

A Bunch of Old Folks (+ some not so old) running in the hills...

Last weekend (18th August 2021) the **Mourne Runner's Vet55 team** took on the Cassie's Challenge relay. First vet team out of the blocks and as you may know the vet team must have an average age of at least 55 years. Well!!! This team with a few septuagenarians on the squad were rocketing skywards in the old average age so we brought a few young 50+s to settle things down (you know who you are).



So, a wet and claggy weekend in August (not many stories start this way – but we are in Ireland; the land of predictably unpredictable weather¹) just shy of 7AM as a group of Mourne Runners stood waiting (Ricky, Sam, Patricia, Beverley, and I) joined latterly by Alexander and Stewart. Still no sign of Team Captain and Leg 1 stalwart; David Bell.

But! With a few minutes to spare out he stepped from the warmth of Harry and Edna's kitchen, and I swear the air filled with a faint aroma of Ulster Fry (which David still fervently denies had anything to do with him) and I will of course give him the benefit of the doubt. After all no-one could have aced it up the road, towards Rourke's Park, as fast as David did, with a belly full of Cunningham's best pork sausages, black pudding nor a feed of fried soda bread.

Anyway, back to the event...

¹ Down in Annalong if you can't see Binnian it is raining. I you can see it is going to rain.



With 10 seconds to go the countdown began and precisely on the hour of 7AM David pounded out from the start, across the now familiar bridge at the head of the harbour and disappeared into the mist. The race was on and set times had to be adhered to or beaten. Now David being a modest man, when it comes to his own capability estimated a Leg 1 time of 2hr 25min. I, for one, knew he was well capable of much better and given the weather conditions a 2:10 Leg would have been a very respectable time. As it turns out David was handing over the bacon (oops! Meant baton 😊) to Harry; accompanied by Stephen Bickerstaff, as the clock was striking just 2:01. So, already we were up on the day and as you might imagine discussions of the clag and the rain were not too far from anyone's tongues. Oh, we do like a good grumble about the weather in this country (It's too cold, it's too hot; it's too wet it's too dry – no matter what it is never the right weather) but as was said to me out on the course *"not many good mountain running stories come in the 'good' weather"*. And while I am telling this version many of the participants (runners and support) each have their own versions of the

story to tell (if they wish to) – or maybe it is a case of what happens on a wet foggy day in the Mourne stays in the Mourne – more on that later... 😊

Besides while I have been distracting you with trivia Harry had been embroiled in his own personal battle with the elements and besides looking like a drowned rat (Photos) he pushed the bounds of what is possible among veteran runners to the brink and beyond, polishing off Leg 2 in an impressive time of 2:04, again ahead of estimated time.



And while many are oft heard to remark of us Vets *"that was impressive 'for their age'"* I am tempted to quote Binyon (out of context of course) *"Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn"*.

More about that later as I highlight some time comparisons. But maybe next time these guys will have to be pressed harder for more accurate estimated times or perhaps the adrenaline rush must be factored into the mix. Either way the Day was going better than planned and things were 'hotting up'. Well!



The Mather's duo: Denise first (Leg 3) and Dale (Leg 4) took the race all the way round to the Ott car park. Firstly, Denise headed off from the craggy slopes of Slievenamaddy across, Slievenabrock, Cascade River and Luke's Mountain before heading up to Slievenaglogh and onto more familiar ground. Descending off Corragh to Cove and Lamagan Denise set off down to Ben Crom dam to meet with and pass the baton to Dale.

Rumour has it that a bike share scheme was in operation between these two and while Dale had to cycle all the way up to the dam Denise is adamant that given the headwind her downhill freewheeling was still the harder end of the bargain. I will leave that for them to resolve. 😊

After what seemed an age (showery, no showers, showery) Dale appeared coming off Ott after a curious manoeuvre near Carn (remember I said *"what happens on a wet foggy day in the Mourne stays in the Mourne"* well...Case in point). Anyhow at this point it was 3:54PM just 4 minutes off

our scheduled time.

Ricky Cowan, barely taking the time to be in a team photoshoot (I know this may be a hard one to believe), determined to get us, not just back on track, but ahead of schedule - 4 minutes is a lifetime in adrenaline fuelled brains. So, as he careered up Slievenamuck from the Ott carpark it was hard to tell if that was Ricky's dust or fresh fog rolling in. Either way he was very quickly out of sight.

We bade farewell to recently joined club member Nicola (out sightseeing, when she came upon us) and headed round to see Ricky cross the road just above the Bann River crossing.

Some chance! As Patricia, Sharon and I were coming down from Spelga approaching the style he had crossed the road in just 54 minutes and was climbing steadily up Slievenamiskan.



Luckily Team Captain, David used diesel power and had gotten to the style in time to capture what must be one of the 'Action Shots of the Day'.



Ricky was never seen again until the weir crossing up the Hen track where he and Stewart were performing some odd handover ritual (involving rivers in spate) which none of the rest of us seem to be familiar with.



So with a ceremonial (and soon to become sacred ritual) passing of the baton over water Stewart accompanied in part by Sharon Dickenson sprinted up Rocky before heading off alone again (Naturally) [get that song out of your head if you can ☺] towards Pierce's Castle (not a real castle – Tourist Board might want to tell visitors that one) and off to the 4th bird; Eagle Mountain before making his way back to Deer's Meadow to finish the penultimate leg of the challenge in just 2:22, well I did keep reminding Stewart throughout the day that I wanted an early night and as little time as possible in the dark so true to his word Stewart arrived at the handover point at a little after 8PM.



Now as the relay race started at 7AM, an 8PM start is a long wait to keep the legs in check and then to charge them up fully for the final onslaught.

Being last brings its own unique challenges. Everyone to that point has given their all to either keep us on track or to get us back on it and between the efforts of Ricky and Stewart we were ahead again by just 4 minutes. Our targeted finishing time of 16:10 hours or 11:10PM finish time could yet be met if my 3-hour predicted time was accomplished.

But good things were about to happen. After hours of wind, rain and fog the evening was golden (photo) the sun shone down on me (and why not ☺) and as I followed the proverbial hare up onto Slieve Muck I wished I had my sunglasses – don't think that would have been a wish for any of my teammates ☺.



Although wet as hell underfoot at least it was dry and sunny overhead, which stretched daylight nicely for me. Headtorch, fully charged, stayed in the bag until I was hurtling down streams, that once were paths into Silent Valley – with all the water running downward to SV I can't fathom why it is so low but no matter it did leave some hairy descents. I've never been in a position where I couldn't fully trust my mudclaws on wet granite but coming down Slievenaglogh (the other one) care was definitely called for. The words "*Nice and Easy*" came into my mind (Thank you Harry). So down that safely it was out to Slievenagore back at race pace, touch the cairn and skedaddle. One last climb when I reach the Valley and then it's only Binnian ☺. In my head I have 15:15:30 to the summit, taking in Moolieve and Wee Binnian but today I wondered would the Scrabo race on the previous Thursday take its toll on me. Would I live to regret that showdown with Newcastle's Eugene McCann? But no! Somehow the legs felt looser than ever they had on a Binnian climb 15:13:24 brought me to the only foggy point of the evening (20 or so yards either side of the summit [that's 18 metres for the younger readers]. So, having summited the final peak; compass now pointing East, it was all to play for. All downhill from here! Right?

Quick glance at the time and while coming in under 16 hours was becoming a slim chance breaking the 3 hours was still in play. So off I tore, downwards towards Carrick Little carpark, using gravity as much as humanly possible and as I

approached the black gate a change of plan was emerging. You see Patricia was at Carrick Little waiting for me; initially I had asked her to bring my road shoes to that point for a quick change over, thinking that a minute or two spent changing footwear would pay dividends on the Oldtown Road/ Major's Hill stretch. However, with the ticking of the clock bringing us ever closer to the deadline I realised a gargantuan effort was called for once I hit the road section so, being safely off the mountains I hurriedly explained to Patricia;

“No shoes change but please take by bag. I’m fine and everything will work out OK” or some words to that effect. I am sure that was in my head and even if all that came out was a strange grunt it would have been polite, and Patricia will have gotten the sense of it. And with the reduced weight my steps felt lighter, and my pace became a little faster – well maybe that is a bit modest.

Cue massive boast alert!!!

Check out and compare the times on the Carrick Little Carpark to the Finish between Mourne Runner’s Open team and the V55s (Screen grab). Just 58 seconds between us. And I know Timmy may probably remind me he did change his shoes, but I am not buying that. It’s a shot in the arm for the older folk.

4 Mourne Runners			
Team Jonny Scott, Adam Cunningham, Ricky Hanna, Clive Bailey, Sam Herron, Gary Bailey, Timmy Johnston, Sub-Runner Garth McGimpsey			
Time Taken	Last Timed Location	Battery	
10:38:40	Annalong Harbour (Finish)	77%	
Carrick Little Car Park	Sat 17:22:40	00:15:58	
Annalong Harbour (Finish)	Sat 17:38:40	00:16:00	

16 Mourne Runners 2			
Team David Bell, Harry Teggarty, Denise Mathers, Dale Mathers, Ricky Cowan, Stewart Cunningham, Ciaran McAleenan			
Time Taken	Last Timed Location	Battery	
16:03:49	Annalong Harbour (Finish)	60%	
Carrick Little Car Park	Sat 22:46:51	00:31:54	
Annalong Harbour (Finish)	Sat 23:03:49	00:16:58	

Anyway, back to the main story. And back to Carrick Little carpark Alexander McKane was there too. He had come up to the carpark kept Patricia company and then drove down the road ahead of me to warn oncoming traffic of my presence. Alexander is a great friend and supporter of Cassie’s Challenge and all our mountain endeavours. There is rarely a time, day, or night, that he doesn’t show up to offer support and almost every runner is accorded his generosity of spirit from Carrick Little down to the Harbour. A true gentleman.



And so, with daylight long faded I sprinted down through Annalong to the harbour and the finish line 3 minutes under my target, delivering a team finish of 16:03:49. ‘Six and a bit’ minutes ahead of schedule. All that was left was the photos, the animated chatting sausage rolls, and pavlova. The hot sweet black tea was a delight at that stage (Thank you Edna).

From the chatter and the messaging that followed it was clear that Mourne Runners had another great day out. The team had worked incredibly in sync. The team support was immense. As I have often said these are not the work of individuals but when we all work together, we can achieve greatness. And I believe we did. My mind was not taking all in at that point, but I roughly recall Coach Herron’s comments that ‘the old folks of the club showed they still had it’. Now I am paraphrasing here but that’s the gist of it.

And in truth I couldn’t agree more, for our combined age reached 445 years, bringing the team average closer to 65 years.

Mourne Runners V55 rank 3rd overall in the relay rankings and are the first vet team for 2021. I believe that earns us some bragging rights! Anyone else feeling the challenge. My advice. Go for it. You will have a blast.

And finally, a thank you round up:

Thanks to each of you for your support - Alexander, Ann, Anne & Pixie, Beverly, Darren, Edna, Gary (King of the Mist – A story for another time – Maybe!), Mary, Nicola, Patricia, Ricky H, Sam, Sharon, and Stephen.

Ciaran

Mourne Runners Vet55 team on Cassie's Challenge Relay Event comprised:

Leg 1: David Bell - Team Captain

Leg 2: Harry Teggarty

Leg 3: Denise Mathers

Leg 4: Dale Mathers

Leg 5: Ricky Cowan

Leg 6: Stewart Cunningham; and

Leg 7: Ciarán McAleenan





Postscript

So now with a **combined age of over 445 years** this team, if it were one person, would have been born in the year 1576. Curiously that is the year of one of history's worst epidemics – the cocoliztli epidemic or haemorrhagic fever in what is now modern-day Mexico. History is crazy! Right?). A Wikipedia article (I know!! BOOM) records;

"The effects of the outbreak extended beyond just a loss in terms of population. The lack of indigenous labour led to a sizeable food shortage, which affected both the natives and Spanish.[38] The death of many Aztecs due to the plague led to a void in land ownership, with Spanish colonists of all backgrounds looking to exploit these now vacant lands.[38] Coincidentally, the Spanish Emperor, Charles V, had been seeking a way to disempower the encomendero class, and establish a more efficient and "ethical" settlement system." (So, capitalist exploitation of a crisis pre-dates the Chicago Boys)



The Market House wasn't even built. Possibly not even thought of by then. But it would be a further 8 years until it was erected.

Also, in 1756 Tycho Brahe, the last observational astronomer to work without a telescope began work on his observatory. His contributions to lunar theory and his planetary model were distinctive contributions to the development of the laws of planetary motion. Interestingly it was a solar eclipse on this day [21/August] a few years earlier that had awoken Brahe's interests is astronomy.

So, what else about 1576:

It was in 1576 that the commercial Stage was born in London, a step not only towards artistic freedom for performers and playwrights, but for freedom of speech itself. It was sometime in the spring or summer of 1576 that Burbage's public theatre in Norton Folgate first opened its doors to paying customers, and sometime during the

Christmas holidays that same year that the same thing occurred with the elite little indoor theatre in the Liberty of Blackfriars.

1576 the 'so called' Act for the Relief of the Poor was passed. Houses of Correction were to be built in each county. Those refusing to work would be sent there. People refusing to pay the poor rate were to be punished. Hmm! A just and fair society...

Born this year (1576):

- Louise Juliana was the first Dutch born member of the House of Orange-Nassau was born 31 March
- Caspar Schoppe, German scholar and controversialist was born 27 May
- English poet and playwright John Marston was born 7 October

Oh, and August 21st 1576 was also a Saturday.

And you thought it was just a bunch of old folks (+ some not so old) running in the hills 😊.

P.P.S. Just to note if we had been 13 minutes slower to the finish our time would have been 15:76 time purists ignore that one) Now wouldn't that have been something, but then again who would wish to be slower.