

7. The Long-Distance Runner

They stumble that run fast (Romeo and Juliet)

Tring Running Club embraces all forms of the sport based on covering the ground on two feet – road racing, cross country, fell running. Many members start to run with the club with the aim of improving fitness alongside like-minded individuals. Once the first 5k is done, runners often advance to a 10k and even to the half marathon distance. Some can't resist the challenge of the full 26-mile marathon but there are a minority who, literally, don't stop there. Ultra-distance running embraces any distance over 26 miles and often takes place across remote and hilly locations.

Club member Peter Hamson is one of our most experienced ultra-runners and has contributed much of the content in this chapter. Peter ran in the very first London Marathon and here he recalls the event:

When Tring Jogging Club was founded in Spring 1981 it was inspired by the running boom of the time caused to a great extent by the running of the first London Marathon in April 1981. I remember when the first London Marathon was announced most runners thought it would not catch on. It had been modelled on the New York marathon which had been going for a few years but surely it would not catch on here. They may get a few hundred runners but that would be all.

In the event there were over 7000. I was one of them (but not running for Tring RC in those days). I still remember it was a damp and miserable day but from that day on marathon running took off. It was no longer an event solely for the elite but for the masses as well.

One year when I got home from the London Marathon I watched the highlights on television and I remember seeing some poor runner struggling to cover the last few yards to the finish. He was trying to finish in under three hours but his legs just would not support him any longer. He kept trying to stand up but his legs just went from underneath him. After several minutes he managed to cross the finish line but by then the three-hour target had slipped away. I forgot about the incident for the next twenty years until I joined Tring Running Club when I discovered the runner was actually from TRC – it was our very own Bob Garland. (I must add that since that first attempt he did manage to break three hours.)

1980s ultra-distance running – Chris Dove's achievements

As well as marathon running there has always been a tradition of ultra-distance running within the club. Probably our most successful ultra-runner was one of the early members of the club, Chris Dove. Chris competed in the once-famous 53-mile 'London to Brighton' road race. In its day this was the flagship event of the Road Runners Club which was effectively the governing body of long-distance road running at the time. Several TRC runners have since completed the London to Brighton but none have got near Chris's time of 6 hours 43 minutes.

Chris also completed several 100km events. His 12-hour time trial involved running round a circuit of a Tesco car park for 12 hours. This might sound a little boring but in fact these sorts of events can be very sociable events. You can always see your fellow competitors, you have got plenty of time for a chat, and there is always someone to run with even though they are probably not on the same lap as you. You experience a multitude of emotions during an ultra-distance event but one that you never experience is boredom! A more detailed account of Chris's ultra-running is in Appendix C.

1990s ultra-distance running – from Mike Gaunt onwards

After Chris's period there was probably a bit of a lull in ultra-running but it wasn't long before Mike Gaunt came along. Mike had run many marathons and decided it was time to move up to ultras. His first ultra was in 1997 and was from Nottingham to Grantham – a 33-mile race mostly along soft grass track alongside a canal. Mike Mitchell and Bill Salkeld also ran. His next ultra was the 34-mile Dartmoor Discovery in June 2000 followed by the 55-mile London to Brighton in October that year.

The following year saw him at the Comrades Marathon in South Africa. This is the world's largest and oldest ultramarathon race. It is an annual event of about 56 miles and attracts over 10,000 runners. For atmosphere and crowd support it betters the London Marathon by a considerable margin. He enjoyed it so much he went on to make the 11,000-mile journey to compete again in 2002 and 2003.

In 2001 Colin Rees and Bill Salkeld also ran the London to Brighton. They chose the wettest year on record to attempt the run but still completed the event in under 10 hours. In 2002 the feat was also achieved by Tom Griffin, who also completed in under 10 hours.

In 2004 Colin Rees turned 60 and his first race as a vet 60 was the London Marathon where he came second place in his age group in a time of 3 hours 2 minutes and 40 seconds. This was a stunning run from Colin and must surely have been the best placing for any Tring runner in such a high-profile road race.

Colin hadn't finished with ultramarathons yet. In 2004 he too completed the Comrades Marathon. A full account is in Appendix C.

LDWA events

In 2002 Peter Hamson joined Tring Running Club. Peter was already an experienced ultra-runner having competed in several 24-hour road and track races and many times in the national ultra-trail running championships which were held along the South Downs Way from Petersfield to Eastbourne. (This event no longer exists but the ultra-trail running championships have been incorporated into the Ridgeway Challenge – more about that later.)

Peter also had a history of competing in LDWA (Long Distance Walkers Association) events. These are not races but challenge events which can be run or walked. They

are off-road events and you are normally supplied with a written route description which must be followed very carefully if you want to stay on the correct route. More recently they also supply a GPS file which can be loaded onto a Garmin which makes navigating considerably easier although this is considered to be cheating by the old timers. The distances range from 26 miles to an annual 100-mile event.

In 2003, Brian Layton joined Tring Running Club. He came more from a Mountain Marathon background and was described in a newsletter as 'Mountain Marathon Man' but had also competed in LDWA events.

From then on the LDWA 100 became a major event in the annual calendar for several members of the club. In 2004 Peter and Brian were joined by Mike Gaunt for the Exmoor 100. They all successfully completed and Mike was delighted to complete his first 100. His account of the event is given in Appendix C. A year later he completed the Chiltern 100 in a time which he claimed was a PB by 7 hours.

Since then, the list of TRC members who have completed an LDWA 100 has grown and now includes Colin Rees, Mike Gaunt, Dave Sawyer, John Manning, Brian Layton, Tom Griffin, Peter Hamson, Kim Reed, Tony Hill and Steve Mayne. Brian and Peter have both completed 20 100s and Tony has completed 11.

The LDWA 100s are held in different parts of the country each year. There are other 100-milers in which club members have participated, notably the Lakeland 100. Each 100 brings its own challenges but the overriding memories are the camaraderie among the competitors, the friendly support at checkpoints where you just sit down and are waited on by volunteers who bring you food and drink. Then, of course, there are nights to go through and the relief when dawn breaks with the freshness of the early morning. The aches, pains and blisters are usually soon forgotten as are the times when it rained non-stop for 24 hours, the long never-ending tracks, the exhaustion and lack of sleep!

The Ridgeway Challenge

Away from LDWA events the most popular ultra within the club is the Ridgeway Challenge trail race. This is an 86-mile event covering the complete distance of the Ridgeway National Trail, starting at Ivinghoe Beacon and finishing in Avebury. It is also the Trail Runners Association National Championship which means it is very competitive at the sharp end. Several TRC members have completed the event (too many to mention all of them) but the most consistent are Brian Layton, Tony Hill and Kim Reed. Between them they have won several age category awards. The most notable performance was by Tom Sawyer in 2018. Much to the surprise of many, he won the race. Here's the TRC report:

Congratulations to Tom Sawyer on his amazing run to win the Ridgeway Ultra. That's the complete Ridgeway long distance path from Ivinghoe Beacon to Avebury – a distance of 86 miles which he completed in 13hr 22mins. He was aiming for the club record which had previously been held by John Millen in a time of 15:41 which was achieved in 2013. When Tom passed us at checkpoint 2 he was within a minute of the leaders. I checked again later in the evening and he was just ahead. Looking good – or had he blown it. Obviously not, as he

gradually increased his lead to 13 minutes to finish at 1:22 Sunday morning. After finishing he said 'I didn't mean to go that fast. I was aiming for 15 hours.'

His dad, Dave Sawyer, also wrote:

I had the privilege of watching Tom cross the line, and anyone who has seen him at the end of a normal Wednesday night run would have assumed that was all he'd done! Apart from a loud expletive! I was at the 80 mile checkpoint when he came in, barking instructions about water bottles being filled. He spent less than a minute there before setting off, convinced he was being run down. When the second runner arrived he was obviously feeling it more and left much more slowly. The marshalls looked at me and said 'there's no way your lad is being caught, he's the winner'. And so it proved. Well done Tom, your incredible hard work in training has paid off. The bar has been raised.

Tom was not the only person to get special recognition, however. Brian Layton also got a special award and wrote the following:

For my part I had decided to take this one very steady as I had a very busy week ahead of me. Anyway, that's my story and I am definitely sticking to it. This was my 11th start at the event having started and finished the previous 10. On the start line for the championship race, the race director, Tim Mitchell, with about 3 minutes to go, presented me with a very fine silver plate commemorating my being the first person to finish 10 races. On the reverse he had very kindly had engraved all of my 10 results, including my 5 Championship M60 and M65 wins over the years. What a kind and thoughtful man.

Other ultra-performances

In the last few years popularity in ultra-distance running within the club has increased dramatically and there are too many performances to mention here. However, the following are especially notable.

In 2018 Kim Reed completed the 'Marathon Des Sables' – a 250km race over the Sahara Desert run in five stages over five days. This involved carrying all your own food to last you for the five days and a sleeping bag and any personal objects you required. It is hard to imagine what this must have been like. Five days running in sweltering heat, no showers at the end of the day, the only food being what you had carried from the start of the event. Kim wrote an excellent account of the event. The first page will give you a flavour and is in Appendix C.

TRC also has two members of the Centurions Walking Club. To be a member of this club you must have *walked* 100 miles in 24 hours. No running is allowed in their events. Anyone caught running is immediately disqualified. In 2014 Tony Hill joined the centurions by walking 100 miles round an athletics track in 23 hours 40 minutes. Kim Reed was also in the race but on this occasion after 24 hours she was less than two miles short. However, in 2016 Kim succeeded in joining the club by walking 100 miles round the streets of Redcar in 23 hours 25 minutes.

Also, in case readers are thinking Kim is the only female ultra-runner in the club, it should be noted that Becky Raftery has completed several ultras including the CCC and the Ridgeway Challenge. The CCC (Courmayeur, Champex, Chamonix) is the

second half of the famous UTMB (Ultra Tour De Mont Blanc) which is a circuit of Mont Blanc, passing through parts of France, Italy and Switzerland. In the Ridgeway Challenge she holds the ladies' club record of 20 hours 51 minutes. An account of her exploits is also in Appendix C.

In April 2021, club member Mark Innocenti ran 100 miles on the track in 12 hours 34 minutes and 51 seconds to become the ninth fastest GB runner of all time at the distance.

Finally, although not a club member at the time, it would be remiss not to record Rick Ansell's 1984 Scottish achievement. Over 100 days (with only eight rest days) Rick completed a fast, unsupported traverse of the mainland Munros entirely on foot, 1270 miles and 407,000 feet of ascent.

The Gauntlet Trophy

There is no award for the fastest ultra-distance runner but what we do have is the 'Gauntlet Trophy'. This was originally introduced by Mike Gaunt in 2005 and was called the 'Forrest Gump Trophy'. Three years later, to honour Mike, it was renamed the 'Gauntlet'. Originally there was just one trophy but in 2015 a second one was introduced, thanks to Brian Layton, so we now have a men's and a ladies' trophy.

These are awarded to the runners who have done the highest number of competitive miles in the year. One thing no one envisaged at the time was that the same person would win it every year. So far Brian Layton has won all of the men's competitions and Kim Reed has won all of the women's competitions. Not only that but the way things are going at the moment no one is going to beat them in the foreseeable future.

Both Brian's and Kim's mileages have been truly remarkable. A list of their 2018 events is included in Appendix C, as is Brian's own account of his ultra, ultra-distance running.

Marathon running

Ever since the club started, the London Marathon has always been popular with probably at least ten runners from the club competing each year. Off-road marathons are also popular, in particular the Beachy Head Marathon which gives the runners fantastic views over the South Downs and Seven Sisters.

There are far too many excellent marathon performances to mention here but no account of long-distance running within TRC would be complete without mentioning two runners.

Firstly, Lynda Hembury. Within her age group (F60) she is pretty well untouchable at any event she chooses to run. Probably her greatest achievement was in 2017 when she set a UK age best for the marathon in a time of 3hrs 14mins. This gave her an age-related score of 94.93%. A full account of her exploits can be found in Appendix C.

Secondly, Luke Delderfield who holds the club's marathon record in a time of 2hrs 33mins 06secs in the 2016 London Marathon. A list of his best performances can be found in Appendix C.

The Future

With more and more ultra events appearing on the race calendar there are endless opportunities for running ultras for anyone so inclined. The local company XRNG runs several local 50km events which are useful for anyone wanting a taste of an ultra.

Centurion Running offers a variety of quite local 50- and 100-milers, for example the North Downs, the South Downs and the Thames Path 100.

For anyone wanting something a bit more extreme there are a variety of 100-milers in mountainous areas, the most popular in this country being the Lakeland 100 or in the alps the Ultra Tour De Mont Blanc.

Finally, for anyone wanting to understand the mind of an ultra-distance runner they can read Tom Sawyer's excellent account of ultras in New Zealand at www.justonemilemore.wordpress.com