

snowing. Only a very sensitive few resort to running leggings. (Which, by the way, are never called leggings. They are always called tights. Even when men wear them.)

Everyone else looked like they had done these sorts of races millions of times. They appeared totally at ease with being in a field on a Saturday afternoon far, far away from a Tube station or civilisation.

I started worrying that I'd be one of the slowest. I knew I could run five miles easily enough but I didn't know how fast I would be compared to others. My only benchmark for competitive performance was my school days, and at school I was usually one of the slow ones.

I hated sport at school. It wasn't that I was the slow, unfit kid. Far from it. I loved being active. I spent every free moment helping at my local stables so I could ride horses. I could run fast if it meant running to the fields to catch one of the horses to ride. But when it came to forced PE classes, I deliberately dragged my feet. I resented the militant teachers who yelled at us and made us wear t-shirts even in subzero conditions.

I hated the damp, cold, concrete changing rooms that smelled of industrial bleach, and I hated the sporty, tough girls who mocked me for being scared of catching the netball because it travelled so fast. Most of the time I tried to skive PE by faking illness or hiding in the toilets.

I cannot recall being in a running race since the compulsory sports days at school. Why would I ever travel to somewhere to run on a Saturday, when I could run near home, where a hot shower and hairstyling products await, and then go on to more important things, like lunch out?

When the start whistle blew, everyone hurtled off en masse. It felt good to run in a pack. The course went around a football pitch and then over a small bridge into an open field, along a footpath, into another field, before coming back to the start for another lap.

I kept looking back to check how many people were behind me and was surprised to find there were lots.

There was a much longer line of runners stretching out ahead of me, however, so I ran faster and pushed harder than I usually would have. I couldn't sustain that pace for five whole miles, so I slowed to a walk a couple of times to get my breath back.

People ran past crying out words of encouragement. "Keep going", "Don't stop"

and "You're nearly there". It was a pleasant surprise to discover such a warm display of sporting camaraderie.

Walking in the middle of a race was another dead giveaway of my inexperience. Proper runners don't walk. If you can't sustain the pace, you should go slower. Afterwards people asked me, "Were you OK?", "Did you go off too quick?" and "Did you have a stitch?"

But no, I walked simply because walking was what I did when I got out of puff. I finished the 4.8-mile course in just under 38 minutes, which was somewhere in the middle - not near the front, but, thank the Lord, not near the back!

I had nothing to worry about in this department though. Thankfully local running clubs shed themselves of performance snobbery years ago and all levels are welcomed and encouraged.

Just 20 years ago, recreational sports clubs were only accessible to the athletically gifted or socially privileged. Some of the veteran members of my club have told me that as young men or women, they had to apply to join a club and were asked to produce evidence of their Personal Best Times (PBs) for a series of distances. Some said if they couldn't do one mile in less than five minutes or didn't attend a school with a strong sports reputation, they couldn't join the club. Imagine that: a whole social scene closed to previous generations. No wonder the pub has become the choice activity of the masses.

Fortunately for me, my Loughton debut was relatively painless in comparison to the more typically muddy, hilly and rainy cross-country experience. That autumn was unseasonably warm and it hadn't rained that year since about June, so I escaped the mess. In retrospect this was very fortuitous. Had my introduction to cross-country been as testing as later experiences proved to be, I may well have been so traumatised as to never return to running club again.

After the race, I hung around trying to chat to people. I was expecting a post-race outing to a local pub, but people started to head home. "Is that it?" I thought. "I've travelled all the way to Zone 6 and got my Estée Lauder tote bag dirty, only to travel back again in sweaty clothes?"

My spirits sank. Somehow I'd expected that joining a running club and going to my first weekend race would immediately make me part of a new gang. I'd thought I'd

be drinking and joking with new chums by teatime. It was clear that one club outing was not going to be an overnight fix. It takes time to become accepted into a new group and I obviously had to do a lot more to ingratiate myself into this new circle than one run around a flat field on a mild autumn day.

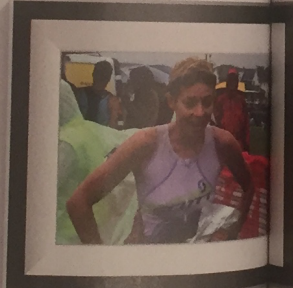
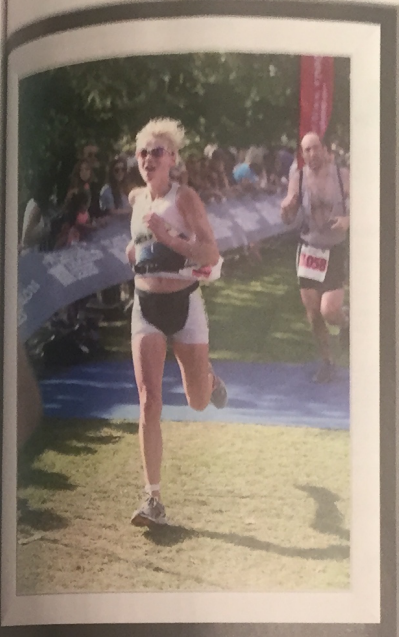
Pub or not, I returned home glowing. The race may only have taken 38 minutes but it had been a whole afternoon out. I'd been in the fresh air, talking to new people, learning new things, visiting a place I'd never seen before (even if it was only Loughton). It hadn't involved a single drop of alcohol and I hadn't thought about the break-up, the guilt and the emptiness all day.

"This", I thought, "is how weekends are supposed to be spent". And not, as I had hitherto believed, chasing the high life.

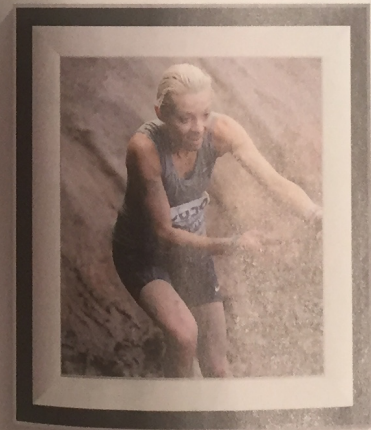


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