

## Jim Smith

We all know that athletics in this country would not exist without the dedication of volunteers who travel up and down the country, officiating at track meetings, cross-country events or road races, in all sorts of weather conditions.

Many club athletes take up coaching or officiating after their competing career is over, but there are also some officials who have little or no competitive background. Jim Smith is one of the latter group, who found a worthwhile pastime through his young daughter being one of our club middle distance runners. Jim is married to Beryl, and they have four children. Daughter Cathy became the only runner in the family, joining Liverpool Harriers. Jim supported her at many different venues, and was asked to help out. Cathy later married Dave Flitcroft (also a Club member) and they moved to Bolton. Although Cathy is no longer running, she and Dave now coach at Bolton Harriers. But Jim is still "helping out" after 30 years, and this is his story:

I was once asked how I began as a track judge. It all started when my daughter started running for Liverpool Harriers. I went to one meeting, I think it was a Cheshire League Meeting, and someone came up and asked if I was doing anything. I said "No", so he asked me to help him do track judging. I told him I'd never done it, and he told me "It's easy - all you have to do is take numbers as they finish". I said "OK" and got on the stand. The first few races were middle distance, and the runners were spread out when finishing, and they were quite easy to judge. Then the sprints began and, after trying to judge the first few races, I thought "How on earth do officials judge the big meetings?". I asked the track referee, who was very helpful. He said "Just relax and put down what you see. Never mind the other judges, because if there is a difference of opinion the referee checks all the results and the majority takes it". After a while it became easier to do, and I started to really enjoy it.

Once I had been on the stand, that was it! I was asked to help out more often, mainly because of a shortage of officials, and started travelling with the Club to away meetings. At the first meeting I went to, I reported to the Referee and was given a worksheet. I'd never seen one before, so I had to ask about it. The other officials soon told me what I had to do, then I realised there was more to officiating than just standing on the stand! I had to go to different positions round the track and act as Umpire, which meant looking for infringements of rules: such as checking the runners stayed in their lanes in the sprints, and looking for illegal pushing and shoving in the middle distance races.

Soon judging and umpiring became second nature, but I was learning something every time I officiated. I made enquiries about getting "graded", and was told that I'd have to know the rules and understand them, then I'd have to sit an exam paper. This put me off at first, then I thought "Why not?". I got hold of a rule book and started to read the rules. I was amazed at the number of them until I realised that half of them applied to the field events. Anyway, I read them, sat the exam and, to my surprise, I passed and became a grade 4 official.

Since then I've been upgraded to a grade 2, and travel with the Club all over England. I've also officiated at the North of England championships. At the meetings you get to know a lot of officials, who are especially helpful when you are first starting. We have a laugh and joke at the meetings, but the moment the race starts we settle down and do the job we were asked to do.

I have been a track judge now for about 30 years, but it still surprises me when people ask me how much we get paid for officiating at all the meetings, and the looks I get when I tell them "Nothing - we're all volunteers and we do the job because we enjoy it". On a nice summer's day, it's great on the stand, with coats off, enjoying the sun. But it's not so much fun when it's pouring rain and you are getting rather wet. That is when you look at each other and ask "why do we do it?".

Never mind "why", Jim, we are just glad that you do such an excellent job!



November 2009