

The Gloucester 24 Hour Track Race 2014 - a tribute to remember!

On 10.00am on Saturday 2nd May 1982 a remarkable 24 hour track race destined to change the history of long distance running was started on the Blackbridge Athletics Track in Podsmead, Gloucester. Organised by Chris O'Carroll on behalf of the local Gloucester Athletic Club, he was rewarded with a number of record performances including a stunning new World Record for 24 hours of 170 miles 974 yards (274.480 kms) set by club member Dave Dowdle.

The field that day consisted of 19 international entrants including two women, with fancied runners from France (and the existing World Record holder), Australia, and the USA joining British favourites Mark Pickard, the then reigning British 24 Hour record holder and a very strong local contingent of Dowdle, O'Carroll himself and Martin Daykin. All sixteen runners still on the track after 24 hours covered over 100 miles, with Pickard 2nd at over 157 miles and O'Carroll 3rd at over 140 miles.

Two women also beat the previous world best distance with British woman Lyn Fitzgerald finishing in 5th place to establish a new Women's World Record of 133 miles 939 yards (214.902 kms) – another outstanding achievement in the days when women running long distance was still not accepted by many and indeed they were laughed at by some of the men as they lined up at the start; but they were soon to be laughing out of the other side of their faces!

Roll forward 31 years to 2013 and the track being refurbished and reopened by Princess Anne as the Blackbridge Jubilee Track inspired Pam Storey, a long-time Gloucester Athletic Club member and a well-known devotee of long distance racing as a much respected organiser of events such as the 2013 British Ultra Fest at Radley in Oxford and the Crawley 6 Hours and 12 Hours ultra marathons, to propose holding a tribute 24 hour race on the track to celebrate Dave Dowdle's world best achievement – and which still is the British 24 hour record.

The Gloucester 24 Hour Track Race was born. Billed by Pam (who of course took on the Race Director role, but ably supported by Co-Director Abichal Sherrington) as an opportunity for novices and experienced runners alike to become a part of local running history by competing in an event that has not been held for many years, the weekend of Saturday and Sunday 14th and 15th June 2014 was agreed as the date.

The search was soon on for sponsors to help meet the costs of promotion over and above expected entry fees from a field limit of 50 runners. Gloucester AC agreed to be the hosting club again and a brand new race logo was designed by fellow long distanced runner Mark Howlett.



The Gloucester 24 Hour Track Race was held under UK Athletics Rules and obtained the Bronze Label of the IAU (International Association of Ultrarunners) so that any records set or international selection qualification distances recorded by competitors would be officially recognised. A good quality field was confidently expected and nearly 40 long distance runners eventually entered.

The leading contender for overall victory was ultra-running international Steve Holyoak, who was the first Briton in the 2013 World and European 24 Hour Championships in 12th place overall (5th European) with a distance of 246.155 kms (nearly 153 miles).

Several entrants were hoping to set records of their own, with local runner Jeremy Mower from the hosting club, Gloucester AC, aiming to break his own 24 hours distance record on the day. Jeremy had just broken a record for long distance running, having recently competed for Wales in the annual 100km Anglo Celtic Plate race for the 10th time – the most ever by any athlete from any of the four home nations that contest the trophy – finishing in 8hrs 49mins 13secs.

Taking part in that same event and running for the winning women's England team in a time of 9hrs 29mins 52secs was Helen James from Loughborough, who was the favourite to take the female honours. She was one of 8 women who entered for the race. Other leading competitors included another local runner for Tewkesbury AC, Angie Sadler, who had represented England at 50km, 100km and 24 hours and was the outright winner in her first 24 hour event, beating many much more experienced men and women with a distance of over 121 miles.

Proving that age is no barrier to endurance running, the top age end of the field, but almost certainly not the last finisher, was represented by ultra-long distance doyen Geoff Oliver, who at 80 years old was attempting to set a World Record distance of over 100 miles for his age group.

In recognition of the historical background to the race, the organisers were delighted that Gloucester MP Richard Graham agreed to start the race on the Saturday and that the Leader of Gloucester City Council, Paul James, did similar honours by agreeing to present the prizes after the finish on Sunday afternoon.

Long distance track racing is not something most runners would contemplate, but once experienced the companionable nature of a short circuit which means all runners whatever their ability can run together and be mutually supportive for the many hours involved, is actually very rewarding. Slower runners being passed work to a well-established race protocol of running one lane out from the track inside edge to allow the faster runners to easily pass by.

Recording the correct number of laps being covered is a complex task and has to be very accurate. In the 1982 race, top local long distance runner Martin Daykin had set out with the specific aim of breaking the world 200 kms record and then pulling out, which at the time it was thought he had easily done. However, on checking it was sadly realised that he had completed one lap too few for the record to be ratified.

Lap recording is traditionally done by volunteer lap recorders who by necessity therefore number nearly as many as the runners. Getting these recorders is understandably much more difficult for organisers than finding actual runners and this poses entry restrictions, but fortunately modern technology now allows for chip timing and all runners in this race had their distances electronically recorded - although manual back-up was also present, just in case!

Another attractive aspect of a set time-race, as opposed to a set distance, is that you get an official result even if only one lap is covered in the time, and although most runners do of course cover rather more than that, whilst the elite aim to run for most of the time, slower or less fit runners can take as much time out as they feel they need (tents for resting were erected around the circuit by competitors) and still earn a finishers medal. There is even no need to be on the track when the race ends to get an official result.

Consequently, and as a special tribute to Dave Dowdle, he was given an honorary competitor place which meant he could wear an electronic distance recording chip like the other competitors to get an 'official distance' and a place on the result sheet to honour his achievement of those 32 years ago.

Dave had not been well until quite near to the time of the race, so it was not certain whether he would be able to attend the event being held in his honour, but his health had improved enough for him to be able to tackle at least a few laps of the track.

Gloucester MP Richard Graham, who had already agreed to start the race and had said 'I might even be tempted to do a lap', was taken at his word and was also given honorary competitor status so that he could accompany Dave for the first lap.

The race attracted quite a lot of deserved publicity and on the day was included on the BBC News website which apparently receives hundreds of thousands of hits per day, so Dave's historic feat tribute reached a large number of readers.



Posing before the start - from L to R: Jeremy Mower, Chris O'Carroll, who also started in this race, Dave Dowdle and Ken Leyshon, who was 4th in the 1982 event.

L to R: Richard Graham MP, Race Director Pam Storey and Race Referee Arthur Daley



On the day the weather turned out to be warm and sunny with a fine morning for the start and a hot afternoon which caught a few runners out on hydrating adequately.

Set off by the MP, with Dave alongside him, the field was soon spread out over the whole track as relatively unknown 'youngster' Dan Lawson set off at a pace which seemed suicidal to many while the experienced Steve Holyoak ran at a more measured and metronomic pace that he maintained until the end.

From the early laps seasoned observers were debating the final outcome – would the exuberant running of Lawson win the day or would Holyoak's steady progress see him prevail at the end. 24 hours is a very long way to run and all can go very wrong in the last few hours. The honours usually go to those that judge their pace best and are still strong in the closing stages.



Ready for the off – from L to R: Jeremy Mower (No 30). Richard Graham (No 40), Dave Dowdle (No 39), Steven Battle (No 5), eventual winner Dan Lawson (No 25) and Maltese runner Victor Vella (No 41) who set two new Maltese age group distance records during the race

Despite learning that Lawson was no new-comer, with some impressive ultra running performances already, this was the furthest he had run and the wise money was on the pace eventually telling and Holyoak coming to the fore. However, Lawson maintained the pace for hour after hour and all through the night, so in the early hours of Sunday it seemed for a while that Dave's British record could be under serious threat.



Dan Lawson defies the hot weather to maintain a blistering pace for most of the race

Local runner Angie Sadler (Tewkesbury AC), who finished as second lady and a now tiring Lawson in the closing few hours of the race



However, he began to tire around 20 hours, and the prospect of beating Dowdle's record gradually slipped away, although a distance of around 160 miles and a new British age group record was a possibility for a while. But despite encouragement from the spectators for him to keep going to try and achieve it, the pace eventually told and he then tired quickly, slowing to a walk in the last couple of hours.

Nevertheless, 41-year-old Lawson's rapid pace for over 20 hours had built him such a lead that he was the unexpected, but well deserved winner of the race, completing a distance of 242.880 kms (150.92 miles) which was a very impressive performance for a novice at the distance. Although not breaking any records it was nevertheless an outstanding achievement which was just over the 150 miles needed to qualify him for future England team selection at his first attempt at the distance.

As a veteran, he also won the Martin Daykin Memorial Trophy which was donated by his wife Liz in memory of Martin, a leading local runner who also competed in the 1982 event, but who sadly recently died.

Fancied pre-race favourite Steve Holyoak (Road Runners Club) showed his international experience by maintaining his steady pace throughout to eat into Dan's lead in the final few hours, but he finished well short in second place with a still commendable distance of 232.703 kms (144.59 miles).

The ladies' race produced no such upset, with England international distance runner Helen James (Barrow Runners) achieving an anticipated win with a distance of 183.324 kms (113.91 miles) and fifth overall place.

Leading local long distance runners Jeremy Mower (Gloucester AC) and Angie Sadler (Tewkesbury AC) both once again demonstrated their pedigree at this discipline. Welsh international Jeremy finished in 4th place overall with a personal best 24 hour track race distance of 196.682 kms (122.21 miles) and Angie, a former England international long distance runner, was 2nd lady and 7th overall with a distance of 172.017 kms (106.89 miles).

Jeremy's view of the race was that: 'It was a fantastically well-organised event and it paid great tribute to Dave Dowdle's World Record. From my point of view and of others I spoke to, the early hours of the race were very tough in the hot weather which caught a few people out on hydration and taking enough electrolytes to cope with these conditions'.

A really down to earth perspective from a lady at the lower end of the finishing order also captured how many felt about the early hot conditions and the physical and mental challenge of running endless laps around a running track, was given by Kathy Tytler (a poet and very experienced long distance runner and walker who finished in 24th place with a distance of 118.426 kms, 73.587 mls): 'I'd be lying if I said that I enjoyed every minute of my weekend on the running track at Gloucester Athletic Club - but I am recovering, and a Big Thank You to Pam and team for organising it - and well done to all of us runners!'

Publicity Officer and fellow race participant Phillip Howells summed up his own experience and observations of many fellow competitors in saying: 'As the publicity

officer and a race participant it was clear from the start that this was always going to be a unique event and the atmosphere on the day was every bit as special as I expected it to be. The fact that Dave could not only attend and take part in the race, when a few weeks earlier this had seemed unlikely since he had been quite ill, just gave the whole occasion a huge lift.

My abiding memory will be the increasing grin and sense of enjoyment on Dave's face as the day wore on and he realised not only how much we all respected and admired him for the record he had set, but that we were also all absolutely made up to see him well and running again, and clearly loving it – which in the end was all the justification that was needed for Race Director Pam Storey's vision that this was the ideal time on the refurbished track for this memorable commemorative race to be held.'

As for Dave Dowdle, despite his only recent recovery from illness, he delighted himself and all his admirers by eventually completing nearly 40 laps and a distance of 15.454 kms, running at the start for a while and then joining in the race at the end to be on the track at the finish.

His companion for the first two of those laps, Richard Graham MP, can probably tongue in cheek claim a MPs' World Record of his own for the 0.800 kms he covered since it is probable that no serving Member of Parliament has ever competed in a 24 hour track race before?

The prizes at the official presentation after the race were handed out by Gloucester City Council Leader Paul James, who as a runner himself was able to appreciate the effort that is required to complete such a demanding type of event.



Prize presentation – L to R: Pam Storey, Liz Daykin, Dan Lawson, Councillor Paul James

First lady Helen James receives her trophy from Paul James.



Councillor James also joined in with Race Directors' Pam Storey and Abichal Sherrington in thanking all the runners for their support, Gloucester AC for hosting

the event, the sponsors – Ermin Plant, Go Outdoors, Howlett Design, Ed & Phil Active and Wigwam socks - for their contributions, and all the helpers for their time, without all of whom the event could not have been held.

The organisers in turn gave their thanks to Richard Graham and Paul James for attending and adding to the memorable ambience of the day by so enthusiastically providing their support.

Above all though, everyone joined in the heart felt applause for Pam Storey, whose vision it was to put on the race and whose determination to make it happen so memorably and successfully despite a tight budget was an equal tribute to her for pulling together a well organised, enjoyable and atmospheric event which will be remembered by all who were there for a long time to come.

And none more so than the man himself and from whom the last word on the whole 24 hours should fittingly come. For Dave Dowdle it was almost as life shaping as the original race, because it was through this event he had clearly re-found his confidence and joy of running after being ill for so long: 'The day was brilliant! I was really knocked out by how many people wanted to talk to me and have their photograph taken with me. It was a totally uplifting day.'