

Tonbridge Athletic Club

Distance Runners

Newsletter December 2015

Mark Hookway
Winter Team Manager



With the end of 2015 looming I felt that the time was right to produce a newsletter, which hopefully will be of use, particularly to many of you who are relatively new to Tonbridge Athletic Club.

The number and size of the distance running training groups have increased considerably over the last decade and although this is terrific news, it makes the transmission of knowledge, experiences and ideas more difficult.

I am sure that many think that the club has always been this large and has always been successful, but that is far from the case.

In this newsletter I have attempted to put down a few thoughts that I believe we built the foundations on to get to where we are now. I hope many of you, both supporters and athletes will take the time to read through.



The senior mens and womens teams at the
National Road Relay Championships - October 2015

Training over Christmas and the New Year

Over the years quite a few parents and new members have asked if we carry on training over the Christmas period ! The answer is an emphatic 'Yes'.

With the major championships coming in the January to March period, the Christmas training opportunities are key to doing well.

Just as importantly they give all ages a chance to get together, which has always been a real positive.

Monday 21st December – 6.30pm from the track as usual

Tuesday 22nd December – Club training night

Wednesday 23rd December – 6.30pm at Judd School, circuit training as usual

Thursday 24th December, Christmas Eve – 10am Knole Park relays

Friday 25th December, Christmas Day – own training !

Saturday 26th December, Boxing Day – 10.30am TAC Christmas Handicap

Sunday 27th December – 9.30am run from the track as usual

Monday 28th December – 6.30pm from the track as usual

Tuesday 29th December – Club training night

Wednesday 30th December – 6.30pm at Judd School, circuit training as usual

Thursday 31st December, New Years Eve – 10am Knole Park hill session

Friday 1st January, New Years Day – own run !

Saturday 2nd January – 10am training at Tonbridge School Fields

Sunday 3rd January – 9.30am run from the track as usual

Then we return to normal



Boxing Day – The TAC Christmas Pudding Handicap

For those of you who have not taken part, this is briefly what is involved –

It's a 5km handicap run/walk around the Tonbridge School playingfields

Cain and Diane Bradley are the organisers

Entry is free and open to anyone, whether a club member or not

Those who enter are requested to provide a small present that goes into a sack. These are then drawn out after the race, in order of finisher.

Registration is at 10.30am for an 11am start

Handicaps are in place, so the 'slowest' go off first and the 'fastest' last

The Bradley family designate your handicap, based on previous performances and current knowledge !

There is an added attraction this year, in that the event is part of the TAC Fantasy Cross Country League, that so many are taking part in. Of course, being a handicap, there will be an added twist to the points allocations.



**Boxing Day Handicap
2014 winner
Elizabeth Heslop**

What level of training is appropriate for each age group ?

Its been a while since I answered this question, even though there is no strict guideline.

For those who have ambitions to be very good as seniors, then the answer is probably that it has to be progressive over potentially many years.

An increase of more than 15% in volume over a period is often seen as increasing the risk of injury. This is just a statement to ensure some caution. So, for example, if currently running 20 miles in a week, you should make small steps to say 23/24, rather than suddenly go to 40.

For youngsters it also depends how active you are with other sports. If you are involved in a lot of other physical activity then maybe you don't need to do so much running. However, if you are less active, its something to consider.

Previously I have given this rough guide to everyone, who is ambitious –

Under 13 – twice per week

Under 15, year 1 - 3 times per week, Under 15, year 2 – 4 times per week

Under 17, year 1 – 5 times per week, Under 17, year 2 – 5 or 6 days per week

Under 20 – maybe before going to college introduce a morning run, to make one 'double day'

Its that sort of progression that many have followed, but of course its always best to discuss your specific circumstances with a coach.



All of the TAC under 13 boys team from the 2004 National Championships are still in action as senior men today



Increasing your training

There are plenty of opportunities to train with others, outside of the normal Tuesday and Thursday club nights. If you are interested then please discuss with a coach.

Sundays – there is generally a ‘long’ run from Tonbridge School Track, meeting at 9.30am. We have up to 30 runners going out at a variety of speeds and distances, but will always try and cater for anyone. Its generally for under 15s upwards, but others have been a long.

Mondays – again we meet at the track for a 6.30pm start and have a mixed ability group. Its generally a run of between 30 and 55 minutes, with a few strides, working on technique, afterwards.

Wednesdays – circuit training at Judd School. This starts at 6.30pm and sees Richard Owen taking a group through a range of conditioning exercises. Many have benefited from this over the years and most of our top runners include some of this type of training each week.

Like every other training session we do all we can to cater for every level of ability and experience, so please dont worry about coming along.

Circuit training is generally for under 15s and older, but as always please talk with a coach.



Can you make it to the top ?

I started coaching in the 2002/3 Winter, alongside Pete Mason. Pretty much the whole group, that we had at the time, was in the under 13 age group and then they grew !

We have seen many come and go and there is not really any clear reasons for why some make it and others don't.

Of the first team that we , which won National medals in 2004, none of them are running or competing seriously today. However, all four of the team that won the National under 13 championship in 2007 are still racing. Infact three of these have gone on to gain track scholarships and attend USA universities.

So what does it take to be successful at under 20 or senior level ?

I have always felt that there might be some secret ingredient, type of training or other factor that plays a part. I had witnessed others 'make it' , but never really knew for sure what produced internationals or national champions.

Since we now have a number making GB teams and have finally won a National Senior team title, I feel we know a little more.

A few of us fom TAC and other clubs were left scratching our heads at the National Road Relay Championships, when the senior men of Ben Cole, Corey De'Ath, Tom Cox, Chris Olley, Henry Pearce and Kieran Reilly won the men's race. "How did that happen ?" "Its maybe two years earlier than expected", "Where did that come from ?" (our highest previously was 9th in 2014), were the type of statements being made.

As I see it now, all of that team have grown stronger, as they have matured. Five of them are aged between 19 and 22, with Ben a bit older. Ben, I don't think will mind me saying, was a very average young athlete, but as he reached his late 20s has become a formidable competitor.

All of the team run between 60 and 90 miles per week regularly and some are still progressing. Similarly some of our best seniors ladies exceed 50 miles a week now and are still relatively young.

Patience has been absolutely key, building gradually, but also being dedicated to what they want to achieve.



Chris Olley is an example that I can use of an athlete who has developed to a very good volume and training ethic.

He has made three GB teams in 2015, for the World Cross Country Championships in China, the European Junior Championships, at 5000m in Sweden and now the European Cross Country Championships, in France.

Chris is in his second year at Imperial University, London. He trains twice most days, with a good long session on Tuesday evenings. Sunday runs are typically 14 to 16 miles and then there will be another session in there, either on a Thursday, Friday or Saturday, dependent on circumstances.

The weekly total is made up to around 80 miles per week, but varies and he has managed one hundred once this Winter.

I can recall a time when we had a presentation evening and Andy Graffin did a question and answer session. Andy went to the Olympics in 2000 and ran 3.35 for 1500m. In his teenage years he belonged to Tonbridge AC.

I can always recall the look on the faces of some of our young athletes when Andy explained that during the Winter, before that Sydney Olympics, he typically ran 100 miles per week. And that was as a 1500m runner. We now have a few following a similar training regime.

For many of you such volumes are a long way off, but those we have now running 70 plus have said that, with good time management, building gradually and patience, that they have been surprised what is possible.

The longest journey always starts with a single step !

**So do you have
what it takes
to make it to
the top ?**



Do you have the talent to make it to the 'top' ?

The simple answer to this for any young distance runner is 'Yes' !

How can I say that ? Its really driven by the fact that someone who works hard will eventually overcome someone who has more talent, but doesn't work hard.

Just recently the Great Britain teams have been named for the European Cross Country Championships. Scouring the Power of 10 profiles (see web sites) of some of the athletes is always interesting.

The two Tonbridge representatives of Henry Pearce and Chris Olley are examples. Henry ran 4.26 for 1500m, as an under 17, in 2010 a time that eight of our current squad ran quicker than, in 2015.

Chris ran 5.23 for 1500m as an under 13, which eleven from TAC beat this year.

Laura Muir made the team as an under 23, but is better known as a track runner being 5th in this years World Championship 1500m final. She also ran 3.58 this year, but even as a first year under 20 was 'only' running 4.50 in 2010 !

Another on the team, who I know, is Jacob Allen, who made the under 23 squad and gained his first GB vest. Jacob hadn't broken 4.30 for 1500m until 2012, as an under 17 ! He ran 3.45 this Summer.

There are many stories like this and with patience, dedication and hard work you can make it aswell.

There are similar comparisons available at -<http://www.tacdistanerunners.com/athlete-progression.html>



The role of parents and supporters

If you race regularly for TAC then there is little doubt that you must have very supportive parents, as we travel to races far and wide ! I am also conscious that many of you travel a fair distance just to come along to training at TAC.

I guess my main message to everyone is that the priorities are to enjoy it, stay healthy and hopefully progress towards the senior age groups.

Like all sports, athletics has a large drop out rate, that demonstrates that there will often be times when athletes struggle with motivation, illness, injury or plateau in performance. Its at these times when they particularly need the support of as many people as possible.

If an injury or pain crops up then we generally have Louise Mason or Nicole Ralph providing sports therapy and advice, on club nights. Please don't hesitate to see them, if you have a concern.

As important as anything else in keeping young athletes in the sport is keeping both good and bad performances in perspective. If you do well then that's great, but no doubt someone else will perform better in the future and if you do badly, you are young enough to bounce back or improve.

The reaction of parents (and others) to success or failure is, I feel, vital. Everyone needs a pat on the back, if they do well and athletes can be notorious for not doing this to themselves ! However, good, young teenagers are not 'superstars', nor should their performances be subject to hyperbole. Some are physically just more mature, whilst others have started training more heavily at an early age, so it should all be put in context.



Similarly, what appears to be a poor performance can infact be more productive, at a young age, as you can learn from it. Try to rationalise it – did you prepare well, have you missed training, how can you improve ? These are the type of things that you can learn from, if something doesn't go as well as you may have hoped.

I am sure all parents love their children, so please don't let the performance of them in racing or training govern your mood ! Offer support, but give them a chance to consider how things went for themselves, maybe with a coach and move onto the next challenge.

Above all else put things in perspective – race performance is what we train for, but at the same time it is not life or death, your health, or anything on that scale that is at stake.

After all, the chances are, if you are young, the best is still to come !

Racing for Tonbridge AC

Many of you will not know what it was like a few years back, either being too young or too new to the club, so are only aware of how busy the club is today.

Back in the Winter of 2002/3 Tonbridge didn't have a competitor at the National Championships and very low numbers in others events This has grown steadily to more than 100 on a few occasions and possible records this season.

I know from talking with people, from many other clubs, that Tonbridge is now the envy of many. The team spirit and the willingness of so many to get out, race and give it a go, is a trait that isn't found everywhere.

I am often impressed how so many are prepared to not only race, but take on each other, whilst being supportive.

I hope we can continue this 'tradition' ,as it makes TAC what it is today. Don't be afraid to race and test yourselves.



Kent selections and other county teams

In the new year there are a few opportunities to represent the county –

Schools

Saturday 6th February – Schools Inter Counties at Bexhill

Juniors years 8/9, Inters years 10/11, Seniors years 12/13. Mainly based on performance at the Kent Schools Championships (or other counties).

Saturday 5th March – English Schools Championships, at Nottingham. Juniors years 8/9, Inters years 10/11, Seniors years 12/13. Mainly based on performance at the Kent Schools Championships, plus the schools inter counties (above).

Saturday 19th March – Schools Inter Counties for years 7 and 8, at Hampshire
Mainly based on performance at the Kent Schools Championships.

Clubs

Saturday 12th March – UK Inter Counties Championships, at Cofton Park, Birmingham

8 per team – under 13, u15, u17, u20, seniors (9 in team). Note u20s born in 1996 run as seniors.

Selection mainly based on Kent Championships (9th January) and South of England Championships (30th January).



Club Kit

We have club kit for sale, which would make ideal Christmas presents. See – <http://www.tacdistancessrunners.com/tonbridge-ac-club-kit.html>

Around the web

Here are just a few web sites that maybe of interest, that a few of you are not aware of –

Kent Athletics – www.kcaa.org.uk

Kent Schools Athletics – www.ksaa.org.uk

England Athletics – www.englandathletics.org

British Athletics – www.britishathletics.org.uk

Power of 10 UK rankings – www.thepowerof10.info

Athletics Weekly – www.athleticsweekly.com

Flotrack (USA) – www.flotrack.org

British Milers Club – www.britishmilersclub.com

Of course we then have the two web sites, used by the club and myself for the distance runners –

www.tonbridgeac.co.uk

www.tacdistancessrunners.com

Twitter

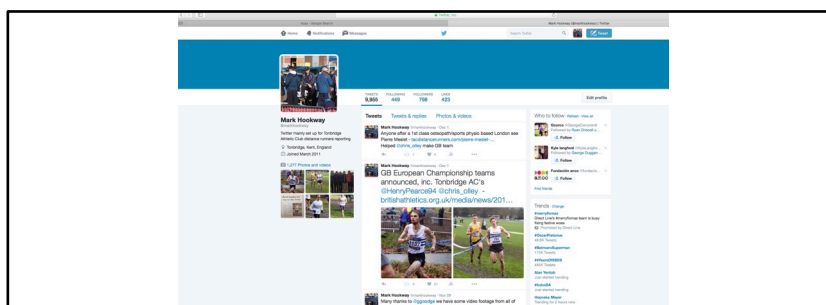
Twitter and social media can get a bad press, but we try to use it in a positive way.

Its an ideal method of following how other Tonbridge AC athletes are getting on.

I try and put out as much relevant and immediate news as I can at @markhookway

There is a page at www.tacdistancessrunners.com that explains how to sign up.

There are plenty of other TAC athletes and supporters on Twitter, plus organisations such as Kent Athletics and British Athletics.



The future of distance running at TAC

The immediate future of distance running at TAC looks bright, as more are developing into the senior ranks. However, if numbers and levels continue to rise we will need more coaches and helpers.

The key is to get fully qualified coaches, who are insured to fully supervise groups and athletes, so if you feel that you might like to help, please put yourself forward.

Mondays and Wednesdays are training evenings, mainly for the 9 and 10 year olds, supervised by Dawn Hookway. Some have gained experience of coaching with these groups and Dawn is generally very grateful of any help.



Tonbridge AC Distance Runners highlights 2015

January

Charlie Joslin-Allen represents England u20s cross country in Belgium
U15 and u17 boys win South of England Cross Country Championships

February

Under 15 boys win National Cross Country Championships
Under 17 men win National Cross Country Championships
Under 20 men win National Cross Country Championships
Kathleen Faes wins u15 National Cross Country Championships
James West – England u20 indoor 1500m
Kathleen Faes wins u15 UK Inter Counties Cross Country Championships

March

Chris Olley represents Great Britain u20 men at World Cross Country Championships in China.
Kathleen Faes wins junior girls English Schools Cross Country Championships
Kathleen Faes, Jamie Goodge and Alasdair Kinloch selected for England Schools Cross Country teams and Kathleen wins schools international in Dublin.

April

Senior Men 5th in National Road Relay Championships (highest ever position)

May

Max Nicholls wins UK Inter Counties Fell Running Championship

June

Ryan Driscoll wins National u23, 3000m steeplechase championship

Photos Kathleen after winning National Cross Country Championships and Ryan winning the National under 23, 3000 metres steeplechase.



July

Chris Olley represents Great Britain in 5000m, at European Junior Championships

Max Nicholls selected for Great Britain u20 men at European Mountain Running Championship

Kathleen Faes wins junior girls 1500m at English Schools Championships

George Duggan wins senior boys 1500m at English Schools Championships

Alasdair Kinloch selected for England Schools team at 3000m, for schools international

Miles Weatherseed selected for England u20m at 1500m, at Welsh International Games

August

Kathleen Faes wins National u15 girls 1500m title.

Ben Reynolds wins World over 50 age group, 5000m title

September

Max Nicholls 6th in u20 mens race at World Mountain Running Championships, for GB

Under 17 men win South of England Road Relay Championship

October

Under 17 men win National Road Relay Championships

Senior men win National Road Relay Championships (first ever TAC medals in a major National senior championship)

Under 17 men win National Cross Country Relay Championships

Under 20 men win National Cross Country Relay Championships

Senior men win bronze medals at National Cross Country Relay Championships

November

Chris Olley and James West selected for England under 20 cross country team, in Spain

December

Henry Pearce (under 23) and Chris Olley (under 20) selected for Great Britain, for the European Cross Country Championships.

Corey De'Ath selected for England u20 cross country in Belgium

Photos - George wins English Schools 1500m championship and Kieran Reilly anchors the men to the National Road Relay title.



AW/SPOTLIGHT



English Schools inter boys' 1500m final in 2009: eventual winner Luke Carroll leads from (right to left) Liam White, Elliott Woolmer (77), Charlie Grice, Harvey Dixon (33) Matthew Grieve, Conor Robinson (15) and Jack Scarr

KEITH MAYHEW



LEWIS LLOYD TRACES THE DIFFERING FORTUNES OF HIS 1500M RIVALS AT THE ENGLISH SCHOOLS CHAMPIONSHIPS

SIX YEARS ago in Sheffield's now-demolished Don Valley Stadium, I finished fifth in the English Schools intermediate boys' 1500m final. Ahead of me were four very talented athletes, and behind me were another five. I'm not just being generous: the runner who finished sixth was Charlie Grice. Now sponsored by Nike, two-time national senior champion and recent World Championships finalist, Grice is a name that will be familiar to many AW readers.

Given that the standout athlete today was sixth in 2009, I often think back to that race. Each year, looking at the latest set of English Schools results, I wonder who will make the jump – because there's a good chance it won't be the winner. It may not even be a finalist – Cameron Boyek didn't make it through the heats that year, but ran in the European Under-23 Championships this July.

The athlete that "makes it" may not have

2009 ENGLISH SCHOOLS INTER 1500M FINAL

1	Luke Carroll	4:01.20
2	Conor Robinson	4:02.39
3	Liam White	4:02.96
4	Harvey Dixon	4:03.01
5	Lewis Lloyd	4:04.65
6	Charlie Grice	4:04.89
7	Jack Scarr	4:05.60
8	Matthew Grieve	4:06.52
9	Elliott Woolmer	4:06.80
10	John Ashcroft	4:06.94

AW/SPOTLIGHT

reached the English Schools at all. They may not even have started running.

Then there's the question of those that don't make it. Many – myself included – stay in the sport and continue to chase times, titles and whatever else. We haven't made it yet.

Others, including the gold and silver medallists that day – Luke Carroll and Conor Robinson – stop running altogether. Both Elliott Woolmer, who had won the junior boys' 1500m title a couple of years earlier, and Jack Scarr have done the same. This means that nearly half of those in the race no longer run competitively.

What is it that sets apart the athlete that makes the jump? Why do people stop? What's been holding back the others who are still going? In short, what dictates these different trajectories?

While it might look random from the outside, I could give a thorough account of why I am where I am, and I would have been surprised if I was the only one. So I asked the others who were in the race in 2009 to tell me their stories.

As the athlete I knew best, I started with my former London Schools team-mate Liam White. A recent Bristol University graduate with a job lined up at an investment bank, White was the English Schools bronze medallist in 2009 and went on to win the UK School Games 1500m title later that summer.

He still runs, but admits that he hasn't pushed on as much as he would have liked since then. His main constraint has been time. The career path he's chosen doesn't afford him much: on his gap-year internship, he "wouldn't really leave [the office] before 1am." While student life offered more flexibility, fitting training around a heavy academic workload and applications for graduate jobs was tough. Then, whenever he started to pull some fitness together, his progress was hindered by a series of niggles.



Luke Carroll beats Conor Robinson (15) to the 2009 English Schools title but both have since quit athletics

KEITH MAYHEW

Injury was a recurring theme throughout everyone's responses. I'm sympathetic. I've had my fair share, marked by gaping holes in my Power of 10 profile.

But it sounds as though I've had it easy compared to some. For Woolmer, a Birmingham University graduate now working as a sports scientist at Birmingham City FC, his drive was being sapped by a prolonged period of injury while still in school. He continued to enjoy running and tried to get back into shape after starting at Birmingham, but struggled to stay fit and felt unable to commit himself fully to the sport. "I couldn't see it as something I would continue once I started work full-time," he said.

Robinson, runner-up in our 2009 final, told a similar story. Already "hampered with injuries" before starting his sports science degree at St Mary's, he found, as he succinctly put it, that "the constant struggle to maintain fitness started to grow tiresome." By the end of his first year, he had decided that the life of an athlete wasn't for him. Instead, he has

spent much of the last few years "travelling around the world surfing" and is about to start a masters in medical physiology at the University of East London.

For others, injury may not have driven them out of the sport, but it has certainly held them back. Matthew Grieve, now a fully qualified PE teacher, is finally knocking on the door of a sub-3:50 clocking after a number of lost seasons.

He said that playing international water polo between the ages of 14 and 20 had left his body "one-side dominant," resulting in a number of running injuries. His haphazard progression in athletics can be explained by the fact that this is the first time in four years that he has reached the summer in one piece.

John Ashcroft, another Bristol graduate and heading to Leeds University soon for a PhD in fluid dynamics, also noted the impact of injury, having spent two of the last three winters unable to run. After a breakthrough bronze at the British Indoor Champs in February this year, though, he is no doubt thinking he is far from finished.

"GIVEN THE EMPHASIS ON INJURY, IT IS PERHAPS UNSURPRISING THAT THE TWO BEST ATHLETES ON PAPER TODAY ARE THE TWO WHO HAVE DONE THE BEST JOB AT AVOIDING IT"

Given the emphasis on injury, it is perhaps unsurprising that the two best athletes on paper today are the two who have done the best job at avoiding it. Harvey Dixon only just missed out on the medals in 2009 and now has the fastest times under his belt of anyone from the race, bar Grice. He can also boast major championships experience, running for Gibraltar in last year's Commonwealth Games. While he stressed that it is the support from his friends and family at home that has kept him going more than anything, he also acknowledged that he has been "very lucky" to be able to compete "continuously" over the last six years.

Similarly, Grice's progression has been helped by his consistency. The main change he made after 2009, he says, was to drop his second sport: football. Playing at county level for Sussex while trying to run had seen him pick up a few injuries, and where Grieve chose to pursue water polo, Grice decided that if he wanted to be "one of the best" he had to focus on running. His training subsequently became more consistent and was supplemented by some strength work, with the volume increasing steadily by about 10% each year.

Both Dixon and Grice also noted the benefits of access to good facilities and physio. Following his breakthrough year in 2010, which saw him win a bronze medal over 1000m at the Youth Olympics, Grice was put on to the UKA World Class Performance Programme. This provided him with physio treatment at UKA bases if he ever got injured, along with some spare cash which he spent on weekly massages.

Dixon, who has one year left of his four-year undergraduate course at Providence College in Rhode Island, was also grateful for the facilities there, which have helped him overcome minor injuries "very quickly".

This might suggest that, in the absence of UKA funding, heading stateside is the best option – but it doesn't work for everyone. Luke Carroll was recruited by the University of Illinois but decided to leave in his second year. Now studying business and finance at Cardiff Metropolitan University, he told me that he left because he had stopped enjoying running as much as he used to. While he was still positive about the experience overall, he said he



MARK SHEARMAN

"didn't really get on with" the coach, was uncomfortable with the increase in mileage he'd had to sustain, was frustrated by the eight or nine-hour journeys to races every weekend, and felt that "there was a lot of pressure with the scholarship".

Starting to feel as though he was missing out on the life of a normal teenager, he came home. Despite being tempted by the thriving training group at Cardiff Met under James Thie, he has hardly run since, opting to make the most of student life and focusing on his degree instead.

Carroll wasn't the only one at a UK university to acknowledge the strength of the set-up there. While the facilities and funding for most might be a far cry from the US, everyone was overwhelmingly positive about the training groups they had found and the coaching they had received. I have been astonished by the quality of the Cambridge University Hare & Hounds training group, which has developed under the guidance of Philip O'Dell over the last few years.

In Bristol, White and Ashcroft were enthusiastic about the relationship between student athletes and Keith Brackstone's Bristol & West AC group. Grieve, too, stressed that he "couldn't speak highly enough of the set-up" under

Andy Henderson at Leeds Metropolitan University, and both Woolmer and Robinson said that they had found themselves briefly remotivated when they moved to Birmingham and St Mary's respectively – two of the country's running powerhouses.

There was even more widespread agreement on what they would say to a young athlete today. "Enjoy what you're doing and don't be too serious about it," Grice advised – a sentiment that was echoed by everyone else.

While you're young, play other sports, do other things and let yourself lead a normal life. "You can't let it consume you," Carroll emphasised. Soak up the experiences you have and make the most of the opportunities you're presented with. Then when the time comes to narrow your focus, do what you enjoy. And if you want to be the best, commit to it.

Even then nothing is guaranteed and, as Grice says, you have to be patient. People progress at different stages. But world-class performance doesn't happen by accident.

➤ **Lewis Lloyd this year ran a PB of 3:46.34 for 1500m and in 2013 was 77th in the under-20 race at the World Cross Country Championships**

ENCOURAGING TODAY'S YOUNG DISTANCE RUNNERS



MARK HOOKWAY, A COACH AT TONBRIDGE AC, SAYS MORE MUST BE DONE TO KEEP YOUNG TALENT IN THE SPORT

MARK SHEARMAN



Charlie Grice: a fine example of someone who has stuck with the sport which then led him to share a stage with world champion Asbel Kiprop in Beijing

IN THE September 24 issue of AW, the young distance runner Lewis Lloyd wrote an excellent article entitled "The Class of 2009", examining what happened to the then 15-year-old finalists of an English Schools 1500m. Who had left the sport and who, like Charlie Grice, had now gone on to greater things by the time they reached 21?

I could relate greatly to the article as it highlighted what many teenage runners are faced with in terms of motivation, injuries, careers and other obstacles that inhibit progress. Those in that final were competitors to many of the young athletes at my club, Tonbridge.

Triggered by a young Tonbridge men's team winning the recent national road relay title, the editor suggested a piece about encouraging today's young runners. What can we all try to do to encourage young athletes to continue in the sport? We had five in our A team between the ages of 19 and 22 and another four in the B team, which placed 10th, of the same age, so some are hanging in there.

Of course they were all on a high, not only as the performances were a surprise, but also as the dream of winning such a championship had been one that we talked about for the past 12 years. This team aspect has been absolutely key, both in training, races and mutual support.

In 2004 we took a team of under-13s to the National cross country and they won silver medals. Incidentally, the first two in that race, both from Warrington AC, were Matt Jackson and Danny Cliffe, who both raced in the Liverpool Harriers team that finished fourth in the recent road relays.

We resolved to support the traditional championships and over the last decade have been able to build the numbers and create a very strong motivation to compete



for the club. That's not to say everyone does, but the vast majority do.

Recognition is key and the club's web sites, emails, Twitter feeds, noticeboards and the like try to give credit, not only to the top performers, but also the improvers or those with a strong team ethic. The local paper also plays a major part and is incredibly supportive in publishing reports almost every week.

All the above becomes even more important when young runners leave for university or move away for work. Keeping in contact, making others aware of how they are doing and ensuring that they are informed, are all important ingredients.

University poses a new issue, as they move away from home and the club environment. It can be a lonely place for a focused and introverted athlete. Not all universities and colleges are created equally in terms of distance-running groups and facilities. However, we have found that there is extraordinary support from clubs around the country to offer a friendly face and a good session once or twice a week.

What doesn't help is the attitude of old-timers constantly referring to how good they were back in the day and that the current crop will never match their performances. The world as we knew it has changed. There is a place for awareness of how the likes of Pirie, Snell, Jones, Ovet, Radcliffe and others trained, but first it helps that they can put that into context with a bit of knowledge of the sport. The odd race video link, articles and forum dialogues all help in this respect. After all, we are generally aware the volume of training in past generations was possibly at a higher level from more runners than it is today. This all helps the "coaxing", rather than coaching. We can sow the seed, but the runners have to have the desire to put in the work.

I have touched on recognition and communication as being key, which leads on to motivation. All young runners, like us all, have their ups and downs, so how do we keep the ups in perspective and the downs realistic?

We can certainly recognise good performances, but I don't think it helps to refer to under-13s and under-15s as "superstars" or such. We never hear how Manchester United's under-13s are getting



on and we have constantly punctuated age-group success with the words along the lines of "that's great, but it only means something, if we can get you to senior level".

There is no doubt that at Tonbridge we have lost many when a junior faces that almost inevitable plateau and motivation drops. Equally many have ridden that particular storm, partly due to close friendships and support among themselves, but also through highlighting that others have survived and prospered. A good example is one of our 18-year-olds, who has had two or three years of growth spurt-related knee and other issues. He has come out the other side to be a national class under-20 and is a terrific example to others.

The presence of a couple of sports therapists on club nights has made a consistently valued impact. A quick assessment, some immediate treatment and, just as importantly, kind words of reassurance, have got many through some difficult times.

So we have ended up with a good squad of young runners, reaching the senior ranks, but what now?

It doesn't seem to be the world of a Premiership footballer that greets them to the senior ranks! Hardly any of our squad have been able to get a kit deal from a sponsor, let alone any income. This is where our sport, I feel, could do more to market our young performers. People are quick to jump on the bandwagon to knock a performance, but let's be positive about our young runners, find them opportunities

where they can prosper and their performances be recognised.

Selection for area or international vests, especially at under-20 level, can give them a major boost at a key time in their career. All of ours who have attended such trips have come away enthused and have also learnt things from their senior counterparts.

An invite to a race here or there certainly made a difference in the past, but seems less accessible today. Even the national under-20 3000m races that used to be held at the London Grand Prix have disappeared.

The England Athletics coach mentoring system gives a few of us a chance to tap into the knowledge of experienced coaches, but also share concerns and experiences. Such contact from the national governing bodies with the grassroots seems important to me and even better if they were to keep in touch with the athletes. In fact, I believe a role along these lines is currently being developed.

In today's world we are in competition with more activities, whether social media, triathlon, bake-offs, reality TV or the growth in just general fitness activities. Can our sport adapt its marketing efforts enough to make distance running something that enough young runners wish to pursue with all their heart? As someone said to me recently, "It's a numbers game to start with." All of us need to do what we can to encourage more young runners to pursue a developing level of training and commitment.