

Alan Bennett – a few thoughts

Firstly, sincerest condolences to all Alan's family and friends, after his passing on Friday 9th February.

Over the weekend, his loss has hit a few of us quite hard. I have witnessed a few old stalwarts and a few young guns shed a tear. I was at the Kent Cross Country League, at Bromley on Saturday, where the organisers agreed to having a minute of applause in Alan's honour, just before the first race.

They asked if I would say a few words and I explained to what was the women's race-starters, who were on the line, that Alan was the President of Tonbridge AC, but loved the sport and the people in it. If he had been there on Saturday, he would have been at the farthest point from the start and finish area, cheering on, not only TAC runners, but many from other clubs.

I had printed off a photograph of Alan, anticipating this moment, as I suspected many might know him by name, but would do by sight. Sure enough, when I held up a photo of Alan many beamed with smiles in his memory, clearly recalling his booming voice encouraging them during races. After the applause, I reminded them all that Alan might be looking down on them, so best not to look at their watches whilst racing, as he would otherwise reprimand them !

So many have taken time to send their thoughts and condolences, but I am picking out just one here, from Calum Laing, who finished 4th in the men's race on Saturday. Calum posted on Strava –

“One of my best ever races, felt great the whole way round. Only thing keeping me going at the end was Alan's voice in my head telling me to push on in the most isolated parts of the course. Honestly, such a hero to the running community, his memory will last on for many generations of runners. RIP Alan” – Calum Laing

Alan was the greatest on course supporter and loved this part of the sport, especially the team competitions such as the relays and the major cross-country championships. I can remember the National at Sunderland in 2013. The snow started coming down heavily, as we left the hotel on the Saturday morning and by the time we got to the course, there seemed a real risk that the championships might be cancelled. However, the officials were brilliant and the whole championships went ahead, creating some great memories, despite the awful conditions. Alan still took up his usual position and headed to the very far end of the course, where hardly anyone else managed to get to and cheered on everyone.

He said that he hated public speaking, but would always grab the mic, as he so often did at National Awards Dinners, speaking eloquently and with huge pride, not only about those near the front, but everyone making a big effort.

This was all the visible side of Alan, but over the years he did so much behind the scenes and without his efforts I can only imagine where the club might be. He negotiated and dealt with renewing the contract between Tonbridge AC, Tonbridge School and the Borough Council, that gave the club security for training and competition. He ensured that the club achieved the upgrading of the floodlights at the track, relatively recently. Iain Presnell commented –

“Every single member has and will benefit from Alan's efforts, negotiations and passion for athletics in general and TAC specifically. Without Alan, we would still be running in the dark without floodlights, getting soaked on a track night without a pavilion and hauling equipment up from God knows where, without trackside stores. And let's not forget the Community Use Agreement, which all but guarantees permanent and affordable athletics (both casual and competitive) for all TAC members well into the future.

There was so much more to Alan than course/track side support and encouragement and even those members who never met or heard Alan are benefiting and will continue to benefit from his commitment to our club.”

Alan carried out so many ‘behind the scenes’ roles at TAC, such as Team Managing, Secretary, Treasurer, Chairman, President, plus similarly acted as Secretary for Kent Athletics. He tried desperately to get involved and improve the South of England Athletics Association, but was frustrated that this was an area that he struggled to influence.

Alan would always take the opportunity to chat and show interest in others, whilst out on the course supporting. He loved the banter and teasing that went on with our competitors from the likes of Blackheath, Aldershot and many others and would often come back to base chuckling at the exchanges.

He was immensely proud of his children, Tony, Rachel, Andrew and Catherine, who have all been part of the sport at various times, with Tony and Rachel continuing to be part of TAC.

Sport was a huge part of Alan’s life, as not only was he a major part of TAC’s history, but he would regularly go and support Tonbridge Angels at football and was a keen Spurs fan. Rugby was also a big part of his life.

Never has it been so true that someone will be missed so much only when they have gone. I didn’t take Alan for granted as I made it known how much his support was appreciated. However, he went beyond the call of duty more than once in giving me support, whether just helping with the crappy jobs on a competition day or backing me at times of crisis. I will be forever thankful for Alan’s support. He fully trusted me and I trusted him and that is what I will most remember him for. That is a rare breed in anyone’s life.

Very few people take risks, say what they really mean, are willing to do many of the jobs others don’t want to do, back their beliefs, even if it means upsetting someone and take on many leadership roles. Alan did all of this in spades and myself and all of Tonbridge AC should be extremely grateful.

Alan, I will really miss you, as will so many. It is really the end of the Alan Bennett era. He is irreplaceable and will be sorely missed.

Mark Hookway

February 2024