

HARD TO BEAT: THE ST. JOHN'S CROSS COUNTRY TEAM OF THE SIXTIES

Edwin Oxlade (1965) remembers how his love of cross country running developed during his time at St. John's. I came across an old college photo the other day. It was of the St. John's cross country running team of 1967-68, three of us standing and three of us sitting and, on the ground, the Cuppers trophy. We won it that season and we won pretty well everything else that college teams competed for.

There was the Teddy Hall road relay (still held now), six individual laps of about two miles, looping around from a city-facing start on the Iffley Road, turning left to return along the backs of the houses, and rejoining the main road to the changeover and finish. We won that against all Oxford colleges and some of the better Cambridge colleges as well. There was always an open invitation from Teddy Hall to any Cambridge college that fancied its chance.

It was mere chance, of course, that put five above-average runners into St. John's at more or less the same time, and further good fortune that always made a sixth runner available to make up a team. Not that some of those sixth men were not themselves keen and able competitors. It's just that they were always different. I look at photographs of the team from other years. There are the same five regulars, the flesh and bones of the team, and then there is A.N.Other, never the same person, but serving the same vital purpose: to add the skin that held the team together. Three of the team in the photo ran for the Oxford University Blues: John Valentine who was undoubtedly the star of the side, John (Bob) Langton and Hugh Starkey. Tim Russell was reserve for one year for the Blues and, along with him, I made the University second team, the so-called Tortoises. It was strange how we ignored the irony and took pride in a badge that seemed to signify that we only ran slowly. But Tortoises we were and proud to be so.

With five runners in the top sixteen (eight in a University cross country team) and, shrugging off personal modesty, arguably in the top twelve, it was no wonder that we took some beating in the inter-college competitions. The years I was up, 1965 to 1969, were undoubtedly the glory years for long distance running at St. John's.

They were also still part of a golden era for British distance running. Through the post-war years and up to the start of the eighties the English men's side rarely failed to win team medals in the world cross country championships and, during the sixties and seventies, British athletes won 21 of the 60 available individual senior men's medals. It was only during the eighties that British running started to decline in both strength and depth, just as the African nations began to take a stranglehold on all distance events.



St. John's Cross-Country Team, 1967-68

Back row: Edwin Oxlade; Tim Russell, A.N.Other
Front row: John Valentine; Hugh Starkey; John (Bob) Langton

The success of the St. John's team, of the second half of the 1960s, therefore, has to be seen in the context of an immensely strong and well supported domestic running scene, a large part of which focussed on the universities. Following the Bannister, Brasher and Chataway tradition, both Oxford and Cambridge still had some of the best runners in the country, and many other colleges and universities could count British internationals amongst their students or alumni. At the time that our St. John's team was doing so well, a combined Oxford and Cambridge team could have held its own in international competition, and an all-universities team might have taken on the world with a fair chance of winning.

The best distance runner at Oxford while I was a student was the South African graduate, Henk Altmann. He regularly competed for his college and for the university, despite obviously having his own, much loftier ambitions. In 1966 he finished second to the phenomenon of the time, the great Ron Clarke of Australia, in the AAA's three miles championship at London's White City. The following year he ranked eighth in the Commonwealth over three miles and seventh over six miles, with times that would look very respectable even today.

I suppose it was odd running with him, or rather behind him, in college competition, but his presence in these races, and that of other top class runners (like Cambridge's Mike Turner, a regular member at that time of the English cross country team) gave the rest of us a target for improvement and, far from having a demoralising effect, in a strange way, made me feel that what had previously just been my fantasies of being a top class runner were achievable. The gap between a Tortoise and some of the best runners in the country was still huge, but the presence of the likes of Altmann and Turner in the same races that I ran made it measurable. And, being finite, maybe it wasn't so fantastically unbridgeable after all.

We all brought our running with us to St. John's. Distance running is not a sport that can be picked up at the start and packed away, along with the rest of the paraphernalia for living in College, at the end of each term. Training, for the serious runner – and we were all serious – is an everyday, all year round part of life. We each had a competitive career outside university: clubs and counties to run for and other runners to train with and race against. The Oxford University running scene just made a welcome and uniquely stimulating change. Oxford was, and no doubt still is, a wonderful place for running. There are parks, for example: through the College garden, out the back gate, across Parks Road, up to the entrance by Keble and you're there. One lap on the gravel is a mile and a quarter. Do four of those at race pace – six minutes is respectable – with a minute to recover between them, and you'll know you've been training. Or a long run will take you along the river: up to Wolvercote via Portmeadow and back along the opposite bank, or downstream to Iffley lock and beyond. Sunday was the day for a long run, a day that could be a lonely one in College, but made less so by meeting a few friends for an hour or more of easy exercise.

I remember my first long run as a St. John's student. Straight from school, I had never previously run continuously for further than five miles. John Valentine, also in his first year in College, took us up Cumnor Hill for an out and back course that totalled nine miles. I smile now that I considered it a long run: what, in later, high-achieving year was to become a standard minimum distance for a worthwhile training session. But I was just starting then.

Both John Valentine and Hugh Starkey went on to greater things as runners after graduating from College, as I did. I lost touch with other members of the team but I feel sure they also continued to run. Just as you bring your running to College when you arrive so you take it

home with you when you leave. It's an indelible part of you. Longevity of running careers is as characteristic of the species as the ability to put one foot in front of the other with a brisk and efficient rhythm. I still run regularly, approaching my 60th year.

I wonder whether members of St. John's still pace the roads, footpaths and fields of Oxford with any more serious intent than burning off the excesses of the night before or reducing the spare tyres of modern living? I hope so. They will be continuing a College and University tradition that I like to think reached a not easily matched pinnacle nearly 40 years ago.

Looking back on a long and relatively successful running career that led me to international representation for Northern Ireland at three world cross country championship events, I can see that it all started at St. John's. From school, where running was regarded as something you did when the playing fields were too wet for rugby or some sadistic teacher could think of no better punishment, I entered an environment where it was okay to run and compete for the enjoyment of it, where I could run with serious and gifted athletes and where I learned that the only route to success was thorough regular and hard training. Although I became a much more accomplished runner after I left Oxford, the foundation of future achievements was laid there. Without my four years at College or the fellow students who influenced me, I don't think I would have done what I did. I shall always remember those times with immense affection and gratitude.

J.P.Valentine ran in the Inter-'Varsity Races of 1966, 1967, 1968 and 1971.

H.W.Starkey ran in the Inter-'Varsity Races of 1968 and 1969.

J.R.Langton ran in the Inter-'Varsity Race of 1967.