garmin recorded temperatures reaching 93.2 °F during the afternoon, and another runner reported a reading of 44.5 °C – well over 100 °F – in one of the unshaded areas. As the temperature rose I kept my effort level and heart rate down, running easy and power hiking the hills. To my surprise I was passing other runners on the uphill sections as well as while running. Going through Denbies I overtook Rob Cowlin, who I knew from many SVN races; it was great to see him – one of the worst things about the lockdown for me has been not seeing everyone at races.

The aid station was a little earlier on the course than usual, at a cricket club just after leaving Denbies, rather than in the Box Hill Stepping Stones' car park. The queue here was five or six minutes. Some runners were taking ages dithering over the food options. Back out onto the road, down to the underpass, through and back up to the Box Hill Stepping Stones car park. I was feeling fine – probably because I'd been holding back compared with previous years running the NDW50. At some point I discovered my watch had stopped recording when I'd attached a powerbank – despite having worked fine doing that on a recce. Irritating.

Due to pressure of visitors at the stepping stones and at the Box Hill viewpoint, we were diverted off the usual trail twice: first over the bridge rather than the stepping stones, then again half way up the usual steps, on a lower level route for some time before a more gradual climb that seemed to go on forever. Having recced this section a couple of times this year, as well as having raced the NDW50 previously, it seemed very strange to be taking a different path. The route had been well marked, but it was comforting to re-emerge onto the NDW and be back on the familiar paths.



The stepping stones that we didn't use, and the bridge that we did

From Box Hill to Caterham is the section that always seems to me to be one hill after another: lots of ups and downs with very little in the way of flatter bits. Every so often on the tops of the hills I reminded myself to look around and appreciate the views. As usual on trail runs, I was also watching and listening for birds and other wildlife, but this day seemed to be too hot even for the birds to be active. I did hear some birds of prey calling occasionally, and watched one gliding not far above the treetops.

On a recent recce it had been raining and chilly as I ran over Colley Hill, and as I ran the same trail through this day's heat and sun I couldn't help think about the contrast and wishing for a bit of that coolness. Through Gatton Park and past the Millenium Stones. Through the Reigate Hill checkpoint, with only a short queue. Across the golf course, then the cricket ground – where I passed a runner with a GoPro and thought nothing more of it until a few days later someone told me they had spotted me on a YouTube video**. Through

St Katherine's Church, pausing a moment to fill one of my water bottles with lovely cool water, and into Merstham, where along the road section suddenly I heard 'Debra! Go Debra!' and there was Peter Johnson, being really encouraging and saying how strong I looked – which was nice to hear, as I felt like I was melting. A local was spraying runners with a hosepipe as they passed (if wanted) and I closed my eyes and went right through for a good soaking. A runner ahead of me almost missed the left turn off the road, but I called 'stop!' and two crew on the pavement waiting for their runner pointed and called out as well, and he stopped abruptly and made the turn. "Nearly missed that!" he said as I passed him a few seconds later. "It's easy to miss," I replied – "I did on a recent recce." Through the underpass then diagonally up across the fields, power hiking in the sun.



Running happy, near Newland's Corner and Caterham (Stuart Marsh Photography)

At the Caterham viewpoint it was lovely to see my friend Jo Quantrill (from South London Harriers), and we chatted while I waited in the queue for the aid station, also with Donna, one of the volunteers who I knew.

By now I was into very familiar territory, and knew that in the hot conditions some of the most testing miles lay directly ahead: not in terms of terrain, but simply because much of the next section would be fully exposed to the sun, running along the sides of fields rather than through woodland. I enjoyed the woodland while it lasted, and managed to call out a "left" just as another runner was about to miss a turning.



Reigate Hill view and Gatton Millennium Stones

So far my legs felt fine, my heart and breathing were fine, I was drinking and eating without any problems. I had my home-made energy balls, boiled new potatoes (with a little bag of salt to dip them in), lentil crisps, mini pretzels covered in salt crystals, mixed raisins and cranberries, and a bag of mixed vegan sweets. The important thing was to keep moving steadily, not pushing too hard in the heat, and walking the uphill to save my legs for later. I

passed the point where I had fallen in the NDW50 last year, this time not tripping on the bit of flint sticking up through the path. Last bit of woodland, down the steps and out into the sunshine. It was hot, but I had expected that. Onwards – down, along past the quarry, a short sharp hill, and along again, passing the steep hill where the Vanguard Way joins the NDW for a little while, knowing that it's now only a few fields until the Titsey Plantation and Botley Hill.

A pleasant surprise while trotting along the fields, as I realised that the person walking towards me was familiar – Rel Lindley had come out to encourage us on our way. That was a great boost and gave me something to think about other than the heat. Past the Greenwich Meridian sign, along one more field then finally a break from the sun, swinging onto the wide uphill track through the Titsey Plantation and up to the Botley Hill aid station.

When running the NDW50, by this point my legs have always been tired, so it was satisfying to note, as a sign that both my training and my pacing were paying off, that I could power-hike up the hill at a good clip, passing people along the way. At the top, however, the aid station was packed, with about six runners before me in the queue and people sitting all around on chairs and tree trunks. I took advantage of the enforced break to put some more suntan lotion on my shoulders, neck, nose and ears, and had a chat with Ollie Dawson – who I had last seen while recceing the Farnham to Dorking section of the NDW a few months before – about other runners we both knew out on the course. Finally I reached the front of the queue, refilled my bottles, took a satsuma and headed on towards Knockholt Pound. Shortly I passed Gareth Allen (who has been doing absolutely crazy virtual races during lockdown, to while away the disruption to his “12 x 100-milers in 12 months” challenge), who said he was really suffering in the heat. Then I saw Myles, sitting under a tree and calling out encouragement – another boost.



Towards Titsey – me (courtesy of Rel Lindley); the Greenwich Meridian Line plaque

Along Chestnut Avenue, thankfully wooded, before Westerham Hill, and about halfway I saw Nikki, with her husband and daughter. They offered me a Calippo, apologising for the fact that it was half melted. I didn't mind – it was cold and delicious. As a bonus, Nikki poured a load of ice into my hat, which felt wonderful, and passed on the news that she had seen clubmates Ally and Tad already, but not Keith Simpson, who, being in the V70 category and a bit slower as a result, had probably set off later. I trotted off down the lane, sucking on the slushy Calippo and redistributing some of the ice down the front and back of my vest. It was horrifying how quickly the ice melted, but it was great while it lasted.

Cross the road, across more fields, up the steep hill and I knew we were only a few miles out from Knockholt Pound. This was where I usually alerted my husband that I was on my way and could he come to see me finish (if running NDW50) or pick me up (from a long recce

run). On this occasion I called him to please meet me at Otford (the next crew point), as I could feel a spot on my back where my heart rate monitor strap was starting to rub quite badly and I wanted to tape it up.

A mile or so before the village, we had a second diversion from the NDW, which unfortunately meant running on road for a while rather than the usual fields and woodland, and was unfamiliar. I was relieved to spot the village hall (aid station). One of the volunteers at the front of the hall was Louise Ayling, and it was lovely to see a familiar face (and no queue). I'd volunteered here in the past, and my memory was of the space packed with people. On this occasion there were far fewer runners in the hall, with chairs spread out around the walls and further chairs outside, but there was another familiar face, as Ally was there. I got my drop bag and sat down to change my shoes and socks. Ally and I chatted a little while we got ourselves sorted – she was having some digestive problems, finding it hard to swallow anything, so was surviving mostly on Tailwind.

It was so hot that even changing my socks and shoes took longer than it should have. Thankfully the volunteers were able to provide some wipes so I could clean my feet of dust and larger bits of road grime before putting on the fresh socks, which felt really nice. I also ate one of my pre-prepared sandwiches, stuffed my next lot of trail food into the side pockets and my head torches into the main pocket of my pack, and of course refilled my water bottles. The volunteers also provided a bowl of ice, so I set off again with ice under my cap, melting and cooling me down – heavenly!

Past where I'd seen wild orchids growing on a recce, down the hill, across the road and onwards towards Otford. I felt a bit bad as I realised I'd taken ages at the aid station and my husband would be waiting for me. Thankfully we had agreed to meet at a bench on a tiny patch of green, after the station, so he would be in the shade and no doubt reading. I finally arrived, and Aidan applied strips of kinesiology tape to protect my back. A kiss and I was off again, up the steep hill and the endless steps, then continuing on the route that was reasonably familiar after two recce runs.



Elephants on the way to Otford; lovely poppies on a field edge

At one point a reminder that we were on the Pilgrim's Way: two men, one in old-fashioned monk's garb and leaning heavily on a long staff, walking along the footpath. Into the Wrotham aid station and out again. Passing through some woodland I realised the light was beginning to go, so I paused and dug out my headtorches – my new LEDLenser neo 10R on my cap, and my old Silva Ninox 3 round my waist. A right turn down the lane and into Trosley Country Park. Partway through the park I switched on the main torch, which lit up the route fantastically, but gave a disconcerting dark patch seemingly just under my eyes. I switched the other light on and that area lit up. The combination of the two lights worked

really well. The path through Trosley seemed to last forever and I hadn't seen any of Centurion's marking for ages, so I was very glad to have recced and know that there was no way I could have left the route. Finally to the end, with a sharp right turn and down a recently-resurfaced path, with another runner remarking as I passed that I was being sensible while he was being stubborn, not turning his light on until the next checkpoint.

The NDW turns north here, as it has to go to the Medway crossing. Heading towards Holly Hill, I noticed a crumpled empty soft bottle that had evidently fallen from another runner's pocket, so I picked it up. At Holly Hill aid station (where I also briefly saw Ally), I asked if I could leave it with them, as I didn't really want to carry it the rest of the way, and they agreed that I could. This was also a crew point, so as I left the aid station and turned back onto the trail I called out to the nearest crews: 'Pass it along the line – if anyone's runner has lost a soft bottle, I found it and I've left it here.' Immediately one of the crew members replied, "An Ultimate Direction one?" As I frowned, trying to remember what those looked like, he added "grey with a red top?" "Yes!". "Thank you!" and he headed towards the aid station.

At some point I fished a boiled potato out to eat and it smelled slightly 'off' so I didn't eat the last two in the bag - nor the ones that I had intended to eat that were in the next drop bag. Sadly that removed a good source of both fuel and 'real' food for my stomach, and I didn't really have anything as a replacement – my sandwiches just didn't look appetising.

There's a little section of the NDW just before the Medway Crossing that I'm very familiar with. The NDW crosses Ranscombe Farm and Nature Reserve, where I have spent many hours running in Saxons, Vikings and Normans events, sometimes in ideal conditions and sometimes in atrocious mud, but always in great company with fantastic camaraderie. It was comforting, therefore, to think of this section as 'running towards Ranscombe'. Reaching the farm was lovely; this bit I knew so well (although I was used to running it in the other direction) and I remembered the amazing flowers I had seen there during my recce runs. The Medway crossing itself I was not looking forward to, after two very hot crossings on my reces, but at least this late I didn't have the sun beating down on me, and there was considerably less traffic whizzing past on the other side of the tall fence.



Ranscombe Nature Reserve, with beautiful summer flowers

Onwards towards Bluebell Hill, and a couple of miles before the aid station I spotted another soft bottle on the ground, so I picked it up (nearly full, this time, a very long, very thin bottle), and carried it with me to Bluebell Hill aid station, where I left it and hoped they would transport it to the end for possible reclamation by its owner.

Next stop, Detling. Here I reclaimed my second drop-bag, ate a bit of the instant noodles that I had made up in the morning, and switched out my food bags for fresh ones. I'd also noticed

on turning off my Ninox torch that the battery indicator light was orange, so I fished out spare batteries and changed those before heading off again (the main torch was still fine). There was a runner there who was totally unfamiliar with the trail. Those of us who knew it told him that the next section was gnarly to Hollingbourne, but it was only a few miles – and after that it was much easier all the way to the end.



Milestone 79 miles from Farnham, and stones to sidle round into a field

Having remembered the next few miles as truly horrible, they didn't feel too bad, even in the dark (having good torches really helped), and Centurion's route markings were plentiful. At one point I glanced at my watch and discovered a blank screen. Despite the earlier recharge, the battery had run out – frustrating! I fished out the powerbank and connected it, gave it a minute then switched the watch on and got the course started again. It was another several minutes before I realised I hadn't actually pressed the start button yet so it wasn't recording my time etc. Steps down, steps up, ducking under branches and stepping over roots. I was moving more quickly than I had expected on this section, and even in the dark it was sufficiently familiar from my recce that I always knew I was on the correct route (and in the little section where the course took us slightly off the NDW, straight across a field rather than up and round the edges, I recognised that as well). I even passed a couple of other runners. Concentrating on my footing and balance, I didn't eat much during this section, which was almost certainly a mistake. When I was on one of the easier bits crossing a field and rummaged around in the running vest pockets, I couldn't find my bag of sweets, which was a real blow, as I had been relying on them for energy. I also felt guilty for having littered the trail by dropping them somewhere along the route. I tried to eat an energy ball instead, but for some reason found it unappetising and had problems forcing myself to chew and swallow it, and I didn't try the raisins and cranberries – no idea why not. The wind had picked up and actually felt cool along the tops; I enjoyed the feeling of almost being cold. I'd worried that the LEDLenser would feel heavy, but it didn't – although my head was beginning to itch from having the hat on (and now the head torch on top) for so long..

Finally, I descended into Hollingbourne, where the wet ground indicated a shower that hadn't touched me. Only 15 easy miles to go! I looked around for the aid station but couldn't see it. There were some runner crews standing around and I asked one of them where the aid station was. She pointed down the lane and said 'about three and a half miles that way!' For some reason, although I knew it was 8.5 miles from Detling to the next aid station and only about 5 miles from Detling to Hollingbourne, I had it in my head there would be an aid station there. Although I still had nearly 500 mL of water left, and didn't actually *need* the aid station yet, the information that I had 3.5 miles to the next checkpoint really threw me.

I started off down the lane, power walking initially to give my legs a bit of a rest. Then I checked the time, did some calculations and worked out that, despite having lost about 30

minutes to the aid station queues, and spent too long at the half-way aid station, if I could average 12 minutes per mile I might just squeak in under 24 hours. So I started to run. For at least 20 strides. Then I dropped back to a walk, frustrated. It wasn't that my legs were obviously stiff and sore – they were not – but my glutes and my hip area in general felt completely tired and lacking in energy for running. The lane was going slightly uphill, so I waited for a downhill section and tried again. This time I maybe managed 30 strides with each leg. It was hugely frustrating. I could power hike at a reasonable pace without any problem, but my legs simply didn't want to run. As an added problem to the glutes and hips feeling out of energy, my stomach was beginning to feel uncomfortable and on the edge of nausea when I ran, and my guts didn't like it either! And my feet were feeling sore, despite my having changed into quite padded shoes (for me) at Knockholt Pound. By now none of the food I had left seemed appetising and I was really regretting the loss of my sweets. I nibbled on the savoury snacks, but that was all.

I continued down the lane, power hiking, trying to run whenever I hit a bit of downhill, managing 30 strides with each leg here, 50 there, while a few other runners started to pass me. Into the Lenham aid station, where I refilled my water bottles, took another satsuma and walked on. It was getting light, and my head was itching, so periodically I experimented with turning off my headtorches, and as soon as it was light enough I stopped, stowed the torches in my pack and took my hat off, giving my scalp a good scratch with both hands. Onwards, with a few more runners passing me. By now I knew the sub-24 wasn't going to happen. At about 5am I phoned my husband, told him I'd hopefully be finishing in a couple of hours.

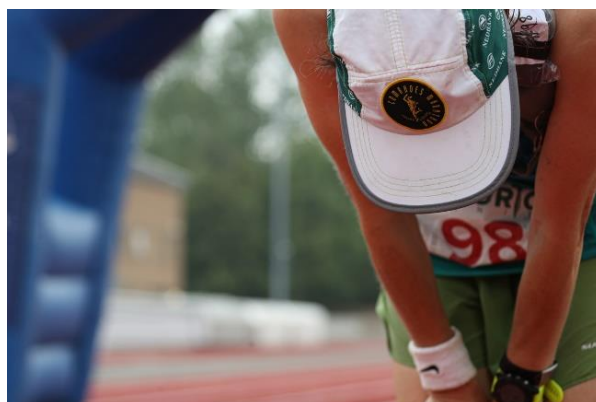


Along the final fields before the road into Ashford – and a lovely cedar

Onwards. Into Dunn St Farm, the final aid station, where I accidentally put Tailwind into one of my water bottles, but thankfully a volunteer told me in time that I could put water into the other one. I took another satsuma and walked on, still trying to jog for 30, 50 or occasionally 60 double-strides at a time. At one point I accidentally drank the Tailwind, which tasted awful. Across the fields, and I was glad that I had recced this bit, as I knew exactly where I was going, without constantly keeping an eye out for Centurion arrows and tape. Through the old churchyard and onto the road. Only 3.5 miles to go. They went on forever. I was glad of the Centurion signs again, so I didn't have to use any mental energy on navigation. Walking briskly, jogging for a little, walking again, another brief jog. I forgot to even try to eat: I just wanted to finish.

Most of the road section had been downhill, and I'd forgotten the final rise before the stadium. Nothing to do except get over it, so I kept walking. My husband came into view and pointed me to the correct gate to take into the stadium. As my feet hit the track, I managed to break into a jog and kept it up for about a third of a lap, then dropped to a walk for a little

while round the far bend, before persuading my legs into something resembling a run for the last of the curve and the final straight. I tried to summon a smile for the photographer as I approached the line, crossed it and stopped. Done. I had left everything I had out on the course and finished in 24:43:22.



Along the back straight of the track, and finished (Stuart Marsh photography)

I collected my medal, posed for the finish-line photos, then headed off the track, accepting the T-shirt, congratulations from the volunteers and the offer of a vegan hot dog, but wanting nothing more than to sit down and hope my innards would stop feeling so uncomfortable.



Me and my NDW100 buckle, outside the Julie Rose Stadium (finish) building. I still need to earn one of these saying "100 miles – One Day" rather than "100 miles – Finisher"!

Louise Ayling told me that I was 4th Woman and I was really pleased with that, but I'm not sure I managed to smile about it – I really had left everything I had out on the course. I felt really bad that I couldn't summon up the energy to thank everyone properly, but I was feeling sick and weak and couldn't find any posture where I was comfortable.

After trying lying down on the grassy bank, then in the car, hoping to regain enough energy to thank the volunteers properly, I finally gave up and we set off for home – where I confirmed I was 4th woman, 22nd overall – and 1st VF50!

MANY thanks to the Centurion people and all the volunteers who made this race happen – to get this held in the circumstances was amazing, and of course we couldn't do these races without the marvellous volunteers.

Retrospective musings: I've run something over 100 marathons and ultras now, mostly ultras, but this was only my fourth 100-mile race and I'm still learning how to tackle them. I am really happy with my performance up to Hollingbourne. I kept my effort level down, my energy remained reasonably high despite the heat, and I was passing other runners throughout. I think I paced myself well through the heat of the day, and the couple of caffeine tablets I took, one at about 11pm and the other a few hours later, seem to have worked as I didn't get sleepy – a far cry from my first 100-miler when I discovered that it -is- possible to fall asleep while walking. My heart rate stayed easily in the low-aerobic zone throughout, as my pace was limited mainly by the heat.

The last 15 miles I'm not so happy about! In retrospect, after the potatoes smelled 'off' I should have made sure I ate some of my sandwiches, even if I didn't feel like it (some other runners had packed bottles of ice into their drop bags – that would be an excellent idea for another occasion). Once I discovered I didn't have my sweets (I found them still in the drop bag when I unpacked it, so at least I hadn't littered the trail) I should have made myself eat more of the dried fruit and the energy balls, and maybe taken another caffeine tablet. The calves, quads and hamstrings were fine but the glutes got very tired – suggesting that I was using them properly (which is good) but need to strengthen them more.

I enjoyed the race (well, maybe not those last miles) despite the heat. I'm delighted with my placing: 1st VF50, 4th woman and 22nd overall out of a field of 235 starters, and in a race that only 46% of the field managed to finish – the coaching and hard training have paid off. The sub-24 remains elusive, but only 17 runners managed that mark in the heat, and I have two more 100-mile races this year, so who knows!

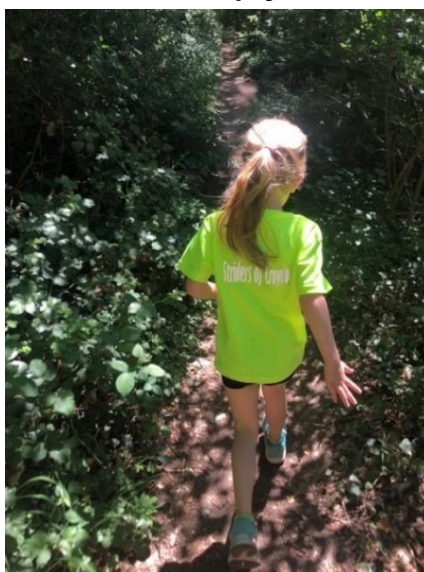
* All photos except the ones of me and the one of the 100-mile buckle taken on recces, so all in daylight even if I passed the spot at night!

**YouTube video is at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E5pmG41U7fs> – I appear from 4:57-5:02.



Another view from along the trail

LIBBY RUNNING (by Nikki Javan)



This is Elizabeth (aka Libby). She's five years old and just like you she's a runner too. In fact, she sees no difference between your running and hers. I'm going to preface everything that follows by pointing out to everyone that I'm her mum which means I'm incredibly biased so there is no way that what I write here will be remotely balanced or objective.

Maybe it's just me but everywhere I look running seems to be about getting faster or going further. In lockdown we've seen some incredible multiday feats such as adventures across The Pennine Way, LEJOG and JOGEL as well as the eye-watering achievements of many of our own teammates running the NDW100. As people have come out of months of lockdown we're seeing PBs being set and records falling. Libby's achievements might not be nearly as heady but she's probably taught me more about running than watching all these immense efforts.

I thought I might share some of my learnings from Libby but before that I need to set the scene and ask you to cast your mind back to the beginning of lockdown. I was one of the number of panicked parents suddenly faced with the prospect of home-schooling. Thankfully we had Joe Wicks to cover PE for the nation but it quickly became apparent that Libby is not a HIIT work-out type of girl and in normal circumstances I perhaps wouldn't mind her wanting to do an art project or read but I'll leave you to imagine the amount of pent up energy we had surging around from a 5-year old who was now unable to leave the house and doing no physical exercise.

For the previous year we've been doing junior parkrun on a Sunday, so we weren't starting from the very beginning, but we started running-based PE lessons doing a single lap of the block but she could not have hated it any more. My first thought was that maybe she's not going to enjoy running, but then we decided to go into Croham Hurst as we live very close. What a difference! This kid was in her element and like a different child entirely. We walked up the hills but ran across the ridgeway with huge smiles. We jumped over fallen logs and explored new paths, so within a few days she was asking to go running during the day rather than being dragged out.

The biggest turning point for us was when Ally mentioned the Centurion One Love event that she was going to be participating in (running 100 miles in the week) and how it was open to children too. Over the course of the May half term Libby consistently went out most days and

across that week ran a half marathon around Croham Hurst. We didn't worry about time, but we measured success in finding as many fallen trees to jump over and hills to run down as we possibly could.

This little girl couldn't have been any happier when she got her medal through the door. It was like the medals that she sees me get for running, but this one was different because it was hers and she had earned it.



Over the next couple of months she kept up the running, but even I was blown away by her efforts when we decided to do the Centurion One Up challenge. The premise was simply that you signed up and attempted to run as high as possible – and for truly insane adults that was up to Olympus Mons (21,229m). Under-18s were allowed to go as high as Ben Nevis (1,345m) and although I'm biased, she blew me away by running this (under-18) maximum in four days. In the first two days alone she ran 10 miles, and somehow didn't want a rest day. We took day trips to the Seven Sisters and Box Hill for running adventures. I had a dream come true in the form of my very own little running buddy.

What has Libby taught me about running?

- 1) It's about the journey and not the outcome
As part of One Up challenge I started a run where my focus was on the elevation and it was painful for both of us. Thankfully Libby reminded me that we need to have fun on the way, so we pretended to ride horses up and down the hills and made up stories about hiding from Darth Vader. Always have fun and enjoy the journey.
- 2) If you run, you're a runner
Libby has absolutely no idea that the running she does and that of others is any different. She knows there are longer runs and faster runs, but she does both of those too. We recently went to see Debra, Ally and Tad at the NDW100 and as far as she is concerned what she does is exactly the same as them because she runs just like them. I'm not going to correct her because yes, she is a runner, she's a mini athlete and what she does is the same. Don't ever say you're not a runner because it's not about how far you go or how fast you are that defines you as a runner.

3) Distractions make all the difference

I'm sure we all know this and it's why some of us run in groups or listen to music/podcasts, but it's nice to have a reminder. On our runs we make up stories, we search for animals; we've named almost every section of Croham Hurst now and we've been on adventures exploring little paths to see where they lead. When we're not thinking about the time, pace or distance we can run for hours (literally, as long as I take snacks).

4) Consistency pays

Although I haven't been running for very long myself, I still manage to forget where I started and the progress I've made. Seeing Libby's little journey from a kid who couldn't or wouldn't run a junior 2km parkrun without complaints to a confident little girl covering 31km and 1,350m of elevation in just 4 days reminds me how small steps and consistency really do pay off. Over the months you could see her strength develop as she stopped needing to walk up the hills and her confidence grow as she sprinted back down the steepest descents she could find. We're all adapting to steady and consistent training in the same way, we just don't get to see it from an (almost) zero starting point.

5) There's no such thing as too much ice cream

On a hot day at Box Hill I offered Libby another ice cream (she'd already had one) in exchange for an extra trip up the big hill (to finish her Ben Nevis challenge). There was no question, she climbed the hill and took the extra ice cream because there is no such thing as too much ice cream. I'm going to add cake to this lesson too, because there is no such thing as too much cake either.



So what's next for Libby's running? Well she's just completed Chris' 1-mile time trial, but has decided that she would rather do a long run in the woods up a hill next time please. She'll be returning to school in the next week, but I hope that she continues to do some running. Selfishly I think I'm going to miss my little running partner. This week she's telling me she doesn't like running and would just like to watch Star Wars. Next week could be completely different and she could be desperate to get outdoors again. Such is the fickle life of a 5-year-old. The main thing is that thanks to a bit of running we survived lockdown and maybe I've planted a little seed in her which will grow into a huge love of running when she's older.

IPHUPHO LAMI: DARE TO DREAM (by Michelle Klein)

Growing up in South Africa, it was always a childhood tradition to watch the Comrades Marathon on television. The Comrades Marathon is one of the most world renowned and longest-running ultra-marathons, at approximately 90km in distance. Next year, 2021, marks its centenary.

I always marvelled at how cool and comfortable the front runners looked, and how broken but elated those runners looked who managed to cross the finish line just before the final 12-hour gun cut-off, went off.

It was excruciating to watch those runners who just missed out on a medal or the cut-off time, or who had to literally crawl across the finish line. It was torturous but sensational TV viewing.

I don't think I ever had the dream to run it one day, I couldn't even comprehend how far 90km or 55 miles was to run. I just thought those runners were a brazen mix of crazy and heroic, but above all else they were totally awe inspiring and such a marvel to watch. I have not considered myself to be a runner, I participated in "long" distance running in primary school, 1,500m, which felt incredibly far at the time. But I gave up all running or any sporting activities in high school and much of my young adulthood.

It was only in my late thirties that I bought my first pair of Asics trainers and started running around Victoria Park in East London, in an effort to add cardio into my fitness regime. Fast forward to a few years later and I became a regular runner at Lloyd parkrun, it was here that I met some people from Striders of Croydon who encouraged me to join their running club. But I am not a runner I thought; the furthest I had ever run was 5k!

But I decided to join Striders of Croydon in 2016 and just about managed to run a full hour in group 4. I remember that first club run so vividly, I had to count the lamp posts just to reach the next point and felt totally wiped out after that run, yet totally exhilarated to know that I could actually run (with a little bit of walking) for a whole hour.

It's a slippery slope getting involved with the club, I joined in early March and all the Striders around me were marathon training and I thought to myself, well this is a goal I need to set myself. I wanted to run a marathon before I turned forty and so that's what I did the following year in 2017, I ran my first marathon. I had runner's high for weeks afterwards. It was one of the best experiences of my life, I was supported by many of my Strider club mates and as soon as I crossed the finish line I thought, well that was incredible, I've got to do that again! I took that as a good sign.

My running has steadily improved, and by improved I mean I can run slightly faster but I am now a long-distance runner at heart: the longer and slower the run, the better!

I am never going to break any running records, the most important thing to me about running is that I enjoy it. I find no pleasure in setting training plans and running to a timetable or trying to beat times. However, I have tried to be more disciplined and focused when I do set myself a goal, which I think is important for me (sometimes). This in itself is a fine balance of setting a challenge but still maintaining optimal enjoyment with a little less pressure.

So this year, when all racing and races were thrown up in the air, I consciously decided to keep on running, to try to keep up my fitness. Having already done 10 weeks of marathon

training prep for Copenhagen Marathon, which would have been my third marathon, I decided to keep up my long slow runs during lockdown.

This period of time came with so many mixed emotions; my mental health felt incredibly fragile but my running was one of the things that held me tight and kept me sane. Long slow runs were one of the highlights to come out of lockdown, I began to appreciate running in solitude, running alone with just my thoughts made me grateful for my health and all the abundance in my life. Discovering new local routes and trails and finally piecing some of the Strider routes together also felt like I had achieved something. Running was my salvation in such an uncertain time.

So when I found out that the Comrades Marathon had also been cancelled and was going virtual, and that I could enter one of 5 distances to run anywhere in the world: 5km, 10km, 21km, 45km or 90km, and get a Comrades medal. I thought, oh wow this is a gift and an opportunity not to be missed! I couldn't resist getting a Comrades medal (which will hopefully arrive in the post within the next few months).

I signed up for the 45km distance, which would be furthest I had ever run and would be half the Comrades distance. But, if I completed the distance successfully it would technically mean that I was an ultra-distance marathon runner.

My very good Striders comrade, confidant, motivator, instigator and inspiration, Jay, also signed up; we were going to tackle this challenge together.

On the 14th June we ran "Race the Comrades Legends 2020" on an out-and-back route starting from East Croydon station and running along the Wandle path to Clapham Junction, along the Thames path to Barnes and back again. We completed the distance! It was an absolute pleasure to run with Jay and to do this challenge together on our running journey.

We ran with another 43,000 virtual runners from over 102 participating nations, with even more international participants than had entered for the usual 90km Comrades Marathon.

It was a good run for me, I felt well prepared and well trained. I wasn't chasing a time, I was chasing the distance, but at 18 miles I realised I was on target to get a marathon PB if I kept up my pace. Unfortunately, I was a few minutes off my PB, but just a few minutes, without even trying or setting out to get a PB!

Afterwards it felt like a bit of an anti-climax; I had run the distance and achieved what I had set out to do and yet I couldn't help feel slightly disappointed that I hadn't beaten my marathon PB.

Why are runners always so hard on themselves? I have unfinished business...

Comrades, the real-life Comrades, is a dream; maybe one day I'll get there. Iphupho Lami or "dare to dream" in Zulu.

I have to get a marathon time of 4 hours 50 to qualify for a Comrades place. My current marathon PB is 5:17:40, so if I want to qualify I've got to take almost half an hour off my PB.

If I'm ever going to get there I've got to up my game (whilst still having fun). I've got to set myself a plan, I've got to be more focussed and more determined than ever before. I've got to have my club mates supporting me (no problems on that front). I've got to challenge myself and I've got to increase my speed (the scariest prospect of all). One of my life mantras is "what doesn't challenge you doesn't change you". Perfectly apt.

I just keep thinking and reminding myself, well I'm halfway there and I won't ever give up on my dreams. Look how far I've run in such a short space of time.

I now consider myself to be a runner and I can now call myself an ultra-runner at that. Anything is possible. Continue to live your dreams.



THE VIRTUAL COMRADES MARATHON: 14 JUNE 2020 (45km)

(by Jadwiga Brzask-Makiela)

Three days after my first ultra-run – 45km (28 miles) – a virtual race from South Africa – I am sitting and recalling it as I want to remember what I felt and thought on this first one. Years down the line I may be recalling more of ultras or I may not run at all – who knows?

I ran it in 6 hours and 5 minutes, so not fast at all, with no specific training preparation, on just two 20-mile trail runs in the previous 2 months, twice a week strength and conditioning classes with Beatrice Schaer, once a week yoga class and running short (2-5 miles) runs 3-4 times a week (one of them longer). That was my routine for lockdown.

But why?

Why did I decide to run my first ultra?

I only signed up for it about a week before the event, after seeing Michelle enquiring about it and asking Debra about her arrangements (Debra has run it at least twice and is a big advocate of it in the club). I have read about the Comrades Marathon in several running books ("Your Pace or Mine" by Lisa Jackson; "The Rise of the Ultrarunners" by Adharanand Finn) and the running magazine "Runners World", and talked about it with Michelle (my running buddy and amazing, kind person, who is South African, but like me has been living in the UK for long time). Her mum told her to never enter it as it would have been too stressful to watch (it is screened on national TV as it is the equivalent of the London Marathon on BBC). Comrades is famous for its strict cut off time – no mercy, no arguments, no medals, regardless if you are 2 meters or 2 miles away from the finish.

Oh! And a small detail: the full, real Comrades is 90 km long (56 miles) – 2 marathons and a bit! There is a qualifying time to enter as well.

All things considered, with only one marathon under my belt, I was not thinking that Comrades was something I wanted to do this year or even next. The plan for this year was Copenhagen Marathon in May and the London Ultra 55km in June. Both of these races were cancelled quite early on in lockdown, so my training had completely fallen apart without Striders support and organised long training runs. It all got a bit too much – I switched focus

completely to running for pleasure and exploring local trails, started running in the morning just a couple of miles here and there to set me up for a day by my desk and lack of movement.

Then May came with the Centurion challenge of 100, 50 miles or other distances running during a week, promoted and encouraged by Ally and her amazing pictures. It was great to read other people's stories and progress over the week.

Comrades was always going to be more for Michelle than it was for me, and I was very happy to take second place. It is her home country's most famous race, a very old race with lots of history behind it, where the medals have their own names (after previous winning athletes) and are different depending on what time you cross the finish line. For me, right now, it was just a long run to accompany my best friend during this epic run. After reading the description and entering I knew I had 12 hours to finish the distance and upload my time.

Michelle oozed strength and confidence; the week before the run we had decided to do a 13-mile trail run and the weather was glorious.

On the day itself the meeting point and start was East Croydon station at 8 am. We had agreed to roughly follow the Wandle route, which we knew from our marathon training runs with Striders. It is flat, mostly shaded and doesn't have too many main roads to cross. Michelle was more organised and had her friend Amy meet us by the entrance to Morden Hall Park with water at the 10 km mark. I had 2 litres with me, but by the time we met Amy, I had already drunk 0.5 litre. She kindly topped my water up. It would have to last until we made our way back to the park, as we had both arranged for our husbands to meet us on the return leg with supplies and water. It was a warm day.

I was nervous and anxious about the run. My stomach was in twists for a good 10k if not 10 miles. I tried to breathe deeply to calm myself down. We started to run and chat, which was lovely after so many months of solitary running, but I was not used to keeping that pace and talk at the same time; soon my breathing got laboured so I decided to shut up and follow Michelle. She was looking strong and set the pace, 10km in about 1h 15min, which should be comfortable – it wasn't, but it was right on the target for her 5-hour marathon time. I knew I was nowhere near my speed from last year's London marathon (5h 3min) and that this pace was not going to be possible for me to keep for the next 35km (22 miles).

After the water top-up from Amy, off we went through the park. The morning was glorious, sunny with some clouds, perfect picnic weather, and the park was getting busy with families, bikers and walkers enjoying it. The paths are wide enough to accommodate that and keep our distance from others.

As we were leaving Morden Hall Park near the tram line, we heard a female voice shout (she must have spotted our numbers) "are you doing Comrades?". "Yes!" was our response "me too!" she said, we shouted "well done!" to each other and carried on. That lifted our spirits and made me smile carrying along the River Wandle path. After Deen City Farm and the busy crossing in Merton it gets quieter and peaceful: birds singing, water humming, the greenery is wild and not so well maintained until Earlsfield. Then we hit St George's Park in Wandsworth, just before the not-so-salubrious back streets of factories and storage places as Wandle reaches the Thames. At this point on my suggestion was that instead of going right towards Clapham Junction station we turn left to follow the Thames Path towards Putney Bridge and Barnes. The plan was to carry on until we hit the halfway mark, 23km (14.5 mile). It was busy, busy, busy – we pass the open rowing clubs, the intoxicating smell of Lush soaps, crêpe takeaways, queues for coffee (at an outdoor stand attached to a minivan), and plenty of people enjoying a lovely Sunday morning by the river.

23km done – U-turn – I had to sit down on the fallen big tree, how convenient! I changed my full water bottles to the front, downing a gel. Michelle was already ahead of me, walking; it was time for me to get up – I was walking, still catching my breath, but could see her already further – I needed to pick up my legs – just a slow jog to catch her – she was still walking, waiting for me. I was catching up with her and we went together again, back the way we came, passing boats, people, dogs and Putney Bridge. In Wandsworth Park another shout out of support and encouragement from another couple of ladies with Comrades numbers on their tops (white background colours, while ours were blue, I guess to distinguish the distance) speeding their way through perhaps doing 10k or 5k; that made us smile again.

Back on the Wandle path, the miles are ticking by: 17, 18, 19, 20. Before Deen City Farm was an ice cream van and my running turned into walking as I was trying to down another gel, hoping for more energy. I had also run out of water now. I let Michelle go, she looked strong, she was right on target and I so hoped she would achieve a marathon PB. When she left my sight, I mentally cut the string pulling me to chase her (someone told me that saying once and I did not understand it until that day). I did not want Michelle to wait for me, to sacrifice her run to pull me with her. I wanted her to run her best marathon, her best race, the best run for how strong she felt.

I knew I would finish it no matter what, even if I had to walk 6 miles; the pace did not matter to me, my aim was to finish this run. Letting her go I could concentrate on my pace, my body and where I was – and between 20 and 22 miles I was not in a great place. Aching and tired, I needed water, I had drunk all 2.5 liters. Walking and jogging, I finally reached my husband in Morden Hall Park, 22 miles in. I topped up my water a litre and a half, drank a pint of electrolyte drink; that picked me up I couldn't face any food (it was too warm?), I had a 10-15 min break, but I did not stop the watch – a 26 minute mile; I needed that break. I do sweat a lot and possibly the electrolyte drink saved me – I picked up – I felt a bit better, still too tired to run, but started to walk. I was quite low, I needed the help of other runners – I messaged our Striders group – the messages started to pop on my watch and despite them being just a line or two on the watch, that was exactly what my soul needed. I smiled to myself, so grateful for that wonderful community, and started to run along the river towards Beddington Park, where according to Mark, Michelle's husband, she would meet me.

Before I reached Beddington Park I saw Michelle coming towards me. I thought she had finished by now, but no, she had had her own dark place after 24 miles and now had less than 1 km to finish, while I had another mile to go. We ran together to her finish, mostly me now chatting, she stopped and walked while I ran around the park for a bit and then headed towards Croydon. Finally, I clocked 28 miles (45km) – this was a bit over just to be sure that Strava did not cut the distance during the upload. Just over 6 hours of running and walking.

It was hard but not impossible; afterwards I vowed never to run such a distance without better preparation. Completing this distance was a mental boost, and not to sound too cocky, I could have run another 5km and finished 50km if I wanted to, knowing that the legs feel as tired at 20 miles as they do at 28 miles. Another point was appreciating organised events for marathon and longer distances, where carrying all your supplies for the duration is just not possible. But we did not want to break the run with unnecessary stops at the shops and most likely queueing, so husbands and a friend got involved. I drank 4.5 litres of liquids, if I could have I would have had 5 litres, but carrying such quantities would have slowed and tired me even more.

Michelle caught up with me, both of us walking back to Croydon and marvelling at our achievement, congratulating each other, me reading her the messages I had received from the other Striders.

My first Ultra done!

IT'S ONLY 5K BUT I LIKE IT

(by Susan Haynes, our Wellington correspondent
– with apologies to the Rolling Stones)



I registered for parkrun in 2011, when Lloyd parkrun began. By the time I left the UK in January 2013, I had run a grand total of 4 parkruns. Despite the fact that I could fall out of bed at 8:30 and still make the start in plenty of time.

In those days I was the running equivalent of a 1980s supermodel – I didn't get out of bed for less than 10K (there the supermodel similarities end). I was a long-distance runner and didn't see the point of getting my kit dirty for 5K. And, of course, the Lloyd parkrun course is a bit hilly. And running 5K makes your lungs burst.

Soon after arriving in New Zealand, I was hit with an osteoarthritis diagnosis and advised not to run again. At all. Ever.

After a few months of not running and being incredibly miserable (not to mention driving my husband crazy; apparently it was like living with a caged tiger) I got a second opinion from a specialist. Her name was Susan and she was British. This was only ever going to go well.

Her advice was to keep running, build up the distance slowly and listen to my body. It would tell me if I was pushing too hard. This is, of course, the same advice I'd give someone who is taking up running. It was about time I started listening. She told me that my mental health was just as important as my physical health when it came to dealing with the arthritis. And running is certainly good for my mental health.

I started to think about why this was and what it was about running that stopped me from being like a caged tiger. A large part of my enjoyment of running comes from having company. I felt too out of condition to join a club at this point. So where else could I run with others? Ahh, yes....and so my love affair with parkrun began.

Wellington has two parkruns: Lower Hutt, which was the first parkrun in New Zealand, and Porirua, which is my local parkrun. For reasons lost in the mists of time, I chose Lower Hutt parkrun over Porirua. I suspect the truth is that someone said Porirua was off road and uphill (the memory of Lloyd Park was still fresh) and "The Hutt" was fairly flat. It's about 10 miles from my house to Lower Hutt and our parkruns start an hour earlier here, so this meant a 6:45am wake up, for an 8am start. On a Saturday. In the middle of winter. It must be love.

I did my first NZ parkrun on 10 August 2013 after nearly 6 months off running. It wasn't quick but it was running and with a friendly, welcoming bunch of people. I've never looked back.

In the six-and-a-half years since then, I've run 160 parkruns, over 19 courses in NZ, the UK and Australia. Not as committed as some, I grant you, but impressive enough given my early reluctance. Just before going into lockdown for Covid-19, I completed my 164th parkrun (my 130th at Lower Hutt). I've chased the World's most southerly via Dunedin and Invercargill, both of which held the title at the time. I thought I'd clinched it with Invercargill, they couldn't start one further south, surely? (Thank you, Stanley in the Falkland Islands, for disabusing me of that notion). I'm also now a Run Director.

Though I've gone back to some distance work (not more than 21K), I still try to keep to my Saturday morning ritual, which now includes a swim and an even earlier start. I've made

friends and become part of the parkrun community. I've run in high wind, heavy rain and hot sun. Sometimes all three within the space of the same 5K. Some would say I have even become a "parkrun evangelist", persuading friends, colleagues, and even random strangers, to sign up. How do you know if someone does parkrun? They tell you and give you details of your local event. And yes, it's true, even my husband, Roy, does parkrun now. He's set himself the goal of walking every NZ parkrun at least once and he even talks about "PBs and course bests".

Not surprisingly, a lot of NZ parkrunners and volunteers are Brits. Pretty much every parkrun I've done in NZ and Australia has a least one ex-pat Run Director (there are two of us at Lower Hutt) and even in winter there'll be UK visitors. We've brought parkrun with us as and it's one of the best exports the UK has to offer. It does mean that you bump into people who quite often know your home parkrun and even some whose mother-in-law lives in the small town you grew up in (how does this always happen to me?).

I used to have a marathon bucket list. I now have a parkrun bucket list – Gisborne in NZ's Hawke's Bay (the World's most easterly), the one in San Francisco that goes under the Golden Gate, any one of the huge South African ones, the most westerly, the most northerly and that one in the Falklands...

Pre-Covid-19 we were planning to go to Otago for Easter. This meant we could bookend our stay with Wanaka and Queenstown parkruns – two of the most scenic NZ has to offer. This will have to wait a while, but we'll get there.

parkrun got me back to a sport I love (even if the distance still makes my lungs burst). I am both grateful to, and yes, evangelical about, it. There's a reason GPs prescribe it. It's brilliant. And I am ridiculously excited by the fact that New Zealand will host the first post-lockdown parkruns on 4 July.

Some New Zealand parkruns to try

New Zealand has 29 parkruns on some fantastic courses. Here's a quick low-down on some of them, should you ever find yourself in this part of the World at 8am on a Saturday morning:

Lower Hutt, Wellington – out-and-back along the river on a tarmac path, a couple of bumps and the friendliest crew in NZ (in my biased opinion). **Best for:** being NZ's friendliest parkrun, the Buzz Café's cheese scones and veggie shopping at the riverbank market.

Porirua, Wellington – nowhere near as bad as Lloyd Park! Off-road out-and-back through the bush. First half is a gradual uphill and then it's downhill all the way home. **Best for:** a manageable off-road experience.

Kapiti, north of Wellington – flat off-road and lovely route along the river. **Best for:** an off-road PB and Kapiti ice cream.

Woodside Trail, Greytown, Wairarapa – run on an old rail trail, with a slight incline on the way out. The old rails are still visible in places and were manufactured in Darlington! Feels like you are in the middle of nowhere. **Best for:** feeling like you are running in the wilderness, and a small field makes a Top 20 spot achievable.



Anderson Park, Napier – lap course around a flat park in NZ’s art deco capital. **Best for:** spotting the classic art deco dog – the greyhound.



Taupo, Waikato – my most scenic parkrun so far. Undulating path by the lake with views of Mt Ruapehu and Mt Ngauruhoe on a clear day. This run is usually so packed with tourists, the RD asks if there are any locals rather than visitors. **Best for:** views.



Puarenga, Rotorua, Bay of Plenty – a truly bizarre running experience. Two laps on a compacted gravel path through a geothermal landscape complete with steaming craters and occasional views of Lake Rotorua. **Best for:** feeling like you’re running on the moon.

East End, New Plymouth, Taranaki – flat course by the sea and across a bridge shaped like a whale’s rib cage with views of Mt Taranaki (if it’s not raining). **Best for:** funky bridges and sea air.

Blenheim, Marlborough, South Island – fast and flat out-and-back on a brick path by the river. **Best for:** PBs and post-run wineries.

Hagley Park, Christchurch – flat figure-of-eight (with a few odd bits) around Christchurch’s pretty riverside park. **Best for:** being close to the city centre.

Dunedin, Otago – possibly NZ’s toughest parkrun. Two laps of the Botanic Gardens including the “Stairs of Despair”. **Best for:** a challenge and rewarding yourself with Otago beer and wine.

Invercargill, Southland – round a formal park in NZ’s southernmost city. Has the benefit of starting at 9am in winter. **Best for:** small, friendly field and Bluff oysters.

COMPETITIVE HIGHLIGHTS: JULY – AUGUST 2020

Because of the coronavirus pandemic, both the Surrey Road League and the Southern Veterans League were cancelled for the 2020 season.

Susan Haynes became the first Strider to complete a parkrun since the coronavirus lockdown began in March, when she competed in the Lower Hutt parkrun in New Zealand on Saturday 4 July. Susan was the fourteenth woman to finish, placing 84th out of a total of 227 finishers, and covering the five-kilometre course in a new personal best of 26 minutes 39 seconds. New Zealand was the first country to recommence its parkruns.

Kara Boaks had an excellent run to be the first woman to finish the Vanguard Way Marathon, starting and finishing in Lloyd Park, on Sunday 2 August. She ran strongly to finish 13th overall, completing the hilly course in 4 hours 33 minutes 03 seconds. Her club colleague Rachel Lindley also ran well to be the second woman to finish, placing 19th overall in 4 hours 45 minutes 03. Belinda Carroll was the 15th woman to finish (6:40:12) with Michelle Klein 16th (6:40:14) and Jadwiga Brzask-Makiela 17th (7:02:07). Striders' men were led by Michael Davis who finished ninth overall, recording 4 hours 23 minutes 58, while Martin Filer was 18th in 4 hours 38 minutes 57. There were a total of 63 finishers.

Striders dominated the Vanguard Way Half-Marathon, which was held in conjunction with the longer event. They had the first man, the first woman, and seven of the first nine finishers. Alastair Falconer gained an outstanding win, finishing more than sixteen minutes ahead of his nearest rival in a new course record of 91 minutes 05 seconds. Club colleague Niamh Vincent was the first woman to finish, producing an excellent run to place third overall in 1 hour 47 minutes 13 seconds. Conor O'Hara-Barrett was fourth (1:47:52) with John O'Mahony fifth (1:52:57), Darren Woods sixth (1:53:37) and Rotimi Oyegunle eighth (1:59:01). Steve Massey was the first over-50 to finish, placing ninth overall in 1 hour 59 minutes 30, while Alan Purchase was second in the over-60 category, placing 26th overall (2:20:54). Claire Mitchell was the seventh woman to finish, placing 27th overall (2:25:07). Striders had 15 of the 51 finishers.

Because of the coronavirus pandemic, England Athletics restricted track races to a maximum of six runners, and imposed a maximum distance of 3000 metres (to prevent runners from being in 'close contact' for more than 15 minutes). The Netherlands adopted a more liberal attitude, and at Utrecht on Friday 7 August, James Rhodes placed 14th in the 5000 metres in a lifetime best of 16 minutes 50.91 seconds.

In the North Downs Way 100-mile race on Saturday 8 August, from Farnham in Surrey to Ashford in Kent, Debra Bourne had an excellent run to be the fourth woman to finish, winning the W50 category and finishing 22nd overall in 24 hours 43 minutes 22 seconds. Ally Whitlock also ran well to be the sixth woman to finish, placing 48th overall (26:45:09). For Striders' men, Tatsuya Okamoto was 43rd (26:34:29). The race was held in very hot conditions, and only 107 of the 235 starters managed to finish.

In the Belgrave Harriers Endurance Night series of 3000 metre races at Battersea Park on Wednesday 12 August, James Rhodes placed 32nd overall (out of 48 competitors) in a lifetime best of 9 minutes 58.64 seconds, while club colleague Andrew Aitken was 35th in 10 minutes 13.04. At the Blackheath & Bromley Open Meeting, at Norman Park on Saturday 22 August, James Rhodes won his heat of the 400 metres in a new lifetime best of 58.86 seconds. And at Canterbury on Sunday 30 August, James ran a lifetime best of 2 minutes 13.08 seconds for 800 metres.

20 YEARS AGO: LOCAL ATHLETICS IN AUTUMN 2000

The ninth annual 'Switchback' race was held on 23 September. Tony Harran of Herne Hill won in 27 minutes 59 seconds (the course was slightly short of five miles, and was lengthened to the correct distance in 2002). Striders were led by Peter Yarlett, who placed fourth in 30 minutes 33. John McGilvray was fifth (31:09) and Nigel Davidson eighth (31:34). The first runner to finish who was not a member of an athletic club was former cyclist David Batten, who placed tenth (31:54). After the race he was persuaded to join Striders.

The East Surrey League held its annual cross-country relay at Wimbledon on 7 October. Box Hill Racers won, while Striders placed sixth. Our team comprised Gerry Crispie (11:08), Nigel Davidson (11:04), Ken Low (11:57) and John McGilvray (12:12). Our B team placed 12th, with Jane Lansdown running 11:59 on the second leg.

The Surrey Women's Cross-Country League began its 22nd season with a match at Tilford on 14 October. This was a memorable day for Striders' women who won the Division Two match, recording our first ever victory since joining the league in 1988. Our team was led by Jane Lansdown who placed second, beaten only by Sally Young of Dorking. Our second finisher was new member Sarah Bowen, and our other scorers were Diane Ballard, Elene Kayum and Kate Potter. We finished with 89 points, well clear of nearest rivals Stragglers (135), Reigate Priory (136) and Dorking (139).

On the same day Striders' men placed fourth in their Division Three match at Richmond Park. Our first finisher was Gerry Crispie who placed tenth, covering the five-mile course in 30 minutes 36 seconds. He was followed by Eric Parker (13th, 30:42); Tony Sheppard (14th, 30:47); Nigel Davidson (27th, 31:33) and Neil Furze (28th, 31:45).

The 19th Croydon 10K took place on the following day. Stuart Major of South London Harriers gained an easy win in 32 minutes 19 seconds. The first woman was Rosalind Lewis of Shaftesbury-Barnet who placed 16th overall in 37 minutes 35. Most of Striders' fastest runners chose to miss the race because of the previous day's cross-country. The first Strider to finish was Alan Dolton who placed 22nd in 39 minutes 11, just five seconds ahead of club colleague Jane Lansdown, who was the second woman to finish.

The East Surrey League held its annual cross-country race at Lloyd Park on 28 October. Striders placed sixth, one place ahead of local rivals Croydon Harriers. Tony Sheppard was 13th with Neil Furze 19th, John Kirby 34th and Jane Lansdown 38th.

In the Jersey Half-Marathon on 5 November, Jane Lansdown was second in the women's race in a personal best of exactly 88 minutes, which was the fastest time by a female Strider since 1988. Club colleague Alan Dolton was only just in front of her, running 87 minutes 54.

The second Surrey Cross-Country League Division Three match took place on 18 November at Wimbledon Common. Striders placed sixth. Our first finisher was Tony Sheppard, followed by Eric Parker, John Kirby, Dave Bell and Colin Cotton.

The second Surrey Women's Cross-Country League Division Two match took place at Lightwater on 2 December. Jane Lansdown had an excellent run to win the Division Two race. Diane Ballard also ran well to place 14th. Our other scorers were Kate Potter, Elene Kayum and Linda Daniel. We placed second in the match, behind Dorking. This kept us on top of the Division Two table with 31 points, ahead of Dorking (29), Reigate Priory (28) and Stragglers (28). On the following day Jane travelled to Margate to compete in the Thanet 10 mile road race, and placed third in the women's race in a club record of 64 minutes 56.

10 YEARS AGO: LOCAL ATHLETICS IN AUTUMN 2010

Striders staged the 19th annual Switchback cross-country race on 26 September. The race was won by Abdi Madar of Newham, who won in a new course record of 27 minutes 21 (this record was subsequently beaten by Mike Cummings of Herne Hill in 2015). For Striders, Lee Flanagan ran well to place third in 28 minutes 40, with Richard Lee-Smith seventh (29:46). The first woman to finish was Suzie Richards of Herne Hill who placed 15th overall in 31 minutes 18, which equalled the women's course record set by Meredith Pannett of Dulwich in 2003. Striders' Steph Upton had an excellent run to place third in 35 minutes 03.

On 9 October Striders' men placed sixth in the Surrey Cross-Country League Division Two match on our home course at Lloyd Park. They were led by Lee Flanagan who placed ninth of the 162 finishers, covering the undulating five-mile course in 31 minutes 06. Steve Starvis also ran well to place 16th (31:39) with Justin Macenhill not far behind in 23rd (31:55). Iain Harrison was 41st (33:11) with Richard Lee-Smith 44th (33:21) and Damian Macenhill 47th (33:47). Dan Jewell placed 51st (34:04) with Lee Wadsworth 68th (34:37), Taylor Huggins 75th (35:00) and Matt Chapman completing the scoring team in 79th (35:11).

Meanwhile Striders' women were competing in Division One of the Surrey Women's League at Richmond Park. They were led by Helen Furze who ran well to place 35th of the 176 finishers, covering the four-mile course in 28 minutes 47 seconds. Steph Upton also ran well for 68th (30:32), with Suzy Yates 79th (31:08), Alice Ewen 100th (32:36) and Hannah Musk 117th (34:00). This placed Striders 14th of the 15 Division One clubs.

The 35th Croydon 10K took place on 10 October. Solomon Mehretab of London Heathside won in 30 minutes 54. Croydon Harriers had the next two finishers in Peter Chambers and David White, while Striders' Lee Flanagan was fourth (35:08). The first woman to finish was Phyllis Flynn of Stragglers (41:30), with Striders' Helen Furze second (41:44).

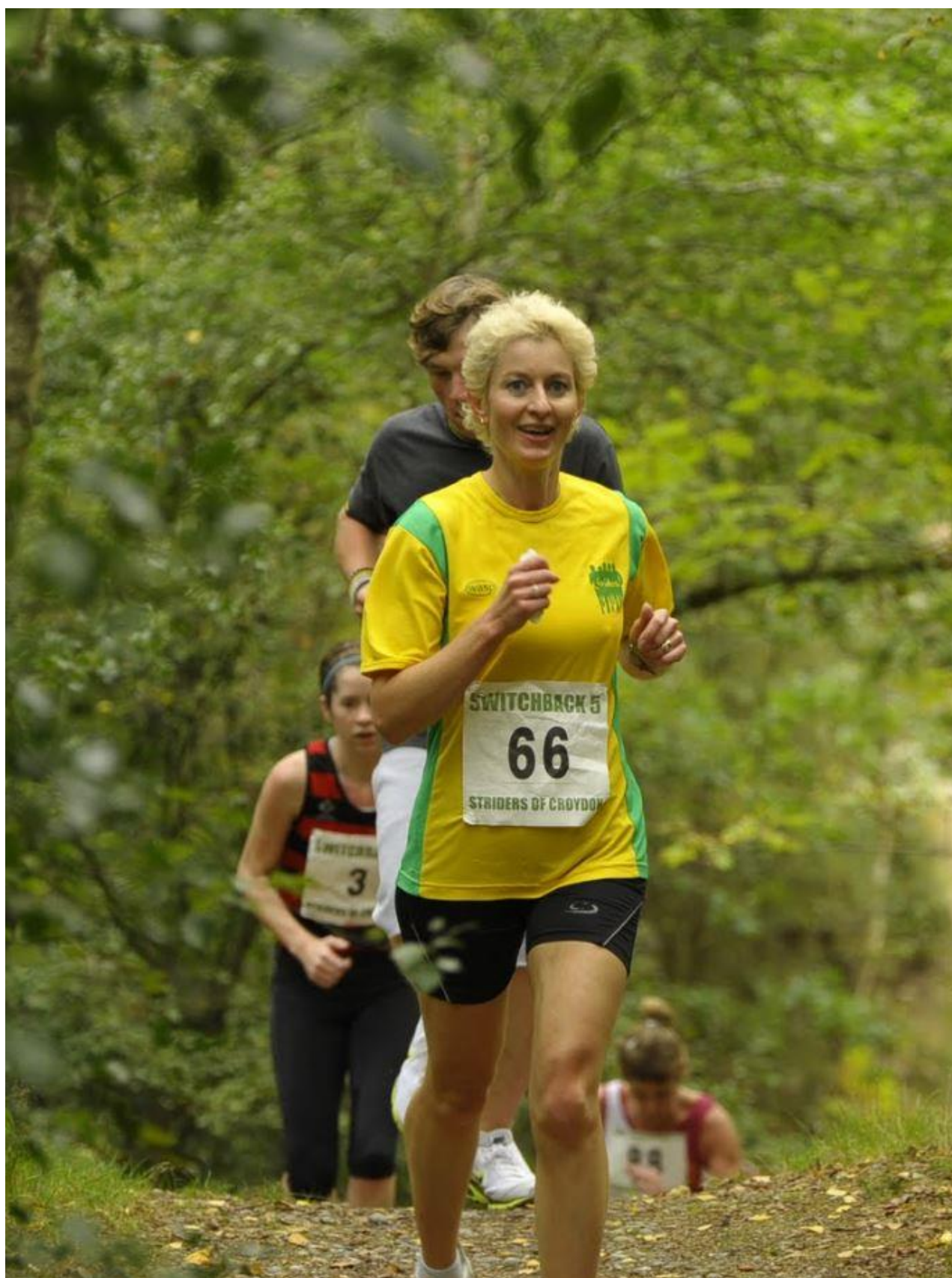
The Surrey Veterans Cross-Country Championships took place at Richmond Park on 16 October. Striders' only medallist was Kevin Burnett who placed second in the over-70 race.

Following the success of the parkrun at Roundshaw Downs, 23 October saw the first weekly parkrun in Lloyd Park. There were 48 finishers, led by Justin Macenhill who ran 18 minutes 25 seconds. Club colleague Kevin Burnett was the oldest finisher, recording 35 minutes 09.

Striders placed third out of 18 teams in the East Surrey League's cross-country race at Lloyd Park on 30 October. Justin Macenhill ran well to place seventh of the 91 finishers, covering the undulating five-mile course in 32 minutes 10 seconds. Tyler O'Callaghan finished 11th in 32 minutes 47, with Iain Harrison 14th (33:33) and Mick Turner 22nd (34:40).

Striders placed fifth of nine clubs in the Surrey League Division Two match at Wimbledon on 13 November. They were led by Lee Flanagan who placed ninth in 27 minutes 37, just one place and one second ahead of club colleague Duncan Lancashire. Steve Starvis also ran well to place 16th (28:02) with Justin Macenhill 24th (28:45), Iain Harrison 39th (29:44) and Damian Macenhill 47th (30:09). Taylor Huggins was 52nd (30:19), Simon Ambrosi 65th (30:51), Richard Lee-Smith 66th (30:52) and Mick Turner 71st (31:02).

For Striders' women, Helen Furze ran well to place 25th in the Surrey Women's League Division One race at Dorking. She covered the undulating six-kilometre course in 24 minutes 47. Steph Upton was 50th (26:06) with Josephine Thompson 73rd (27:01), Alice Ewen 104th (28:57) and Hannah Musk 124th (30:12). Sadly Striders finished last of the fifteen Division One clubs.



Steph Upton in the 2010 Switchback

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