

In the Day

By Colin Tanswell

Sometime ago, Ken Bingley & I were manning a drinks station at a club handicap. The opportunity arose to share memories of running fifty years ago!

Specialist running shoes were unheard of. I remember running in 'Dunlop Green Flash' plimsolls. The soles were almost indestructible but the tops soon rotted from sweat or water. Designer road/cross-country shoes did not become readily available until the early 60's. Initially I ran cross-country in flat plimsolls, then ones with ribbed soles. I ran my first road race (10 miles) in RAF plimsolls.

Warming up/down were unheard of, although we did rub our muscles with embrocation. The smell was awful, especially in confined spaces. Races were seasonal. Cross-country in winter, road relays in spring and track in summer, until we became interested in road races which were then few in number. Races were mainly inter-club matches or area/national championships. Changing rooms were non-existent for cross-country. We returned home sweat stained and mud spattered. Cross-country was over demanding courses involving often hills, ploughed fields, stiles & water crossings. In major championships, tin baths might be provided in the open air. The water was cold and dirty by the time the backmarkers arrived!

Coaching was by self-help. Advice from the one specialist magazine available, or books. Running standards were surprisingly high in comparison with today. A ten mile time of 60 minutes was considered the norm and anything much slower was likely to incur the displeasure of the officials/fellow competitors awaiting the results. No medical support was available apart from the local GP who was only interested in getting you back to work. Well-meaning advice from friends or colleagues was seldom helpful and could be counterproductive.

I timed my training runs using an ordinary watch, with no second hand. I had an ex WD stopwatch, which had to be carried in the hand and was therefore not convenient for long runs or interval work.

Race fields were generally small. The National CC Championships over nine miles, I ran in six, was the largest with barely 1000 runners. The Eastern Counties would have had less than 100 in the Senior race with a few more in the Juniors & Youths. No women in those days!

Kit was basic, no lightweight materials; tracksuits were heavy woollen material vests and shorts were cotton. Transport to races was a problem with public transport a rare possibility. We travelled to the National CC in Blackpool by chartered train or hired coaches sometimes, but it was mainly down to fellow club mates, who had their own transport to share. In my early days I travelled by motor scooter to Bedford (10 miles each way) once a week for club training.

Colin Tanswell, August 2020