

August Edition

Mr John West

Annual School Cross Country Race

This race is run every summer, and in 1948 it was to be one of our last pleasures in the 5th Form.

Actually most of us hated it because it was 5 miles of hot agony, apart from its being boring, long, and exhausting.

Don't get me wrong. I liked running, and any races that I took part in consisted mostly in trying to beat Martin O'Connor in the 100 yards, an achievement seemingly always just beyond me. Cross

Country, however, was a different matter. It was not a short race and I had zero chance of ever coming within a mile of whoever would eventually be passing the post first I think, as far as I remember, the idea of the race was that we were running for the honour of the particular House we were in. So, in my case that would have been Challoner, of which, incidentally I was Captain. This comes to mind because I do remember that our House Master was Johnny Mescal and he was there at the start to give us a pep talk.

At that time we had 4 houses, Feckenham, Bampffield, Bourne, and Challoner, and we comprised about 90 in each of them. For some reason Feckenham, this year, seemed to contain an overload of the sporty types.

We were assembled at the front gate on Woodside Lane, when the whistle blew and off we went. Pep talk or not, four of us, who were considered rank outsiders (rather that's what we considered ourselves), quickly dropped to the back of the pack. I have a feeling that Ron Lawrence was one of them. May be John Hughes. We tracked down Woodside Lane, over the Northern Line Underground bridge, and on to Laurel Way.

This is where the race became really tricky. Laurel Way was a dirt road made up of stones and rocks over which it was more of an effort to avoid injury than the actual running across it.

The first part was still downhill but soon we hit the long drag to the top by Totteridge Green. Here we skirted a pond and then began a series of style hopping obstacles, that continued through one field after another. We, the four laggards at the back, had little difficulty in remaining in this position, staggering along almost like drunks.

We came to the last style, and it was time to turn towards Totteridge Lane and begin the long haul back.

We were so far back by this time that I imagined that someone had already won the race. At which thought something clicked within me, perhaps it was a delayed reaction to the pep talk, but I suddenly and unconsciously increased speed to such effect that I was actually running.

Soon, without a word said, I had left my fellow back packers way behind and I was almost sprinting along as if the Hounds of the Baskervilles were after me. To this day I cannot explain it. I suddenly felt exhilarated.

I was actually passing my fellow runners with a freshness I had never felt in previous races like this.

Totteridge Lane went by in a flash, on past the Orange Tree Pub, Totteridge Cricket Club, and on to the dread Laurel Way. Instead of stumbling over the rocks, as I had on the way up, I now skimmed over the top of them, barely touching the surface.

All that remained now was that nasty climb out of Laurel Way and on to Woodside Lane, over the Bridge and dash for the winning post, the last person I passed before getting there was Troy Martin.

No. I had not won the race! Nowhere near it. But Johnny Mescal came up to me and congratulated me as if I had!

This must have been the one time, perhaps, that a pep talk did me good.