

## Part 2: The British Master's Cross Country

The 2018 British Masters International Cross Country event took place in Swansea, Wales this year. It is held on a rotation across England, Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and Ireland. Teams of runners in both genders are picked in each age category from 35 upwards. Runners then take part in one of three team races. There is the ladies race with some of the v55+ men and then the men's race and then the open race for all of the reserve runners.

Driving down to the event on the Friday was a slog and we set off shortly after brunch with the aim of stopping for a comfort break a couple of times. What was supposed to be a five hour drive ended up taking almost seven hours and the traffic outside of Cardiff during rush hour really made for a boring drive.

We arrived at the main race hotel and I headed to meet the England team manager to pick up my vest and hoodie. All runners had been requested to wear red shorts so I very eager to get my vest to see how it all matched up. Emma was very patient when I got there, as my excitement to get the vest meant that we didn't immediately go for tea. I picked up my vest and hoodie and the team manager went through information about the course and the race. Some of the people there had been running on the Masters scene for years and they seemed very au fait with it; I listened intently.

We were going to run as a team to score points by finishing higher up in the placings. The highest points scored would win essentially. Whilst there were individual medals in each age group, there were much quicker runners than me there and I was hoping to finish in the top ten overall. Looking at the results from previous years, the Ireland team had dominated the v35 category and England had only won gold once since the category was introduced.

We had faggots for tea. Mental note made to eat more liver.

On the morning, I woke up bright and early! I was in the best shape I think I've ever been in. I had cut weight down to 9 stone 1lb and I'd averaged around 45 miles a week for the 16 weeks running up to the competition, peaking at 72 miles a week before tapering. Race times hadn't been brilliant for me, compared to 2017, but I felt light on my feet and fresh. I was looking forward to getting onto the start line.

At breakfast, we squeezed onto a table with Dave and Kath Aspin from New Marske Harriers. Kath was a reserve for her team. The hotel restaurant was packed with runners in lycra eating sensible breakfasts and weary looking spouses ordering full English breakfasts. There was a proper sense of occasion now that was missing from the night before. It was unlike a hotel before a marathon where there are a lot of very inexperienced runners doing things that you shouldn't do... over eating/hydrating, covering themselves in deep heat or wearing too many layers. Everyone there looked like they knew what they were doing.

We drove over to the public park where the event was taking place. It was right by the sea and it was fresh and cool. I half joked with Emma that I wanted to go into the sea after the race. I was almost serious!



The park was huge and you could see the undulating course as you walked round. There were lots of runners milling around and I went to start, where the team photo was going to take place. After the photo shoot, it was warm up time! Emma got a drink and resisted the urge to get a burger and chips. Seriously... what a tease it is putting a burger van there?

I went through a full 2 mile warm up around the edge of the park and did all of the drill, flexibility and mobility work that Mic has made a part of my prerace routine. The warm up followed by the drills and dynamic stretches activities all the right muscles and helps to

make sure that I stay injury free, run with good form and stay at 100%. I massively recommend going through and doing drills and flex' mobil' work on a regular basis as part of your training routine. There's so much more to running than just running. The conditioning needs to happen too!



I walked around the course to get a feel for a race plan. The start was flat and slightly descending down to a boggy patch. Then, the course started uphill for around a mile. The climb was steady and it would be tiring to a lot of the field. Whilst my short legs don't make for speedy climbing, they don't tire too easily. A quick flat section gave way to a very quick, relatively steep downhill part. Perfect for hammering it!

So on went the vest, complete with the red shorts and GB socks. As a runner that has only ever raced (proudly) in my Quakers vest, it was an odd feeling putting on different colours. I was very proud of this moment and it really was the culmination of many years running for me and I don't think that any running achievement matches it. I didn't think it was bad progress for a former fat lad...

We watched the ladies race and it was amazing to see how determined everyone was! There were so many races within races and you could see the battles going on throughout the field. The phenomenal thing was that the level of competition was so high and no quarter was given.

Veteran Athletes show that exercise, fitness and competition does not stop once a runner ceases to be in their prime. Arguable, some of the athletes running were competing,

relatively speaking, at a level akin to their prime. Looking at our own club, the Quakers, no one that has ever ran a sub 3 marathon would say that it is easy. Yet, Brian has done it! Similarly, Shirley at the Darlington parkrun proves with her age grading scores that it is possible to have that level playing field between the ages and genders.

When the field began to assemble for my race, I joined the front of the group. There was a surprising level of comradery amongst the nations and lots of laughing and smiling. I was glad of this as my usual pre-race jovial mood was joined by butterflies in my stomach. The race plan was simple: steady away for the first lap and then pick it up for the latter two thirds of the race. I did not want to go off too fast. I knew roughly in the field – amongst the English runners – where I wanted to be.

We were quietened down by the starter and we went towards the line. The organisers had an inflatable arch, so there was no wide Cross Country start. With a bang of the starter's pistol, the race started! It was a little crazy as everyone flew past me; I'm not a good starter. I kept pace, watched my footing and kept going at a decent, strong steady speed. I could see at the front that a lad from the North East was pushing the front of the field and that I was well back position wise. "Don't panic, stick to the plan," I said to myself.





The ground was thundering and mud filled the air from all the flicks and feet. It wasn't quite flat but it was fast to run on. The grass was thick and it grabbed hold on your foot if you planned your foot fully down. We went through and I mentally tried to ignore the numbers on the back of the other runner's vests. Emma was waiting around the start line and she later told me how she was worried about how far back I was at the end of the first lap.

The hammer then came down hard. I thought out the culmination of "Rise and Shine" and set off – be the lion in a field of lions. I picked up the pace and started to pass and overtake runners. A lot of people had gone off far too fast and were suffering. I wasn't the only one that tried to ease back during the first lap and a small group of us started jostling for position as we cut our way through the field. The hills were as sapping as predicted and it was a proper tongue out, with grit and determination. Every number starting with 35 became a target and I passed a few Scottish and Welsh runners. The crowds were spread throughout the course and they cheered and jeered accordingly. The Scottish support was amazing; although it

did take me a few minutes to realise that there wasn't a bloke named Scott running with me. The second and then final lap were hard and at the top of the last hill, before the 800m decent, I was spent. The final descent and sprint was done on fumes and I pushed hard to catch one final v35 runner but to no avail. I got into a sprint with another Englishman and finished hard – with a stitch and a complete lack of Oxygen. Results: 14<sup>th</sup> Overall and 8<sup>th</sup> in my Category.

After the race, it was cold. I didn't end up in the sea.

We celebrated afterwards with a drink and some excellent orange cake in a small café near the hotel. Even better was the choice of beers in the café! Beer and cake is almost always a good thing!

We then ended up gatecrashing a group of the Scottish team celebrating (drinking Welsh Whisky!) in a local pub before went off to the Presentation Banquet.

The meal and prize giving was held in a grand old hall in Swansea. It was an amazing setting, with ornate features that wouldn't have looked out of place in the stately home. In a stroke of good fortune, they had one of my favourite beers behind the bar and I happy got a bottle for the meal and the prizes.

England ended up winning overall Gold and my team – Mens v35 – took the Team Gold for only the second time, with the scores being tied with Ireland, resulting in a back counter tie-break! So, not a bad effort: Team Gold! The English team gave everyone a quiet applause, whilst the Irish gave every winner a standing ovation! It made for quite the scene whenever Ireland won anything!

So, on reflection. The weekend was amazing, as was the journey getting there over the previous twelve months. The pride and sense of achievement isn't something that I think I'll ever feel again, regardless if I do have the opportunity to run as an England Master again. From the starting point of being a fat lad to where I am now, I think that the demons of a once unhealthy lifestyle have been properly banished; the motivation to continue to run and compete as an older runner fully seen. There have been some amazing people that I've seen along the way and I think that as the opportunities are there, anyone with the slightest chance of being competitive should push and challenge themselves to see if they can do it.

The vest, medal and race number now hang on my living room wall and 2019... well, it's time for a bit of a rest... probably.