

WELSH CASTLES RELAY – JUNE 13th & 14th 2009

Another assault on the Welsh Castles Relay beckons, and after the usual hectic preparations, a small advance party descended on Caernarfon on Friday night, after the usual tiring drive across Wales. This intrepid group was surprised and delighted to find, for the first time in recorded history, a respectable restaurant in the centre of Caernarfon.

We were in good spirits therefore, as the race kicked off at 10:30am on Saturday by the gates to the Castle. **Leg 1 (9.1 miles)** headed for the village of Penygroes. The sky soon darkened, and Alex Gaskell, leading off for the Open team, had the misfortune to suffer an asthma attack early on in the race.

Alex battled superbly well to finish 17th (65:19), with the “rock on which others will build”, David Jenkins also running well to place 47th (79:14) for the Vets team.

Leg 2 (10.75 miles) follows an undulating course over trail and road to Criccieth Castle. The dark clouds soon cleared, to be replaced for the rest of the weekend by gorgeous sunshine, and Andy Howse rose to the occasion magnificently, producing a strong run which saw him promoted to 2nd (61:35) following the disqualification of the leader, and 1st Vet on the stage. At the rear of the field Andrew Simon (56th – 94:05) brought the Vets home, crossing the line with a raised arm salute which summed up his great enthusiasm for Thames, the event and for running in general.

Sadly it was a difficult weekend for Andrew, who was the blameless victim of a road traffic accident on the road out of Newtown later that evening. Hopefully he will make it to the Severn Arms next year, when we all look forward to drinking his health. Many thanks to Michael and Jane Johnson for returning Andrew safely to London on Sunday.

Leg 3 (12.3 miles) follows a fairly benign course until the final few miles, where there is a savage climb before the steep descent into the village on Maentwrog. Simon Molden, making his debut in a “King of the Mountain” leg, showed great judgment by saving his effort for the climb, moving up from 15th to finish 7th (71:18). Mike Sandford also ran very well to finish 33rd (86:31).

Leg 4 (9.5 miles) takes the flat road out to Harlech, the castle a heartbreakingly distant sight for the runners. The temperature was now a major factor, and it was great to see our new Captain Nic Gould continue his comeback in 19th place (67:09). Dave Walsh moved quickly early on in the preparations to bag this leg for the Vets,

and was rewarded with a strong run (41st – 75:32). Thanks to all those from the Open team who came up on Friday or who got out of bed at an early hour on Saturday to assemble in Harlech for marshalling duty, which was again a success.

No time to rest, **Leg 5 (9.6 miles)** sets out along the coast road to Barmouth, climbing initially and then descending into the seaside town. Andy Arbour gave a wholehearted performance, and did well to place 4th (58:39) and 1st Vet on the stage, despite struggling in the latter stages. Maureen Poole also had a fine run for the Vets, finishing well up the field in 36th (75:54).

Leg 6 (10.7 miles) crosses the estuary and follows a disused railway line inland to Dolgellau. The stage is unfortunately almost wholly inaccessible by road, which is a shame, as we were unable to witness one of the highlights of the weekend. Liz Stavreski ran superbly to finish 1st lady on the stage (66:45) and an incredible 8th overall. An awesome performance. Julia Kendall also ran well for the Vets (48th – 87:03).

The road rises steadily and remorselessly out of Dolgellau, eventually rising to a pass which then drops precipitately, leaving the runners shattered legs to negotiate the two mile run in to the village of Dinas Mawddwy, where a pint awaits the conquering heroes. **Leg 7 (9.75 miles)**, the second “King of the Mountains” leg, has seen considerable success for Thames over the years, particularly from the course record holder, Andy Weir. Andy stormed into an early lead, determined to demoralise the opposition and attack his own course record. He succeeded brilliantly, and just ducked under his old record (53:53) to win the stage with ease. Chris Cheeseman responded well to the challenge of this toughest of legs to place 38th (71:21).

Leg 8 (11.2 miles) is not a King of the Mountains leg, but is the “toughest of the rest”, with a steady and persistent climb over many miles, before descending into Foel. The leg was graced by the presence of Dan Robinson, the Captain could only watch, admire, and dream of past glories, as he disappeared into the distance, narrowly missing the course record. Fortunately, your correspondent was able to settle into a more sedentary pace, which brought him home a relieved and pleased 3rd (64:04). Al Irvine deserves praise for taking on this leg for the Vets, and he battled bravely in warm conditions to place 51st (89:14).

Leg 9 (8.6 miles) is the shortest and easiest leg of the race, following the road steadily downhill into Llanfair Caereinion, but it is a challenge nonetheless, which was risen to with great aplomb by Michael Johnson, gaining bragging rights for the Vets in 22nd (60:01 – unlucky Michael), and Vikki Filsell (61:09), who ran well over a distance rather shorter than she prefers.

The Saturday ends with **Leg 10 (13.3 miles)**, an extremely long and tough leg to Newtown, incorporating steep climbs and descents, in which pace judgement is

absolutely vital. Toby Pearson rose to the occasion superbly, battling hard to pass two runners in the latter stages to finish 6th (78:40), a great effort. Paul Whitlock also produced a typically gutsy performance to finish 51st (103:39).

And so to the Severn Arms in Penybont for a fine evening of wholesome food drink and conviviality. Sadly not everyone made it there, but even that sad occurrence had its moments of comedy, as your correspondent proved his map reading abilities by taking his vehicle on an entirely unnecessary and lengthy, albeit beautiful, detour through mid Wales. Our hosts at the pub did us proud as ever, and there was much merriment over the dinner table, followed by the usual pathetic attempts on the dartboard and pool table, lasting well into the night.

Sunday morning at the Welsh Castles begins early, with a 7:00am start at Newtown Leisure Centre for **Leg 11 (12.3 miles)**, an unremitting and hilly slog along the main road to Llanbadarn Fynydd, absolutely no way to start the day.

The Open team began Sunday in 4th place overall, and under pressure from Poole and Serpentine in the King of the Mountains title, a competition that we have made our own over the years. With typical selflessness, Simon Wurr volunteered for the early start. His fitness did not enable him to repeat the heroics of two years ago, when he stormed to a stage victory, but a brave and committed run saw him place 5th (73:15).

Late withdrawals and sacrifices made to maintain the strength of the Open team meant that the Vets team were only able to complete 17 legs, and did not field a runner on this stage.

On to **Leg 12 (11.2 miles)**, a lengthy slog to Crossgates, near to our overnight stop on Saturday. The Vets took pride of place on this stage, Jerry Watson, no doubt inspired by the presence of the whole family, produced a fine run to place 6th (67:23) and 1st of the teams in the Vets category. However, such is the preponderance of Vets in the race these days, which now includes men 35 and over, that he was only 5th Vet on the stage, a recurring state of affairs that sums up the ageing character of distance running. Definitely on the youthful side however was Natalie Farr, who produced a fine run in her Thames debut to place 46th (86:02) for the Open team.

Dave Symons had warmed up for his leg with a useful 3rd place in 17:04 in the Wimbledon Common 5km time trial the day beforehand. He stormed into the lead on **Leg 13 (10.6 miles)** from Crossgates to Bulith Wells, and looked well set for victory. Unfortunately, not for the first or last time that weekend, he had to give best in the latter stages to a Serpentine runner, but ran extremely well to place 2nd (58:56). The Vets were unable to finish a runner on this stage, but the injured Madeleine Watson gamely started the stage in order to minimise the time penalty for the team.

Then the undoubted highlight of the race, the picturesque but gruesome **Leg 14 (11 miles)**, from Bulith Wells, climbing to the summit finish at the Drovers Arms. The toughness of this leg really has to be seen to be appreciated. A long undulating stretch of around 10 miles is followed by several miles of unremitting climb to a summit finish. Our very own Phill Sly holds the record for a stage that has seen great performances from Thames in the past.

As ever, the climb was densely lined with vehicles and spectators, rendering this small corner of mid Wales a passable imitation of Alpe d'Huez as they cheered the runners on in the hot sun.

Andrew Mcnamara rose to the occasion superbly in this cathedral of suffering, with a well judged and gutsy run that saw him placed 4th (69:13) following another disqualification of a stage winner. Well done also to Bernt Erik Roed for taking on the challenge for the Vets, finishing a very creditable 48th (88:34).

Then it is downhill most of the way on **Leg 15 (12.8 miles)**, a long and deceptively tough slog to Brecon. Chris Hutber produced a storming performance to finish 20th (86:50) for the Open team, with the Vets again having to miss out on the stage.

The final King of the Mountains stage is **Leg 16 (8.8 miles)**, an unremitting climb out of the town of Brecon to Brecon Reservoir. The consistency of Serpentine meant that our prospects of retaining the King of the Mountains title had now effectively gone, and John Mcfarlane had the small matter of the 22 miles of the Man v Horse cross-country in his legs, having finished a very impressive 2nd in that race only the day beforehand.

Nevertheless, Johnny turned in a great performance to finish 4th on the stage (52:23) and leading Vet. Anna Garnier also ran very impressively to finish 39th (67:42).

From there the race starts its descent into the valleys of South Wales, with the race becoming less scenic and less easily accessible. **Leg 17 (9.2 miles)** plots a steady downhill course to the finish at Cyfartha Castle, on the edge of Merthyr Tydfil. Kate Symons had also seen action in the Wimbledon 5 km time trial the day beforehand, partnering baby Lucas and the buggy to 26:44. With Lucas safely tucked up in the car, she ran well to finish 40th (66:21). Well done also to Anthony Hickson, who finished 53rd for the Vets (91:33), whose run however resulted in an afternoon long battle to reunite him with his car keys, which I won't bore you by recounting.

Leg 18 (9.1 miles) runs from the Rhyd-y-Car sports centre in Merthyr to Abercynon. Not a leg renowned for its picturesque beauty, but it did see the first all Thames sprint finish of the weekend. Enfys Jones, clearly inspired by racing in the land of her birth, produced a superb performance to finish 21st and 3rd lady on the stage (64:28).

She also just managed to outspurt Keith Spacie, who also produced a great run to place equal 22nd (64:31) for the Vets.

Nick Altmann was typically dismissive of his prospects before the start of **Leg 19 (10.8 miles)**, which follows the Taff Trail to Caerphilly Castle. However, he picked his way through the field methodically after a conservative start to finish 4th (67:00) and 2nd Vet (!) on the stage. Clare Sylvester also had a great run to place 34th (84:26) and 3rd lady on the stage for the Vets.

Finally, **Leg 20 (10.7 miles)** brings the race home to the finish inside the grounds of Cardiff Castle. It was good to see Rameez Khan racing in a saltire for the first time in a while, and he produced a fine run to place 22nd (69:12), with James Bogue also running well for the Vets in 44th (79:17).

And so after 20 Legs, 2 days and 211.3 miles, the Open team finished 6th overall in 22:22:11, about 25 minutes outside the medals and almost 2 hours adrift of a very impressive and consistent Serpentine team. We were also just pipped by Serpentine by 4:15 for the King of the Mountains title.

The Vets team, weakened by withdrawals and the sacrifice of runners to the Open team, could only complete 17 stages and were inevitably hit hard by the resultant time penalties. They finished a gallant and unbowed 55th in 29:03:00, 7th and last in the Vets category.

Nevertheless, it was another great race and we will be back. Many thanks to all who turned out to run, drive, marshal and support over the weekend, particularly Simon Molden and Nick Altmann, who both undertook a vast amount of driving duty in order to ensure that we got from Caernarfon to Cardiff without a hitch.

Thanks in particular to Jeremy Denny for his prodigious efforts in organising the Vets team, he will be a difficult act to follow next year.

Finally, what of the future? On the competition side, we have always prided ourselves in entering an Open team that is both mixed and reflects the varying levels of ability in the club. This year was certainly no exception, and I think everyone can be proud of the result that we achieved. However, it gets harder every year to adhere to that principle and maintain our position in the overall standings, which are slipping year on year. It would certainly have been difficult to challenge for victory this year, however the team had been constituted.

It has been suggested that we should perhaps consider taking advantage of the extended Vets category of 35 and over, and enter a team geared towards trying to win the Vets classification, rather than focusing on the Open team.

In opposition to that idea, it has been pointed out quite rightly that the Vets classification in the Welsh Castles is relatively minor and involves very few teams (only 7 this year). It could be said in response, however, that it would nevertheless be quite an achievement to place a Vets team high in the overall classification.

Both approaches have their merits, and this issue is something for the club as a whole to discuss and for others to decide upon. I hope however that, leaving aside competitive issues, our participation in the race in coming years can somehow be revitalised a little.

We have been going to the Welsh Castles for many years now, so perhaps, while still enjoyable, the race is less of a novelty than it was. We certainly don't get the numbers going all the way to Cardiff that we used to. I appreciate that we all have busy lives and that it is tempting and understandable to bring your own car and make your own plans for the weekend, but if I am permitted to be honest about it, I am envious of the way that other teams are able to support their runners en masse right through the race.

I'm not suggesting that a minibus, blow up dolls, silly wigs and musical instruments is ever going to be the way forward for Thames. I do however make a final plea, as I did last year for a more communal approach. I have greatly enjoyed my two years helping to organise the Thames assault on the Welsh Castles. It really is a magnificent race with a fantastic atmosphere, which epitomises all that is best about club running. I hope that it will always have a treasured place in the Thames racing calendar.

Regards,

Larry Mathews