

A year of Master's Running (Part 1)

I like to have one big target to work on over a running year. Sometimes, when the weather is horrid or the sofa is too comfy, it's the motivation that's needed to lace up your trainers and get out training: "rise and shine". So in 2018, I decided that I was going to try and compete in some of the Masters running events. The Veterans age category typically starts at 40 in most events. However, the British Masters Athletics Federation (BMAF) classifies v35 as an age category for men on the track, the road and across country. I wanted to try some new events and see what it would be like racing against some new and different runners – more my own age! I took massive inspiration from Brian Martin, who has taken part in several age category events for England and it was great to get lots of support from Brian over the course of the year. My wife, Emma, gives me the encouragement to get out and train and knows when I need a push out of the door or – more importantly – when to pull me back in!



My coach, Mic Doughty, worked on roughly a six week cycle with lots of speed work and strength endurance. The constant dialogue and discussion, adaption and variety helped make me a stronger runner. I massively appreciate the effort that Mic puts into the schedules and the discussion that follows. Sometimes, having an impartial eye watching over you as a sounding board has been vital. A good example being, adapting training to include different/new sessions following weaknesses identified in races/training. The

training group (and occasional drinks) helps with the constant chatting and push in training – when I manage to make track sessions!



For my own sanity though, I took to having a few more beers in 2018. Going out for a beer and enjoying some variety in my drinks has been an excellent release valve and whilst drinking the odd beer might not be conducive to getting down to a top racing weight, it has certainly maintained my happiness level. I think that you have to marry up a healthy relationship between life and running. I can understand how some runners go too much to one extreme and I think at this stage in my life, a balance is needed.

I aimed to compete across 5k and 10k on the track and on the road and hopefully get selected to represent England in the British Masters International Cross Country race. The selection criteria said that selectors would look at form over 5k and 10k and then select a team. With this in mind, I completed my first full NYSD Cross Country season in 2017/18.

Despite being a member of Quakers since 2005, I'd never completed a full season and although I was aware of the positives of Cross Country, I've always been too focused on marathon training or Spring 10ks to make the events. However, I knew that a good season of mud, would do me the world of good. Cross Country – with a race taking place every fortnight – was great at strengthening and building up stamina over the winter months. Road racing and running races aiming for PBs (always with one eye on splits) have their place but, because Cross Country is competitive across a variety of ever-changing terrains and distances, it built in some real strength and speed in my legs that carried across the year and complimented the longer steady runs that were done in Winter.



I ended up as second Senior Man in the NYSD points league, behind Greg J from Middlesbrough. Try as I might, Greg was just far too strong and I was never in serious contention to catch him. Each race did bring pushes from other runners and it was great mental training having to find the determination to keep going or to chase someone down. Every runner would benefit from doing the full NYSD series as you'll begin to recognise the runners around you start to push on to beat them!

The season moved on and after a minor calf niggle that set me back a few weeks, Mic had me training for 5km and 10km on the road. I aimed to try and improve my speed and remain injury free. One of the things that I have definitely found as I've gotten older is that it's becoming harder and harder to maintain a high training load and recovery takes longer than it did even just five years ago. I remember being able to race a couple of times a week – sometimes more – when I was in my 20s. I doubt I could do that now. My limbs really do ache sometimes and the importance of

maintaining yourself and your legs is becoming more and more important: foam roller, stretching, massage and strength and conditioning is vital to be able to recover and maintain performance.



My Masters adventures started in June, following my 35th Birthday. I drove down to Oxford to take part in the BMAF 10,000m Championships on the track. It was a good four and half hours' drive down and it was a scorching hot day. I sat in the stands and watched the 10,000m race walk and the hurdles. It was proper athletics but with a lot more wrinkles and a lot more grey hair! It was definitely competitive though and there was talk of an attempt being made at a world record by a v80s athlete. That ended up becoming a recurring theme at a lot of events; many of the runners and athletes, regardless of their ages, were pushing on and competing at a high level!

Through the OpenTrack race sign-up system, you know exactly who is in your race and I felt confident that I would be able to podium.

The heat by 2pm was beginning to cause an issue. Lots of runners hid in the shade and no one wanted to go out onto the track before the start as the sun was really beaming down strong! The runners shared sips of water and wet flannels amongst themselves. We eventually did get called up and the nervous nature of the race led to a couple of very slow first laps before I tried to break out and push my way to the front. I led the race until half way when another runner broke out from behind me and put a good 20m inbetween us. He continued pulling away but I could see that he had a v40 number on so I knew that he wasn't in my category. There was someone right behind me though and we continued to keep going quite speedily for the next two miles. The organisers had provided a water stop and neither one of us wanted to break first; I certainly didn't want to give up my racing line!

With two laps to go, I sped up and felt him drop off. There was a great feeling as people were shouting and encouraging both of us along. I knew I had a couple of metres on him at the start of the final lap and everything was definitely burning now. I remember my legs feeling heavy and tired, with the pain in my lungs making every breath hard. I stuck my tongue out and pushed on but by the start of the final bend, 200m to go, the bloke behind me had pulled level. I tried to maintain my form and remember all the work that Mic had done with me about driving with my arms for sprinting and I managed to hold him off to finish 2nd overall and 1st in my age category. At the end of the race, there were lots of handshakes and lots of chat – before jumping back in the car and driving back home!



The next event was the BMAF Road Championships 5k on the road down in Horwich, a two hour drive away from Darlington. This race was just for masters and there was a healthy competition with lots of runners in the 15:30-15:50 range so I knew that it would be quick! The v40 category had lots of strong runners in it and I knew that it would be a tough one. The course was undulating and there would be some of the back walkers from the 5km race walk still on the course. The course was around a 1 mile loop with the final 200m being uphill. The race started fast and it remained fast



throughout the race with no one taking much out of the leading pack. With about 800m to go, it was all systems go and everyone pushed on! I managed to take third place overall behind two v40 runners in a season's best of 15:40. In the race there were some former Olympians and a few more record holders; again showing that age is no barrier!

Two more track races followed at Morpeth in the local master's association league. It was lovely having my boys cheering me on each lap – well one of my boys. My eldest was too consumed by a bag of chips! Race wise: I was done up like a kipper in both the 5000m, by Conrad Franks, and 10,000m, by Kevin Jeffress, with the eventual winner streaking off in the last lap to leave me with a silver medal. This left me ruing my lack of kick and top-line speed. Lessons learned here for sure – do more speed work!

The BMAF Road Championship 10km race was in Trentham, near Stoke. Another boiling hot day and an exceptionally hilly course! The race started and almost immediately, I was left in third place with two v40 runners streaking away from me. I had no chance of making up the ground between us at 5km; at halfway, we reached the top of a 2km climb and I had a good 800m lead on the runner behind me. I was able to drop the pace to a steady one and just keep position. The runner behind me would have to work hard to catch me and if he did, I would work hard to get away from him. I

coasted and let him play catch up. I finished in third place overall and 1st in my age category. There was a partially sighted runner in his 80s that finished the hilly 10km in just under the hour. Again, showing how well some Masters runners can do!

The pattern emerges at the front of races that the competition is definitely present in the v40 category and there are some very strong runners competing in this age group!

The final track events I took part in were the North East Masters 800m and 1 Mile league races. All I'll say about these is that my oft-stated truism about pain levels in running was again evidenced here. I think the highest and most painful event is the 800m, followed by the beer mile and then, the marathon. By the final 200m, I thought I was blacking out. With 100 to go, I was jelly legged. Finally, after crossing the line I was on the floor in agony, with lungs that would go on to hurt for the next two days! I had to ask another runner, who was also on the floor, who had finished in front between us!

The final cross country and my potential peak race was the England Masters Cross Country in Bury St. Edmunds – another good five hour drive away! It was a hot September Day and the ground was rock solid! Although it was not a selection race, the selectors would use it as a guide to form. The week before, I broke the spike plate on my well-worn spikes so a quick replacement was needed. Thankfully, Dean at Up & Running sorted me out. I tried breaking them in with a few miles on the track but it wasn't quite enough. My trusty spikes that had chased Greg round the NYSD were race ready but knacked! Because it was Cross Country, I was definitely going to wear spikes. I really should have chosen race flats because there was no give at all in the ground.

I went into the race feeling extremely fit and my enthusiasm was my downfall. I led the race for the first two and a half miles and I really tried to push on as hard as I could. I got into a race with a lad that I knew was a much quicker runner. I didn't want to shirk the challenge so I made my legs work.

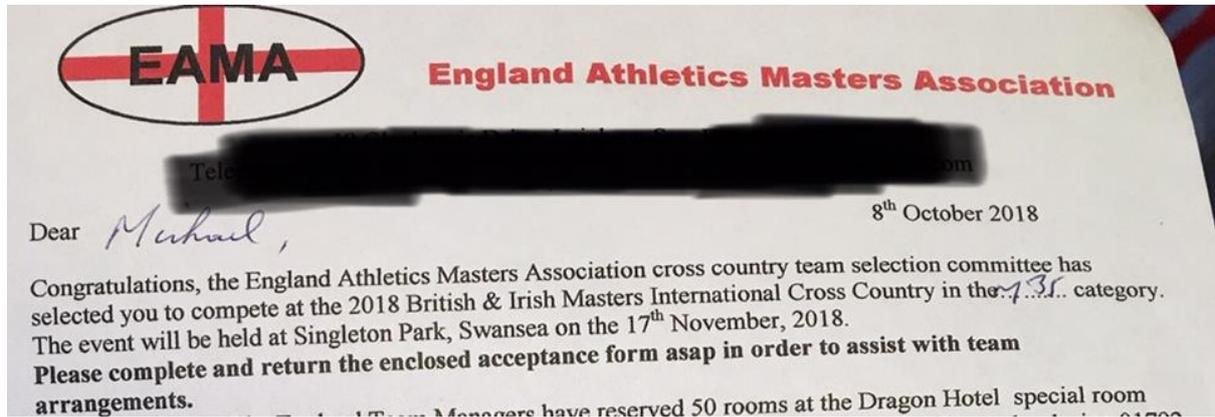


However, a combination of going off far too hard and new spikes led to a massive blood blister and a massive stitch: complete rookie mistakes that I shouldn't have made. I faded back and ended up finishing in 7th place and 2nd in my category. Everytime I was overtaken it was crushing. I really did feel stupid! I was broken and it definitely wounded my pride to have not finished higher. I raced completely on emotion and didn't apply the game plan that I should have done. After the race I was spent and it took me a couple of minutes to drag myself from the ground. The blood blister took a fortnight to heal and I was limping around and unable to train. The lesson to be learned there was

definitely to stick to the plan and not get complacent. The race was just over 5 miles and trying to hold on when you're over-exhorting yourself isn't possible. To me – just 2 miles suddenly went from being a warm level distance to an excruciating battle of endurance.

As part of the scores on the doors, I also took part in the excellent New Marke Race Series and the Darlington 10k to get times on the board for England Selection.

So my times were submitted in October and shortly after, I found out that I was picked as part of the England v35 team alongside two other afore mentioned runners from the North East. It was probably the proudest that I've ever felt as a runner and it was the culmination of a lot of training. But that part of the story is next!



Part 2 to follow: British Masters Cross Country Race.