

You've come a long way, baby by Debbie Worthington

After a summer of running, jumping and throwing, a 10 year old girl leaves the stadium on a cold Autumn evening. With the floodlights behind her, she makes her way to the dark, misty expanse of the playing fields, ready for her first road race with the Rotherham Harriers. Starting to stretch as instructed, she reaches down to the ground and promptly puts her hand in some doggy deposits... a potent portent of her future distance running prowess. In floods of tears, she begs to return to the safety (and toilets) of the stadium, but the race is about to begin; cleaned up with spit and a tissue, she starts her running journey.

At the back of the pack, she feels lonely and scared - "you're not supposed to be out on your own in the dark" she thinks. As she gets to the main road it seems brighter and safer, but her new foe is the hill. At the top, parents are waiting and more tears spill - why can't she take the short cut back down to the stadium and end this torture? A few weeks later she's forced to attend the awards evening, where she gets her Four Star Athletic Award certificate, never to return to the Harriers again.

Fast forward almost 30 years and it's the start of another race, only a kilometre from the first... the return of the Rotherham 10k in 2018. The sun is shining, friends and family are waiting and it's a glorious day in Clifton Park. After a not so glorious return to running in 2014, a rollercoaster of injuries have got in the way of progress... so recovering from a torn hamstring, she sets off once again around her old stomping ground.

Down past the old Arts Centre where she took part in teenage plays (now a Tesco), quickly through Canklow (don't loiter, it hasn't changed!), through All Saints square in front of the impressive Rotherham Minster for a quick drink. Then the hills begin... up past the front of the Museum (or Zoomeum as it was known back in the day), past the doctors (where she went with childhood tonsillitis and adolescent acne) and then up that same hill she ran up all those years ago.

Since then she's traipsed up that hill barefoot, after nights of underage drinking and spending taxi money on chips 'n' cheese, and its time to walk once again, chatting to some other ladies who think it's far too hot for excessive exertion! Soon she's passing that little gap in the wall which leads down to the stadium, but once again, she's taking the long way around. Across the playing fields, through the houses where the locals cheer on the runners, and back into the leafy park.

The finish straight is now familiar from Rotherham parkrun, but then and there the finish seems daunting and distant. At the end her husband and family are waiting and cheering her in, smiles all round. They chat and rehydrate... we've all come a long way, and no distance at all.

Debbie Worthington, May 2020

