

## *Having a Ball in the BAL*

### **The story of the participation of Liverpool Harriers & Athletic Club in the British Athletic League**

Since 1970, every summer season for the Club's Senior Men's team has been dominated by the BAL fixture list. There have been highs and lows, with some amazing individual performances, to such an extent that it was felt that this aspect of the Club's activities deserved its own independent place within our documentation of the History of LHAC.

#### ***Where it all began***

It became apparent in the middle sixties that the form of inter-club competition provided by Trophy Meetings, which had served the needs of club athletes well for nearly twenty years, was failing to meet a growing demand for a more structured and less haphazard system.

Following a lead from the continent, the Midlands Area League was formed in 1967 and a pilot national league of two divisions was established the year after, which was to precede the formation of the National League proper in 1969. In the face of this, trophy meetings, some of which were major events in their day, have either been abandoned or changed format, as typified by our own Melbourne Trophy which is now staged on the lines of an open meeting.

The National Athletics League originally comprised three divisions of six clubs with four matches contested each year, as at present, in each division. The six clubs take part in all four of their respective division fixtures. The eighteen founding clubs were selected by computer based on the top performances in the various events and Liverpool Harriers, in narrowly failing to make the initial eighteen, won the right to compete in the first qualifying match by winning the regional knockout ahead of Stretford and Derby County. A qualifying match is held at the end of each season to determine which clubs replace the two relegated from the lowest division.

Liverpool Harriers duly won the qualifying match in 1969 and, with Wolverhampton, gained their place in the third division for the 1970 season. Although the basis of the league remains unchanged, it was renamed the British Athletics League and expanded to four divisions in 1971 and eventually to five in 1979, to involve thirty clubs. The teams for the qualifying match are now drawn from the winners of the Area Leagues.

#### ***Year One - optimism and reality***

It was with some optimism and excitement that the Club headed for Oxford on May 16<sup>th</sup> 1970 to contest the first league match. Hopes were soon to fade, however, when it was learnt that a car-load of athletes had failed to arrive, thereby providing an early test of the Club's organisational and management abilities. Sadly the team was reduced to fourth place on the day, although prominent members such as Mike Turner, Joe Speake, Mike Gilbert, Frank Davies, Alan Gerrard, Pete Waddington, Tony Swindlehurst and Tony Farrell had helped to launch the Club endeavours, with Mike Holmes representing the Club for the first time.

Matches at Nottingham and Kirkby followed, with the Harriers places second on both occasions. Going into the final match at Croydon, lying second overall, promotion seemed assured but, rather than coast in, the Club unleashed its full potential with a storming 267 points win, a total which we have only surpassed on one occasion since. All-rounder Bob Bruynooghe amassed an amazing 42 of those points on his own. Thus promotion to division two was achieved at the first attempt, by finishing close behind Wolverhampton & Bilston (19 points to 18½) who went on, shortly thereafter, to dominate the League as, indeed, they still do.

Although Mike Holmes accumulated the most points with 90, the top honours must go to Mike Turner who doubled in the 5000 metres and Steeplechase in all four matches, turning in the remarkable times of 8:59.2 and 14:19.8 at Nottingham, and 8:58.0/14:25.0 at Croydon, on a very loose track. Alan Gerrard doubled in

the 800 and 1500 in those matches, Keith Purves had 3 wins in the 110H (best 15.0) and Barry Williams lofted a 61.84m hammer throw, amongst a number of other good performances.

### ***Year Two - into Division Two***

It was with confidence that we went into 1971 and onto our first division two fixture. Unfortunately, the team performance at Norbiton (Surrey) was undistinguished and Barry

meant that both promotion and relegation would be unlikely.

The \_\_\_\_\_ in the final match at Aldersley Stadium where there was no indication that, in finishing a distant third overall, it would be

Mike Gilbert dominated our sprints with 11.2/22.3/48.3 and Alan Gerrard, topping the scores with 64, doubled 800/1500

Our 1960 Olympian, Tom Farrell, helped us out twice at age 38 and for three matches Mike Turner doubled the Steeplechase and 5000m.

### ***1972 - What went up now comes down***

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A poor last in every match gave us our ??lowest ever?? final total of 4 match points, having only accrued 145 points in the last meeting at Reading, another lowest ever score by the Club. This fixture was also notorious for the condition of the track, which was so poor that the relays had to be cancelled for the safety of the athletes. This is a problem we are unlikely to encounter again, now that the leagues are held on synthetic surfaces.

The Club Newsletter reported after the meeting at Chiswick that "this fixture is best forgotten" and the same could be said for the remainder, if not for some exceptional individual performances. Barry Williams, who set a British, National, Commonwealth and Club Record of 69.42 in 1972 in the hammer, managed 66.92 at Kirkby and set the current Club Discus record of 46.70 on the same day (regretfully his last league match for the Club). Dave Sorrell launched a mighty 77.38 Javelin throw (also a standing Club record) for 7<sup>th</sup> on the UK "All-Time" list, again at Kirkby, with Bill Hartley representing the Harriers for the first time and running a 53.6 hurdles. Mike Gilbert (11.0/48.6), Alan Gerrard (3:50.1), Bob Bruynooghe, Pete Waddington and, of course, Mike Turner (who threw the Javelin at Reading!) provided the back-up and Brian Camp made his first appearance.

### ***1973 - Back in Division 3 - should be easy!***

So 1973 saw us back in division 3 and the first fixture, on the new all-weather track at Kirkby, started with an inspirational 51.8 hurdles from Bill Hartley and continued with a superb 7.10 Long Jump from Junior Steve Wright, but, amazingly, there were no Harriers in either the A or B 200m and we were held back to third on the day.

Steve was also outstanding at Chiswick, helping the team to a surprise second with a magnificent 7.40 (w) Long Jump which still stands as the Senior Club records and gained him a Junior International vest.

One of our most memorable trips was to Swansea, our first visit to Wales, and it was by a convoy of cars that the team made its way down, with an overnight stop at Brecon. [Pete Wadd at I stopped near Hereford with our ladies, and Gill got booked for speeding in a little village the next morning!!] A fine win on a nice day at a track overlooking Swansea Bay [The Mumbles??] rounded off a very enjoyable weekend. Hitherto unmentioned regulars such as Paddy Byrne (50.8), Nick Winter (15.8 and 3.40 PV), Paul Carey (14:33.8), Nick Parry (13.56), John Newett (46.58), Alan Ascott (:40.6) Geoff Birchall and Frank Davies (3:52.8) contributed to a good all-round performance.

A power failure on the train to Euston caused the team to arrive half an hour after the match start at Enfield, resulting in an injury to leading points grabber Bob Bruynooghe through lack of warm-up, and we did well to finish third.

Polytechnic were promoted with 20pts and Liverpool tied with Enfield with a high score of 19pts but lost promotion on the "count-back" in what was to prove to be only a pause in our drift downwards.

### ***1974 - Nearly down and out***

The 1974 campaign opened up with fourth in a match at Luton with a team which the newsletter described as being "seriously crippled" and which also suggested that Roger Harrison had made his League debut. There is almost certainly no connection between the two statements, particularly since Roger's first run was in 1972.

Meadowbank Stadium was the next venue and provided the highlight of a year which unfortunately resulted in our relegation to division 4. At Edinburgh Bill Hartley set a 400m divisional record of 47.4 and a p.b. 100 metres of 10.8. ??Ron Symington ??run of his life behind Steve Ovet with a ???3:48.2, pulling Phil McEvoy to 3:52.1. Steve Wright completed five events to help the team to second spot.

This standard was not maintained at Bristol or Brighton where a couple of fifth places sealed our fate. Bristol was sad for another reason as it saw the final track appearance of ex-European record holder Tom Farrell who had distinguished himself so greatly

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the low point of our league endeavours. The standard of the ??division ??consistently high and even with the help of our good scorers Turner, Waddington, Davies, Speake, Gerrard, Hartley, ?? , Parry, Holmes and Bruynooghe, relegation out of the league altogether was only avoided ... ??? new division five??

### ***1975***

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The year seemed to be typified by the first match when, following another long haul to Brighton, we were greeted by a track which had suffered a tremendous storm and in places was completely flooded from kerb to kerb, with little running surface to be seen. Some events were cancelled, and the athletes splashed through the remainder

[this track, at Withdean, became the ground of Brighton & Hove Albion Football Club]

### ***1976 - Who says you win nowt with kids!***

.. ??no prospect in the League until greater support and resources could be mustered. but 1976 saw an astonishing turnaround despite another opening fixture at Brighton. The team included eight youngsters under the age of eighteen, with Rob Harrison running a p.b. 1:56.6 and Maurice Ducasse who surprised with a 49.4 relay leg. A clear second on the day followed by another second at Solihull... good start... best was still to come..

??Our win at Norbiton set us up for promotion, established the Club's highest ever points total at 271, and even gave us the possibility of becoming the division champions.

??Newett (51.46), Ducasse (49.2), Roger Harrison (3:53.1) were ??? best.

Eventually, enough was done at Parliament Hill to confirm the Club as winner of the division and we have not surpassed the 19pts match score and the 911 events points in any other year. As it turned out, 1975 would be the last time the Club was relegated and it is not possible, even if the worst were to happen, for the Club to find itself in division ?? again until 1986 {Editor's Note: what prophetic words!}

One unhappy note was the final run of Joe Speake at Parliament Hill. Joe had served his Club and Country well and went ??to the Mexico Olympics where he ran in the 4x100m relay.

### ***1977 & 1978 - Consolidation***

The years 1977 and 1978 were spent consolidating in the third division. the Club pressed for promotion during both seasons but finished third on each occasion.

It was also a period of change, however, for we were to lose fine athletes such as Pete Waddington, Steve Wright, Alan Gerrard, Maurice Ducasse and John Newett, all of whom regularly raked in the points. Nevertheless, we witnessed the emergence and development of a new crop of talent which included the following 1977 and 1978 performances;

Geoff Smith (3:49.7/14:15.0), John Woods (9:15.6 and 14:16.6), Paul Carey (??3:51.8), Pete Nickson (?? , standing Club record), Tony Baker (??58.80), Paul Tobin (??), Sean Butler (??), ?? ?? (10.8/22.2), Derek Spencer (49.3), Ian Elliott (??), Dave Galvin (50.6).

"Ever presents" such as Mike Holmes and Brian Camp ???? provided continuity between ??changing to see Bill Hartley make his comeback after serious ?? injury.

### ***1979 - Start of a rise in performance***

The Club did not manage to win a single league match from 1977 to 1979, although 1979 was ?? to be the start of our ??finest times in the league to date. The Haringey club joined our division and were obviously in the middle of a meteoric rise which was eventually to take them from the Southern League to first division without a pause. We held off the challenge of the other teams to secure the second promotion slot despite the lack of match wins.

The year was also not without ??torment. We contrived to be late for the last fixture at Enfield, with Vaulters and Hammer Throwers changing on the coach. On the return journey the coach windscreen blew in with a bang, showering the front passengers with glass fragments and allowed a ??brisk wind to blow down the aisle for the remainder of the trip.

[Editor's Note: Like John Woods once said: "Old athletes never die, they just move to the front of the bus"!]

The next meeting at Bristol was ??held on Spring Bank Holiday. Tailbacks and heavy rain forced a detour off the M5 and resulted in a late arrival by 45 minutes. By chance the downpour had postponed the start of the meeting and the conditions were so bad that there was talk of cancellation despite the all-weather track. Finally, only the pole vault was cancelled although the trackside bar proved to be the best facility, which the coach driver

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coach bounced abutment and kerb!

### ***1980 & 1981 - Much to remember, but we stay in the same Division***

There ??followed a span of three years in division two. There was no prospect of holding Haringey back in 1980 and, in the event, ex-first division clubs Cardiff and Sale proved too strong also. In fourth place, however, we did confirm the Club as the second best in the North, as Stretford crashed out in a downward slide which was to see them into division five by 1983.

A joint second with Sale in the Kirkby fixture was our best result and the closest we have come to beating our great local rivals. During the year, Brian Camp (14.90, club record), Bill Hartley (51.3/21.9), Rob Harrison (1:49.5), Paul Dunn (21.9), Dave Hughes (3:48.0) and Derek Spencer (??48.9) excelled.

At the Stretford fixture a superb Club record was set in the 4x400 metres relay. Harrison 48.9, Galvin 48.1,

Spencer 48.0, Hartley 47.4 combined for a 3:17.4 clocking which put them 7<sup>th</sup> on the all-time British club Rankings.

??something about Mike Turner doing a vets record 14:22 behind Murphy's 14:10??

... marred by the tragedy which befell talented junior Peter Everett. Peter ran a terrific ??[time] ??800 and won the "B" race, but then lapsed into a coma immediately afterwards, from which he never recovered. The Club now hold an 800 metres race for junior men in the Club Championships, awarding a trophy in his name????

1981 was a year of mixed fortunes and controversy. Never before had the Club competed with such distinction in the league. The final position was third, which matched our previous best of 1971, but this time we tied with second place (Cardiff) on 17pts only to lose on the "countback" with 852½ match points to 862.

The figures only tell half the story because, on our fifth trip to Brighton, with many having dropped out beforehand, the team performed very well only to be disqualified in the 4x400 relay (along with two other teams) following a very dubious interpretation by the track referee of the rules on breaking from lanes. As it turned out, this was sufficient to drop us one place on the day and eventually cost us promotion to the first division.

Much credit for the good performance at Brighton must go to our internationals Dave Murphy, Paul Dunn, John Woods and a particular Bill Hartley, who had a very bust afternoon. Brian Camp broke the Club triple Jump record again, with 14.92, hotly pursued by the talented Dennis Davis.

The final match at Birmingham was a milestone and, perhaps, a portent of things to come. Not only was it the first match win by the Club in five years (despite our promotion and high league positions over the period), but it was the first ever division two match win out of 16 contested by the Club since 1971. Many contributed on the day, but none more so than John Woods with a remarkable double (reminiscent of Mike Turner) in the 1500 and 5000 of 3:49.6 and 13:58.9, with very little rest allowed by the timetable, although ably assisted by Geoff Smith who turned in 3:46.8 in the 1500 metres.

### ***1982 - Any chance of something special to commemorate our Centenary?***

Into 1982 and Liverpool Harriers' Centenary. It was everybody's ambition for the Club to achieve division one status in such an historic year. The team had, indeed, finished 1981 strongly but there seemed little else to base optimism on. We had never beaten Sale, not had we beaten Edinburgh A.C. who finished ahead of Sale in division one the previous year.

Once again a poor opening effort, now a hallmark of this club's league endeavours, left us in fourth spot with a lot to do. A surprise second at Enfield, however, brightened the prospects considerably. Edinburgh A.C. slumped to fifth and with two London matches out of the way, our London rivals now faced a lot of travelling. Enfield was our fiftieth league fixture, with Mike Turner and Mike Holmes being the only survivors from the first match in 1970. It was Richard Haycock who stole the show with an impressive 10.6 100m.

Stretford was the clincher, largely thanks to our internationals Hartley (51.3), Harrison (1:49.9), Murphy (3:47.8/14:13.0) and Smith (3:49.6). A superb 4x400 metres Club relay record of 3:11.9 (averaging less than 48 seconds per leg) provided the finishing touch. At the end of the meeting, Mike Holmes was presented with a silver salver by his team mates, in recognition of his 50<sup>th</sup> league match.

Barring a disaster, division one was secure, although a weakened team for Grangemouth did worry the team management. Strengthened by supporters, a large party of 40 set off for Grangemouth via a memorable overnight stop at an establishment known as "The Truck Inn".

Our London opposition was predictably affected by the 400 miles journey and only Sale stopped us winning the match. Mike Holmes accumulated his 1000<sup>th</sup> league point, probably the ??first athlete in the country to do so and Dennis Davis bounded a terrific 15.27 Club record Triple Jump, having already won at the three previous fixtures. Many points had come from events which had been weak in the past, such as High Jump (?? 1.98), Javelin (Tony Baker 61.70 and ?? 57.08??) and Steeplechase. Little Alan Cole had endeared himself to everyone when ?? after missing the coach, he hitch-hiked ?? ran five miles to the track to

arrive just before the Steeplechase. He gradually improved throughout the race, to win the event in the final fixture??. Dave McCutcheon, new to the Club and Commonwealth Games bound for the Isle of Man, was a tremendous asset as his 53.9 and 14??? hurdles times suggest.

Most of all, the achievement of becoming a division one club can be put down to ??overall team performances. Liverpool Harriers have invariably held a higher league position than the Club's depth or national ranking would suggest. This is undeniably due, in large part, to the spirit that the teams have generated. It also reflects the quality of organisation behind the team led so well by Tom O'Mahoney, who ??has only missed a couple of the 52 matches (on one occasion when Tom was absent half the team were left standing on the platform when the train pulled out of Lime Street!). Assisted greatly by Brian Jones, who has acted as Team Manager since 1974, and Brian Camp who spent many dozens of hours on the phone during his six year stint as Team Captain. Mike Gilbert, Mike Holmes and latterly Ian Elliott made up the balance of the selection committee, which deliberates long and hard over matters such as availability, injury, permutations, combinations and the demands of athletes (sometimes temperamental!). Finally, let's not overlook the regular support of Charles Rice, Tony Swindlehurst, Jane Holmes and others who have travelled up and down the country for us over the past 13 years and who are as much part of the team as any of the competitors.

Centenary Year and Division One, after 52 matches and thirteen (lucky) years. But this is only the end of the first chapter of the history of Liverpool Harriers' participation in the British Athletics League.

### ***Summary of Liverpool Harriers' British League progress - 1970 to 1982***

1969	Start of B.A.L.	Liverpool H & AC win Qualifying Match
1970	2 <sup>nd</sup> in Division 3	Promotion (3 Divisions, a 4 <sup>th</sup> added in 1971)
1971	3 <sup>rd</sup> in Division 2	Tied with 2 <sup>nd</sup> club. Placed 3 <sup>rd</sup> by virtue of 895½pts to 940½pts
1972	6 <sup>th</sup> in Division 2	Relegation
1973	3 <sup>rd</sup> in Division 3	
1974	5 <sup>th</sup> in Division 3	Relegation
1975	4 <sup>th</sup> in Division 4	Tied with 5 <sup>th</sup> club. Placed 4 <sup>th</sup> by virtue of 826pts to 820pts
1976	1 <sup>st</sup> in Division 4	Promotion
1977	3 <sup>rd</sup> in Division 3	
1978	3 <sup>rd</sup> in Division 3	
1979	2 <sup>nd</sup> in Division 3	Promotion (and 5 <sup>th</sup> Division added)
1980	4 <sup>th</sup> in Division 2	
1981	3 <sup>rd</sup> in Division 2	Tied with 2 <sup>nd</sup> club. Placed 3 <sup>rd</sup> by virtue of 852½pts to 862pts
1982	2 <sup>nd</sup> in Division 2	Promotion to top division.