

The story of Liverpool Harriers' Senior Men's Road Relay teams in the 1970s "Kings of the Roads"

By Frank Davies 2010

Prologue

There is a very true saying: "*The older you are, the better you were!*" With that in mind, just how good was Liverpool Harriers' Senior Men's road relay team of the 1970s? Was it really as omnipotent as some of us would like to remember? And, if it was, then how did such a success come to pass?

I went through my old scrap books, training diaries, Liverpool Harriers newsletters, minutes of Committee Meetings, and AWs, to try to find the answers. My research showed that the story needs to begin in the late 60's and finish in the 80's to put the whole thing into perspective.

The exercise certainly brought back lots of memories: of happy victories and frustrating defeats; of loyal team-mates giving 100% in training and racing, but others perhaps not showing the same commitment; of the exhilaration of winning a title for the first time, and then the fear of failure when trying to defend it next year! But, most of all, there was a feeling of collective achievement and pride shared throughout the teams, the supporters, and the Club officials. I have tried to write the remainder of this piece largely as a purely factual record, rather than one old man's reminiscences ... but, those were exciting times and many old emotions were re-kindled!

Setting the scene

Back in the 60s there was no "AAA 6-stage Road Relay", nor a 12-stage version.

There were many high standard relays organised around the country, generally 4 or 6 runners all doing the same lap. They were fiercely contested by the local clubs. In this area we had open road relays such as the "Egerton" at Bolton, the "Hollingworth Lake" near Glossop and the "Burtonwood" near Warrington. We also had annual championship relays in the shape of the 6-man Liverpool & District at Sefton Park, and the 8-man Lancashire held at Southport. Liverpool Harriers teams turned out each year, but rarely got prizes or medals.

The long-standing "London-to-Brighton" relay, of 12 stages totalling circa 50 miles, was generally regarded as an informal national championship, with all the top clubs participating - a real test of road running strength and depth. In the North West, we had the "Manchester-to-Blackpool", of similar distance. In due course, largely due to increasing traffic volumes and the logistical problems of getting runners to every stage of such a long course, the London-to-Brighton was replaced by the AAA 12-stage, which is now held each year on a closed circuit at Sutton Park, in the Midlands. At the same time, an official Northern 12-stage event was established, with its venue moving around the region.

Where it all began

Readers who knew LHAC back in the 1960s will recall that we had an excellent organisational set-up (known as Tom O'Mahoney!), reasonably strong track and field teams, but not much to shout about on the road or cross-country... with the exception of Mike Turner! Mike's level of performance, especially in cross-country races at the highest level, has never been matched by a Brit, and probably never will be. For many years he was known by runners throughout England as "The King", and rightly so. In those days, any minor team successes achieved by LHAC road relay and cross-country teams were usually dependent on Mike. He had become a senior figure at Cambridge University, but he travelled back to Liverpool whenever Tom said he was required by the Club!

In 1967, there seemed to be a glimmer of hope for improvements in Club's team performances. Because Mike Turner was temporarily away in the Pyrenees, doing research for the AAA into altitude training (the Mexico Olympics would be held in 1968), the focus was on the rest of the squad. Mike Fearon was leading the way, and running very well. Behind him was a promising group which included Brian Jones, Alan Gerrard, Tony Farrell, Keith Burrell, and Tony Swindlehurst. Also, the young Roger Harrison was running well at Aberystwyth University.

Frank Davies joined LHAC from Darlington Harriers, just in time for the Liverpool & District Road Relay, where we managed 2nd, with Mike Fearon running overall fastest lap. However, that was virtually Mike's last run for the Club: he moved south and joined Hercules-Wimbledon. Quite a set-back! For the 8-stage Lancashire Road Relay, neither Alan Gerrard nor Frank Davies was eligible, and the team came 8th.

During early 1968 Mike Turner was still dominant on the country, but was again absent for the road relays later in the year. The team ran reasonably well to come 3rd at Sefton Park, where newcomer Dick Strutt was our fastest, just ahead of Frank Davies. For the Lancashire race, we welcomed back Mike Fearon and John Linaker (both able to run "second-claim" for LHAC in the county championships), and skiing bi-athlete Keith Oliver made a rare appearance. A good all-round team performance equalled the Club's best-ever placing of 4th. Then tragedy - we lost a young and very promising runner, when Dick Strutt became so depressed during his charity work helping old people that he took his own life. Those of us who knew Dick still remember him with great affection, and wonder just what he could have achieved in athletics.

1969 - Just a "one-man team"!

In the spring of 1969, the LHAC team exceeded expectations by finishing 10th in the Northern 12-stage relay, at Derby. But we remained in awe of the teams ahead and could only dream of being near the front in such events! In the autumn, Mike was back, and running brilliantly. He ran a record lap at Sefton Park (even so, the team only came 2nd) then, next day, ran a blinder in the Luton-to-Bedford relay. This latter race featured in the Club's fixtures every year. It was a 5-stage event run on a Sunday morning, along the main A6 - great fun, if a little bit dangerous! That year Mike set off in 5th place on the penultimate stage, about a minute behind the leader (Tipton's Doug Fownes, a Welsh international). We hoped our Mike might just close the gap, although tired from the previous day's efforts. When the leading runner came into sight after five of the six miles, it was Mike, on his way to smashing the stage record and delivering a massive lead. Tony Farrell ran an excellent anchor leg, extending the lead, and we basked in the rare glory of victory!

A solid 4th in the Lancashire Road Relay at Southport the next weekend was the lead-up to our participation in the first ever AAA 6-stage, on 25th October 1969, around the old motor-racing circuit at Crystal Palace. Those readers who have witnessed AAA relays know the situation: lots of supporters all round the course, loud speaker systems divulging interesting and up-to-date information, top quality runners in every team. But not in 1969! Any team could enter; there was a lack of officials; no P.A. system; little information of any sort at the course; probably more dog-walkers than spectators on the circuit. Athletics Weekly was scathing about the whole organisation, but had to report that "Mike Turner blazed round the course to set fastest time". For the record, our team was Alan Gerrard, Frank Davies, Chris Elson (a lecturer at Liverpool University who only ran for us briefly, and is now a star veteran with Bristol AC), Brian Jones, Tony Swindlehurst, and Mike Turner. We finished 7th, which sounds good, but there were only nine teams and the 9th team were so poor they were lapped!

1970 - Things are changing!

Another milestone in road relay history occurred in the spring of 1970: the first AAA 12-stage was held in Sutton Park. The course was slightly different from the one we know (and love?) today, but the format was the same - long stages alternating with short ones. The Club had finished a respectable 7th in the Northern race, at Derby, so a Liverpool Harriers team was able to run at Sutton Park, finishing 20th. Mike Turner had gone to work overseas (a few days after finishing 4th in the National Cross-Country), and the race emphasised our lack of strength and stamina in depth. Finishing 20th does not sound too bad, but only 21 teams started and two of them arrived late. Blackheath eventually left the start line some 5 minutes behind the rest, and failed to catch us by just 50 seconds! Our inaugural team was: Tony Farrell, Alan Gerrard, Frank Davies, Mike Dooling, Brian Jones, Geoff Pearson, Tony Swindlehurst, Ron Symington, Alan Ascott, Brian O'Neill, Roger Harrison, Dave Jenkins.

Many of those 12 were to figure in successful Club teams in later years but, back in 1970, most of them could not handle a road relay leg as tough as the Sutton Park course. The National League had recently become a key focus for Liverpool Harriers and, consequently, our middle distance runners gave priority to track work for much of the year, culminating in *a superb victory in the AAA 4x800m relay (averaging inside 1:55)* and a decent 3rd in the 4x1500m against a very classy field. A solo road relay leg of 5-6 miles on undulating roads was a very different proposition! We had a few long distance runners (like Tony Swindlehurst) who had the strength, but they were a bit short of basic speed, whereas most of the team were decent track runners who struggled once the distance exceeded 3 miles.

Miles and miles and miles....

The big new fashion in distance running at the start of the 70s was very high training mileage, championed by Ron Clark and coaches such as Arthur Lydiard and Percy Cerruty. For runners who had previously concentrated on speed sessions, the increased stamina work could make a massive difference. Many of our squad experimented with this new fad, regularly covering over 100 miles per week, while not significantly reducing the quality work. It was not long before improvements began to show! Around this time, Pete Waddington (another believer in high mileage) came to teach back in the city where he had graduated, and quickly became a key figure in the Club, bringing not just his running strength but also his enthusiasm, influence, and organisational skills.

By now, the Northern and AAA 6-stage road relay events were gaining popularity. Lots of clubs struggled to get out a decent 12-man team, but could compete reasonably well over 6 stages. Every major club was "up for it". In these circumstances, and with Mike still overseas, 10th in the Northern and 12th in the AAA 6-stage (both at Southport) were excellent results.

1971 - A new year and a stronger team.

The Club finished a respectable 12th in the Northern 12-stage at Blackpool, where Alan Gerrard won the first leg and Frank Davies was second fastest overall on the "medium" length stage. Although these two runners were bitter rivals in track races, they benefited from training hard together in the summer, and lifted the standard of LHAC middle distance running: that year *the Club won the year's AAA 4x1500m in dominant fashion.*

Into the autumn, and Mike was back. Furthermore, we had gained Paul Carey, a distance runner of proven ability, whose career as an Architect had brought him to Liverpool. His brother, Peter, had joined the Club a couple of years earlier, after qualifying from Liverpool University as a doctor.

From the early autumn road races, it was apparent that our runners were far stronger than in the past seasons. A lot of this was simply the effect of higher training mileages. But probably the key factor was the evolving "Tuesday Night Eye-Balls Out" training sessions held from the Waddingtons' house in Gateacre, generally consisting of extremely hard repetition work on the road, led by Pete and Frank. In later years, Roger Harrison was to admit that he felt physically sick at work each Tuesday, as the time for the session approached!

It was only a matter of time before this hard work yielded team success for the Club, but it came sooner than expected! In October, the Northern 6-stage was held on a horrible course around a rough area of Leeds. The strong Bolton squad (including internationals Ron Hill, Mike Freary, Eric Haslam and Steve Kenyon) were expected to totally smash the field. But LHAC finished only a minute behind, and gained *the Club's first Men's Senior team medals on road or country at area level since 1954!* Our team: Tony Farrell, Pete, Alan Ascott, Mike, Paul, Frank.

The next weekend saw *another first for the Club: silver medals in the Lancashire Road Relay.* Frank passed the Bolton runner on the final stage and finished just a couple of strides behind Manchester & District, running only one second slower than Mike. Our performance over the eight stages demonstrated a growing strength in depth, and we could see a real team in the making.

A week after the Lancashire race, the AAA 6-stage was also held at Southport, albeit on a longer lap. Our team was an excellent 5th. "The King" still ruled: *Mike Turner was fastest overall in a new record time*, but the rest of the team were improving with every race. There was a lot of pride in what had been achieved already, and a growing feeling that this team might soon win something big!

Spring 1972 - High expectations and harsh reality

The cross-country races in early 1972 brought *team victories in the Liverpool & District (first since 1955) and the West Lancashire Clubs race* (first ever in this strongly contested 9 miles event, now defunct). Mike was the individual winner in both events, as often before, but now we had a solid team to support him.

A decent participation in the AAA 12-stage event was our next aim, and qualification depended on a top 6 finish in the Northern race, to be held on a really tough course near Sheffield. After the 6-stage successes of the previous autumn, a high place seemed certain, but the LHAC finished only 8th and failed by 50 seconds to qualify for the national race.

So it was back to earth with a thump! A better performance than the previous year, but still the team could not cope with these longer stages, nor the strength in depth needed for a 12-stage event. Despite that, everyone felt the team had potential, and could yet achieve success and recognition at a high level - perhaps Northern or even National titles.

Autumn 1972 - Another step on the way!

After disappointments in the National League in the summer of 1972, confidence returned as soon as the autumn road relay season began. It started with something special in the traditional Luton-to-Bedford. Normally this event took place on the day after the L&D relay, so we ran with tired legs. But this year the L&D was scheduled for later in the season, so we had not raced the previous day, and we also had an excellent team. Paul won the first stage by a huge margin; Frank broke Tony Simmons' record on the next; Pete extended the lead on stage three. Then Mike smashed his own stage record on the penultimate leg, leaving Alan Gerrard to bring us home over a minute inside the course record, half a mile ahead of the second team.

A week later, the Club hosted the 1972 Northern 6-stage, with each runner doing two laps of the pavement around Clarke Gardens. The October sunshine was glorious, and LHAC supporters were out in force. Could this be the time when we beat star-studded Bolton at last, and could we dream of winning gold in a Northern team race?

Roger was out through injury, but good early legs from Tony Farrell, Pete, Alan Gerrard and Paul meant that Mike set off not far behind the Bolton runner on stage 5. Mike was expecting to race against Ron Hill, but Ron had a slight injury and decided not to run. His replacement was not in the same class: Mike handed over a huge lead to Frank, who duly finished over a minute ahead of Steve Kenyon. *Northern Champions!*

With Roger back for the Lancashire race the next week, and the dependable Alan Ascott added to the "Northern 6" squad, we fancied a first-ever victory. The race turned on the 5th stage, when Frank overtook Ron Hill and gave the team a lead which lasted to the end, for *the Club's first ever victory in the Lancashire event*. Supporters went mad, evening celebrations were excessive, and Athletics Weekly now conceded that Liverpool Harriers had a road relay team among the best in the UK.

So near but so far

After these unprecedented victories, we approached the 1972 AAA 6-stage (at Leeds) with lots of confidence. City of Stoke had won the title for the previous three years. However, they seemed to be struggling to find a sixth strong runner this year, and they looked to be out of contention for victory. Bolton wanted revenge for two defeats by us, and seemed our main danger, but we thought we had ten or twenty seconds to spare over their squad. The plan was to give Frank a decent lead over Steve Kenyon for the final stage, and expect him to do the business.

Two things went wrong. Firstly, LHAC did not quite match the high standard of the previous two weeks, with the exceptions of Pete and especially Mike (second fastest overall). Perhaps the others struggled with the bitter wind, or perhaps it was complacency. Secondly, and more importantly, City of Stoke found an excellent sixth team member, in the shape of Alan Dean, an international 800m runner who had been increasing his mileage with the intention of moving up to 1500m.

We were looking good when Frank started the final stage with a comfortable lead over Steve Kenyon, and a deficit of only ten seconds to Alan Dean. He caught the Stoke runner quickly (perhaps too quickly?), but failed to drop him, and had him as a shadow for the next three miles, sheltering out of the wind. Towards the end, Dean's track speed came into play, and he sprinted home to give Stoke the gold medals by just (unlucky) 13 seconds. *Second in a National team race* sounds pretty good, but we felt we might have missed the opportunity of a lifetime.

A few weeks later the team took a massive 1:35 off the record for the Liverpool & District event at Sefton Park. But that was little consolation.

1973 - A year of consolidation

The disappointing end to 1972 continued in the following spring, when the team could only finish 9th in the Northern 12-stage and again missed qualification for the prestigious AAA event.

However, there were some positive signs during the track season of that year. Of the existing road relay squad, Pete was showing more basic speed and producing quality performances at steeplechase; Roger was training more consistently, racing well on the track, and was definitely getting stronger; Paul and Frank were improving their 5000m times significantly.

The young Dave Evans had suddenly matured into a quality road runner, doing well in several local races, and was expected to be a part of our six man relay squad in the near future. An even younger John Woods was showing great promise, building on regular attendance at the infamous "Tuesday Night" sessions and running 18-20 mile runs with the seniors on Sunday mornings.

Most of the prizes in road races around the area, and indeed many of those across the North, seemed to be won by LHAC guys! But, then, how many canteens of cutlery do you want?

We entered the autumn with high hopes, but it began poorly. We finished "only" 3rd in the Northern 6-stage, although next day saw another Luton-to-Bedford victory. This latter performance was significant, because Dave Evans and John Woods joined Pete, Mike and Frank in the senior team - shades of things to come. Mike missed the Lancashire relay, due to a poisoned toe, and our team came only second, even though **Frank ran the fastest lap.**

One week later, and yet another road relay, the AAA 6-stage championships, held in the picturesque campus of Keele University. Mike was still not well, but would run anyway, because we had an outside chance of medals. Injuries led to late withdrawals, which meant that unsung hero Alan Ascott came into the team via a last minute call-up. Alan was so often on the fringe, and unlucky to miss out on many of the best moments, but he always gave absolutely everything. That day was no exception.

After relatively poor performances on the first two legs, **Frank ran fastest lap of the day**, moved the team from 10th to 4th. Then Pete improved to 2nd on stage 4. A fully fit Mike on stage 5 could have put the race beyond doubt, but he had to fight hard just to hold his position. That left poor Alan Ascott starting in 2nd place, chased by a plethora of star runners. He ran a heroic stage, narrowly losing 3rd place near the end.

So we had finished 2nd and 4th in consecutive years. The potential was there... but you have to do it on the day!

Spring 1974 - Big improvements!

After the high expectations and the near misses of the previous two years, 1974 began positively. A dominant team win in the L&D Cross-Country was followed by another in the West Lincs. Moreover, the latter victory was achieved without "The King", who was working in Nigeria. Although these local successes were pleasing, they were increasingly seen merely as stepping stones on the way to challenging for regional and national titles.

Then it was time for Liverpool Harriers to confront our demons of previous years: the 12-stage relays. That year, the Northern race was held around Stanley Park in Blackpool, on a magnificent course for spectators - they could see the runners several times on each clover-leaf-pattern lap. Mike was back, all the "usual culprits" were reasonably fit, and we could supplement them with a mixture of reliability (Peter Carey, Stuart Graham) and star youngsters (John Woods [18], Peter Kennedy[17]). Across our supporters and runners there was great excitement and anticipation. Although we had never won this race, we really expected to do it this time. Even Tom was confident!

What a race! Great runs by every member of our team: Alan Gerrard, Peter Carey, Stuart Graham, John Woods, Dave Evans, Tony Farrell, Peter Kennedy, Pete Waddington, Mike Turner, Roger Harrison, Paul Carey, Frank Davies. But it was a close race against Airedale & Spen Valley, which culminated in a final six-mile stage which would be remembered for many years to come. Thanks to a great 11th leg by Paul, Frank started 20 yards ahead of John Temperton. Terrific tension, which led to Frank starting very quickly, opening a big gap, and then suffering a profuse nose-bleed. Eventually (after lots of hankies and tissues!) it was a clear win for Liverpool Harriers and wild celebration by the many supporters. As the Daily Telegraph headline said, it was "blood sweat, and tears"! **Liverpool Harriers: Northern Road Relay Champions at 6-stage and 12-stage!**

The Club had qualified (emphatically!) for the AAA 12-stage for the first time in four years, and we expected to do quite well at Sutton Park. But, like many clubs before and since, our team could still not cope with the physical demands of the Sutton Park course, and the result was a rather disappointing 11th.

Autumn 1974 - A grand plan and the team to deliver it

It has been said "a relay team is only as good as its weakest runner". True.. but only part of the story. If you want your team to win, then the key is to get the very best out of every runner - this is not a "9 to run, 6 to count" situation! If each of our six runners goes 5-10 seconds faster, that means 45 seconds at the finish: often the difference between first and nowhere. As a general principle, this means following the pace of a marginally faster runner where possible, and only leading when it can be decisive.

Clubs which have little chance of finishing high up in relays will often put their better runners on early stages, so that the team can hit the front and receive the plaudits. The downside is that team-mates on later stages struggle to stay with far faster competitors, and run below their potential, so the overall team performance suffers. In the past, when Liverpool Harriers had an "average" team, this approach was sometimes used. But, now that we had a chance of winning big events, the strategy had to change!

When the 6-stage relay season approached, there was reason for confidence. As ever, Mike was consistently fast, but the others were all improving. Frank and Paul were closing the gap to Mike, Pete was consistent and reliable, and Roger was matching his eternal aggression with a degree of maturity and pace judgement we had not seen before. Furthermore, the youngsters (Dave and John) were showing ability beyond their years: Dave was now part of the "big six", and John was ready to make a challenge.

Tom and the team members gave a lot of thought to the particular strengths of each runner, in order to get the best team order:

On the lead-off stage, the key ability is to hide in the bunch, mark your main rivals, and keep the team in contention. Dave was a master at this - often beating opposition which was theoretically faster!

Stages two and three are usually frantic, with lots of changes of position, because many of the weaker teams field their best runners early in an attempt at brief glory. Roger and Pete were so calm in these circumstances, rationing their efforts sensibly, closely following the major rivals, and avoiding kamikaze errors of pace judgement.

Stage four is typically when the main players start to show, and it is vital not to let your rivals gain any big gaps. The last two stages tend to be similar to stage four, but more lonely. The strategy is to keep the fastest runners for these stages, with the final stage given to someone with a known "kick", just in case! We used Mike, Frank, and Paul - with Frank or Paul running the anchor leg.

An excellent build-up!

Everybody's race programme and training in the weeks leading up to the 6-stage events were aimed at "peaking" when it mattered. The Liverpool & District Road Relay was used as a trial - mixing up the LHAC teams to give more competition. The final result: Liverpool Harriers teams 1st, 2nd, 5th. Fastest laps overall: Frank, Mike, Paul.

We headed east to "Sunny Cleethorpes" to try to regain the Northern 6-stage title. Tony Swindlehurst has a home movie which records the desolate conditions: a bitter wind along the sea front and no shelter. Under these circumstances, the first leg was bound to be tactical and close. Dave Evans handled it perfectly, and built a small lead in the closing stages. Roger, Pete, Mike, Paul and Frank extended that lead, to *regain the Northern Championship* with victory over Bolton by two minutes, and Mike was our fastest runner.

In the Lancashire Road Relay held the following week, Tony Farrell ran the first stage and came home with a lead which was held to the finish by the "big six" plus Peter Kennedy. This time Frank was our fastest. Superb runs all round, culminating in *a new race record*.

Gold at last?

Now for the AAA 6-stage, to be held at Wimbledon. Surely this time we could do it?

We need to digress at this point. Prior to 1974, a southern outpost of Liverpool Harriers had formed in Wimbledon. It was based in flats in a house on Murray Road - a house owned by the brother of tennis star Virginia Wade. The location was near the Common and near the famous "Laureston Cottage" where many international runners came to train (including Ron Clark on his visits to the UK). The likes of Mike Fearon, Tony Swindlehurst and Stuart Graham lived there at various times, and many others stayed for the odd night when in the area. So when Wimbledon was chosen as the venue for the AAA 6-stage in 1974, many of our most voluble supporters were already on site!

The supporters were great. And they had plenty to enjoy:

Dave ran the first stage, against very strong opposition, and finished 5th, about 25 seconds off the lead - just as planned! On the second leg Roger pulled up to 3rd, closing the gap to the front teams, and then Pete gave us a narrow lead at the end of the third stage. There was something of a surprise on stage four, when Mike was relegated to second, despite running sixth fastest lap of the day. He and Richard Newble (Invicta) had worked together all the way, to pull well ahead of the rest, and Mike just lost out in the final sprint. Paul ran away from the Invicta man on the next stage, and was able to hand over a 16 second lead to Frank, who extended it to 42 seconds by the end.

Once again, consistency was key: our fastest man was Mike (17:08) and our "slowest" was Paul (17:32).

Liverpool Harriers' first AAA senior team title since 1885!

The presentation should have been quite special, but the team missed it! Runners and supporters went back to Murray Road, then Mike took us on a mass warm-down which became a six-mile run to Richmond Park and back!

1975 - A promising start

After the success at Wimbledon, mention of Liverpool Harriers in the press frequently included the phrase "current AAA Road Relay Champions". We were keen to keep it that way.

The increasing strength of our squad was demonstrated in the local cross-country races early in 1975: first 3 men home in the Liverpool & District, and first 4 in the West Lincs. In both races Paul showed a new level of stamina, which he then repeated in the Northern race at Burnley, being our first counter. Some of our team at Burnley had been suffering from colds, and not much was expected overall, but excellent performances on the day resulted in LHAC beating Gateshead (at last!). Unfortunately, Airedale did even better - so we settled for silver.

Alongside these Senior medals, John Woods had a major breakthrough to finish 3rd in the Junior race, where our team also finished 3rd.

The National Cross-Country was held at Luton, on a relatively flat course, which was very firm after a dry winter and suited a team of road runners. Paul suffered a foot injury, and did well to finish at all, but the other counters ran well, and that gave us 2nd place behind Gateshead.

The best LHAC Senior Cross-Country Team performance in living memory: Mike 20th, Frank 46th, Roger 49th, Pete 80th, Dave 89th, Paul 134th.

John Woods secured a top ten finish in the Junior race at Luton, where the winner was the Southern Counties **400m** title-holder, a certain "Steve Ovet". John could have made the England Junior team for the World Cross-Country Championships, but chose instead to make use of his family background and run for Eire. That was the start of an international career which would include many appearances in the World Cross-Country (finishing as high as 14th) and participation in the marathon in the 1988 Olympics at Seoul.

Spring 1975 - Ups and downs

As title-holders for the Northern 12-stage, and clearly in good form, Liverpool Harriers were probably favourites for the 1975 race. Possibly Gateshead could get near us, if all their stars turned out (Brendan Foster, Charlie Spedding, Lindsay Dunn, Max Coleby, etc.).

Charles Rice had an excellent idea to sway the odds further in our favour: hosting the event at Calderstones Park, over roads where most of our team trained every day. He conceived a course which involved three different laps, and the distances suited our team perfectly! "Big" Dave Evans (ex Sefton Harriers) had joined us recently, and he was fastest overall on the short stage. Frank was fastest on the medium one, and Paul fastest on the long stage. Gateshead were well under strength, and we won by two minutes, ahead of Derby & County.

And so to Sutton Park, for the AAA event. The team looked strong and we really fancied a win. However, the race was disappointing yet again! "Little" Dave Evans was usually a safe lead-off runner, but that day he ran about a minute slower than we had anticipated. That was

followed by several other sub-standard performances, and we were well outside the medals. Gateshead had all their big names running, and won easily. Brendan turned the knife in the wound when he said "Ah well, never mind, you won the Northern didn't you"!

Let's forget it and move forward!

Autumn 1975 - The "Big Six" roll on!

The autumn relays began as usual with the Liverpool & District event at Sefton Park. Mike was not available, but we still got 1st and 2nd teams, with Frank fastest overall, ahead of Paul.

Dave was not yet on top form. But John Woods had shown well through the summer, and so he was picked as lead-off runner for the Northern 6-stage on a very hilly course at Bolton. Mike was back, and was our fastest on the day, but the rest of our team under-performed, and we were a poor second to Bolton.

Dave came good in the Lancashire Relay. Peter Carey, the other addition to our team in the Northern, also had an excellent run. At the end we were two minutes clear of the rest, and *one second inside our own race record*.

Victory at Southport had been expected, but the next week was different - back to Wimbledon Common for the AAA 6-stage race, with all the pressure of trying to retain the national title.

Actually, it was a bit of an anti-climax on the day: same course as last year; same team; same result!

In 1974, Dave had finished 5th on the opening stage. This year, having regained his place from John after the Northern race, he was an excellent 4th, close behind the leader.

Our "leg two specialist" Roger produced his usual gutsy performance to put us in the lead after stage 2 and Pete finished a close second to Cardiff on the next lap. With the runners to come, our prospects looked good. Stage 4 was the hottest of the day: Frank passed the leader, but was then narrowly outsprinted by Keith Penny and Richard Newble - 6th fastest lap of the day, but losing a place, just like Mike the previous year!. So we were shunted back into third place.

No problem! On stage 5, Mike put us emphatically back in front, and Paul's elegant long strides brought the team home with a 37 seconds victory. *AAA Champions again*

We made the presentation this time!

1976 - Perhaps an elusive AAA 12-stage win this year?

The focus was now on adding a 12-stage title to the 6-stage one, which had never been done. As usual, Gateshead would be the team to beat. Having spotted Charles' cunning ruse in 1975, when he arranged for the Northern 12-stage to take place on our home patch, Gateshead hosted the race in 1976. Although they were not at full strength, "Big Bren" was running one of the short stages in the middle of the race. We had Keith Burrell on that leg, and he was terrified! He need not have worried. By the time his stage started, Liverpool were nearly two minutes ahead and, although Brendan pulled quite a bit back, we stayed in front to the end.

Clearly this team would take some beating at Sutton Park. Tipton would be strong, on their home patch, and Gateshead would pull out all the stops, but we thought we could really compete this time. The prospect of victory and glory galvanised the Club: there was a coach full of runners and supporters, another coach for more supporters, and yet more travelled by train or car!

At last the team all ran well:

Pete Waddington had a blinder on the lead-off leg to come home 4th. Tony Farrell lost three places on the second stage, but only by seconds, and the gaps were small enough for Roger to bring us back to 3rd after 3 stages. Dave Evans made up for his 1975 disappointment by gaining another place with a well-judged run, so we were lying second to Gateshead.

On stage 5 we had Dave Murphy, back on holiday from Reno University. Dave had put down some great performances recently in the U.S., but he discovered (like so many other runners over the years) that the quality of runners in this race is something special, and the Sutton Park course itself demands respect! He had a reasonable run, but lost three places.

Keith Burrell immediately regained two, and then Frank pulled back another, leaving only Gateshead ahead. Second was retained by the Carey brothers and John Woods.

With two stages to go, the situation was: Gateshead in the lead by over a minute, Liverpool second, Tipton about 20 seconds behind in third place. Stage eleven was a cracker! Mike was chased by Tipton's Andy Holden, who virtually closed the gap before Mike changed gear and Andy blew up! Mike also had the satisfaction of running inside 26 minutes (a mark of real class).

Tipton told us their final leg runner could snatch silver, but we had Paul Burton (a good 5000m performer, with a strong kick), and he increased the gap for a comfortable second place.

Everyone ran well, and *our team beat the course record*. Why had we not won? Gateshead had finished over 90 seconds ahead, and we had to admit that Gateshead's full strength team for this event was unmatchable.

Autumn 1976 - Dreams of a 6-stage hat-trick

September arrived, and thoughts turned to preparing a team to win the AAA 6-stage again.

First and second teams again in the Liverpool & District relay. This was getting easy!

Next came the Northern 6-stage. Team selection and running order was not easy. Dave was our expert "leg one" runner, but John Woods had forced his way into the 6-man squad again, after an excellent track season. However, we didn't see John as an opening leg runner. It was a difficult and important decision. In the end Pete seemed the best option, and he ran the opener for us in the Northern 6-stage at Derby. All worries disappeared as he came into sight up the final climb, powering into a comfortable lead. Mike was next, because he wanted to get back to Cambridge quickly: he ran our fastest of the day (extending the lead) and then rushed to the station. John, Roger, Frank and Paul finished off

the job, with the second team out of sight. Mike had run our fastest, and Frank (having become a dad for the first time a few days earlier) was our slowest, but only 35 seconds covered the six.

The Lancashire Relay of 1976 was a copy of 1975 - a victory over Bolton by nearly 2 minutes, but this time without Mike. Frank was fastest, but only one second ahead of Roger, who fought Mike Freary all the way on his stage. Again, it was good to see only a little spread across the times of the whole team.

In the lead-up to the AAA 6-stage, it was clear that many of the Northern teams thought they could get close to Liverpool Harriers this time. Furthermore, Athletics Weekly highlighted the qualities of Aldershot and Tipton (Southern and Midlands champions respectively), while somewhat reluctantly saying that Liverpool would be hard to beat. But we were confident, for three reasons. Firstly, the venue was Southport once again - a flat lap of a little over 4 miles, ideal for our runners. Secondly, all six were running well and consistently. Thirdly, there would be terrific support for LHAC all around this local course.

It was a beautiful, sunny day.

Pete again ran the initial stage, and again ran well, to finish just behind Tipton's Andy Holden.

On stage 2, Roger took us briefly into the lead, but was then overhauled by top international Dave Black of Small Heath.

The race really took shape on the third stage, with several of the "big guns" moving their clubs through the field. John did well to hang on, and only lost two places, but Bernie Ford had brought Aldershot through into a significant lead.

Paul set about closing the gaps, and pulled us up to 3rd with a typically solid effort, but Aldershot were still worryingly ahead, and they had two good runners to come.

Stage 5 was a classic! Mike soon gained second place, and was clearly having a great run. Now he chased after Les Presland of Aldershot - a runner with many major successes over the years. For a while it looked as if Mike would simply scorch past, but Les was renowned as a real fighter, and their neck-and-neck battle over the final half-mile resulted in Aldershot preserving a lead of just one stride at the changeover.

The last leg was a Davies clan duel: our Frank versus Aldershot's Taffy but, once Frank broke clear after a mile, the result was not in doubt.

A hat-trick of AAA wins! The margin was 37 seconds - the same as the previous year! Once again, consistency was the key: no bad runs, and only 21 seconds between fastest (Mike) and slowest (John).

One of the spectators that day was Geoff Smith, who was in the process of switching clubs from Southport to Liverpool Harriers. He was a relative novice to the sport, but already showed amazing ability (and would go on to break the UK record for the marathon and to compete in the Olympics). With Geoff added to this squad, who could stop us adding a fourth title next?

1977 - Still searching for that AAA 12-stage victory.

The Northern 12-stage of 1977 was held at Gateshead again, and we beat Gateshead by a minute and a half. Unfortunately, Airedale finished the same gap in front of us! "New boy" Geoff Smith was flying, and was easily fastest overall on the long stage. Paul Carey ran equal fastest on the short stage (with Mike McLeod) when taking us into a short-lived lead, but there were several poor runs as well.

A few weeks later, and the AAA 12-stage again. With a bit more consistency added to the Northern performance, LHAC could challenge for victory at Sutton Park. Paul Carey was already gearing his training towards the track season, and Pete Waddington was not fully fit, so they both ran short stages. We welcomed back Dave Murphy (on vacation from the U.S.) and Ron Symington. But the consistency was not there. On the short stages, Paul ran 3rd fastest overall (behind Brendan Foster and Ray Smedley). Pete and Ron also ran well, but others were off their best. On the "killer" long stage, Dave Murphy had another disappointing performance, and Mike Turner had a slow run by his standards. On the plus side, Geoff and Frank both dipped under the 26 minute barrier, and were both in the fastest six. Overall, we came a respectable second to Gateshead, just as the previous year. Tipton were well behind us, and Airedale even further back. Gateshead had yet again shown real quality in depth, and deserved their clear victory.

Autumn 1977 - Four in a row?

After the 12-stage disappointment, came a reasonable track season for the Club, with growing hopes of winning the AAA 6-stage for the 4th time. After another convincing performance in the Liverpool & District relay (first and third teams), we were most people's favourites for the Northern title, to be contested at Wakefield. But we had problems. Mike was not available; Geoff Smith was away; Pete was struggling with a cold; Paul was tired after a hard track season (he and Geoff both ran sub 14 minutes in the AAA 5000m). All this meant we had to juggle the team, to try to hide weaknesses and hope to sneak a narrow victory.

It was a tough race, held in poor conditions. Dave and Paul ran early, and lost ground to Derby and Bolton. Pete's run on stage 3 was better than we expected, but not to his normal standard, so our big rivals Bolton were well ahead. Then John ran splendidly and held Mike Freary on the next stage. On leg 5, Bolton produced a guy we hardly knew at all: Greek marathon runner Kirk Lazarides. Roger ran against him, and pulled some time back, but things looked ominous. We were second at the final change-over, 70 seconds behind Bolton. Even Tom looked worried! Bolton's last man was Eric Rannicar - another runner we didn't know well, so it was difficult to guess whether Frank had any chance of catching him. At half-way the gap was still 40 seconds, but Tom was shouting "he's just around the corner, and he's dying"! Tom was right: the gap was closed with 400m to go, and LHAC won by just 4 seconds. Phew!

Our two extra runners for the 8-man team in the Lancashire relay made a big difference against Bolton, and we won by a clear minute.

Now for a fourth AAA 6-stage victory? The venue was a hilly course at Melton Mowbray, and the standard was especially high, with all the Midlands clubs turning out in force. Pete ran the lead-off lap, somewhat below expectations, and finished well down the field. Roger pulled back some places, and handed over to John around 10th position. John found the hills to his liking, and came in 6th. On stage 4, Frank ran 6th fastest of the day, to finish 2nd, but Aldershot were ahead by about a minute. Gold seemed to have gone, but silver medals looked certain, with two sub-14-minute 5000m runners to come. Unfortunately both Geoff and Paul failed to reproduce their track form, places were lost, and we came away with a frustrating 4th position.

1978 - End of an era?

Towards the end of the 70s, Paul moved south and never ran for the Club again. Also Pete moved to Cumbria, and we would see little of him in the future. Many of the other established runners were now past their best.

For the AAA 12-stage relay, Mike and Roger were absent and there were several new names. The race began well: John won the first leg in a sparkling 25:33, to become our fourth member of the "sub 26" club. Geoff ran well (under 26 minutes again), as did Sean Butler, on a short stage, and the team came 8th: respectable, given the overall lack of experience.

The AAA 6-stage that year was held at Crystal Palace, and we finished in the middle of the field: respectable for most clubs, but nothing special to report for Liverpool Harriers!

1979 - The new breed

During the late 70s, a group of promising youngsters was coming through the Club's Youth and Junior teams. The key ones were Chris Dagnall, Ed Arrowsmith, and Brian Currie, who would all make the Senior teams in the near future. Chris Dagnall actually made it first, in the Lancashire and AAA relays of 1979.

The relay team's successes had raised the profile of Liverpool Harriers, and so the Senior team was also swelled by established runners from other clubs who joined LHAC the next few years. However, many of them seemed to be happy to win prizes in local individual events, and did not put much priority on the championship races. Frank McGuire from Blackpool joined in 1979, and was one of the few "in-comers" who committed himself to the team ethic. Unfortunately, his career meant moving again, so he was only with us for a couple of seasons. He was our lead-off man in teams which won the Liverpool & District Relay (veteran Mike was second fastest of the day!), came 4th in the Northern 6-stage, finished second to Bolton in the Lancashire Relay, and gained a respectable 8th in the AAA 6-stage.

Early 80s - Ups and Downs

1980 followed a similar pattern to the previous year: 3rd in the Northern 6-stage, 2nd in the Lancashire Relay, 6th in the AAA 6-stage. All these performances would have been pleasing ten years previously, but not now.

The new breed made their presence felt in the spring of 1981, when Liverpool rather unexpectedly regained the Northern 12-stage title on a pretty, rural course near Hull. The team was a mixture of old lags, imports and the ex-Juniors: Ian McEvoy, Colin Smith, Roger Harrison, David Hughes, Ed White (ex Wirral), Brian Parsons, John Woods, Brian Currie, Chris Dagnall, Mike Turner, Frank Davies, Ed Arrowsmith.

No Mike Turner or Ed White for the AAA 12-stage, and too many youngsters facing their baptism at Sutton Park, so 16th was about all we could expect.

There was good news in the autumn, when Liverpool Harriers won the Northern 6-stage at Wakefield by over a minute, by a team of: Steve Hollewell (who had moved to Germany, but was back temporarily in the UK), Roger, Ed White, Chris, John, Frank. Ed White was not eligible for the Lancashire Relay, and John was absent, but Dave Evans, Mike, Ed Arrowsmith and David Hughes augmented the Northern team and we won this race too.

When the AAA 6-stage was held a week later, at Crystal Palace, only Frank was there from the "big six" of the mid-70s. But the newcomers ran well (especially Ed White) and 7th place was quite encouraging.

The lack of true depth in the distance running side of the Club was evident again in the spring of 1983. We qualified for the AAA 12-stage thanks to a good performance in the Northern 12-stage at Barton-on-Humber (Frank won the first stage and John ran a very strong 6-mile leg). However, Sutton Park was again a disaster, from the moment Keith Ainsworth finished a distant last on the first stage. The team never recovered, and came home in a dismal 20th position, equalling our worst-ever placing in event.

A semblance of pride was salvaged in the autumn, with second place in the Lancashire Relay, but it was followed by only 14th in the AAA 6-stage. This was Liverpool Harriers' 15th consecutive appearance in the AAA 6-stage race, beginning with that inaugural event in 1969, and Frank had been in the team every time. He was absent the next year, but a sequence of 15 individual appearances will probably never be matched. Equally, the Club competed for at least a further two years, which is probably also a record sequence.

The gradual decline of the Club's Senior Men's road and cross-country team continued in the remainder of the 80s, but this account would not be complete without highlighting the achievements in the spring of 1985.

March 1985 - Success in the mud!

Every team dreams of success in the National Cross-Country, but we knew in 1985 that Liverpool Harriers could not realistically challenge for the top team medals. However, there is a trophy for the team outside the first three which finishes all nine starters with the lowest total. A couple of years previously, the win had been in our grasp until Ed White dropped out with about a mile to go, when a place in the first 400 would have been enough. In 1985, that trophy again appeared to be a legitimate target, and served to increase determination as we prepared for the mud of Milton Keynes!

John Woods had finished an excellent 3rd in the Northern at Thirsk (won by Steve Cram) a few weeks before, with the team a close second to Sunderland. We had several runners chasing home our 6th counter that day, and extending the count to nine men looked straightforward. Although John Kelly (ex Pembroke) was not available for Milton Keynes, Dave Murphy was making one of his rare UK appearance and he was aiming to gain a place in the England team.

After a great start by everyone (apart from Tony Hughes!), things looked good: John and Dave were up with the leaders, and we had another four runners in the top 150 or so. However, the course was very hilly and increasingly muddy. On the final lap, Chris Dagnall and Kevin Capper faded badly. Things were looking bad, but the worsening conditions seemed to suit Frank Davies and Alan Cole, who both powered through in the final couple of miles.

Great excitement at the finish, as every runner looked across the finishing funnels to see how team-mates had fared. Dave had come 3rd - a superb run by any standards - and John was close behind. Then we had Ed Arrowsmith and Andy Merrifield (best ever National runs for both of them?), Frank and Alan. Although Chris and Kevin had lost places, they both gave maximum effort to the finish and were not too far outside our six. Then we waited for Tony! He had run a solid race, ensuring he finished, and his placing was good enough for us to win the "nine-man" trophy. After the initial excitement, we realised that we had also won the trophy for top Northern team outside the first three!

The best part was the trip home, when we displayed our two trophies our travelling companions: Pembroke!

April 1985 - Motoring to victory!

The Northern 12-stage of 1985 was held on probably the finest course we have seen: the Oulton Park motor racing circuit in rural Cheshire - smooth underfoot, with some interesting climbs and descents, and excellent views for the spectators. Our game plan was to follow the leaders for five stages, then hit them hard with Chris Dagnall and John Woods on long legs 6 and 8, and stay well clear to the finish. But John Kelly ran well to gain a decent lead by the end of stage 5! It was soon a massive gap, which only reduced on the final stage when Alan Cole deliberately ran conservatively to make sure of victory. The second man to finish punched the air as he crossed the line, believing he had won: Alan had already put on his tracksuit and started his warm-down!

The team that day was: Gary Grant, Andy Merrifield, Tony Hughes, Ed White, John Kelly, Chris Dagnall, Roger Harrison, John Woods, Duncan Black (an 800m runner having his first race for us during his short stay), Kevin Capper (shortly to leave for Birchfield and sponsorship), Mike Woolrich (who has run for several local clubs) and Alan Cole.

As usual, the AAA 12-stage was a disappointment - 13th. Several runners chose to do the London Marathon the week before, so we had to juggle the team composition and order. Our "long legs" were far too slow, apart from John, who always ran well there!

Epilogue

So just how good was that team in the 70s? The results speak for themselves.

Year	NCAA 12	AAA 12	L&D 6	Lancs 8	NCAA 6	AAA 6
1967			2 Fastest: Mike Fearon	8		
1968			3	4		
1969	10		2 Fastest: Mike Turner	4		7 Fastest: Mike Turner
1970	7	20	2	6	10	12
1971	12		1	2	2	5 Fastest: Mike Turner
1972	8		1	1	1	2
1973	9		1	2 Fastest: Frank Davies	3	5 Fastest: Frank Davies
1974	1	11	1,2 Fastest: Frank Davies	1	1	1
1975	1		1,2 Fastest: Frank Davies	1	2	1
1976	1	2 (inside record) Mike Turner sub 26mins	1,2	1	1	1
1977	2	2 Paul Carey 3rd fastest short leg; Geoff Smith, Frank Davies sub 26mins	1,3 Fastest: Frank Davies	1	1	4
1978	8	8 John Woods, Geoff Smith sub 26mins	1 Fastest: Dave Evans	2	2	8
1979	8	10 John Woods, Geoff Smith sub 26mins	1	2	4	8

Why has Liverpool Harriers not been able to perpetuate these successes?

Two key ingredients were present together back in the 70s.

Firstly, the individual runners were all extremely fit and capable of excellent performances on track, road and cross-country (and all seven members of the "big six" [!] gained representative honours at county level or higher). Very few Harriers have matched these performances since - and certainly not 6 or 7 at the same time! There is no magic formula for getting to that level of fitness. If you are prepared to run 100-120 miles per week, on a consistent basis, and throw in three or four high quality sessions each week, then success is certain to follow. It means getting up around 6.30am for a gentle loosening run, doing a day's work, then psyching yourself up for a tough evening session. And doing that day after day after day. How many UK runners do that today? Paula Ratcliffe does it, but she is a professional: her running is a well-paid career and she has a support team to provide her all the assistance she needs. To sustain that level of dedication and commitment is very hard indeed for any athlete on their own.

The second ingredient was a strong team focus - the Harriers squad managed to train so hard and win so many titles only because of shared objectives, which they worked together to achieve. We see the same phenomenon in other sports, where a collective drive leads to unexpected performances: such as "minnows" in the FA Cup, or the GB track cycling team. It means helping each other to improve, and not daring to let your mates down by skimping on preparation for championship races, or by deciding to go prize-hunting rather than competing in key team events.

Back in the 70s, we had the runners, the supporters, the organisation, and the belief. We were very lucky! It has not happened since, and probably never will again. Those of us who participated in those exhilarating team victories are proud to have been part of something *memorable and unique*.