

## Interview with Bill Adcocks

by Alastair Aitken

In the UK many people have heard of Ron Hill, not just because he ran so brilliantly in 1969-70 but with his legendary longevity as a runner and, for his well known brand of Ron Hill sports goods. Bill Adcocks of Coventry Godiva athletic club has a lower profile but was equally talented as a marathon runner, when you look back at his record.

Running over the Athens 'Classic' and historic course from Marathon to Athens in 1969 he ran 2hrs 11min 07sec for the undulating test and it was not until 35 years later, in the 2004 Olympic Games that Italian Olympic Champion, Stefano Baldini beat that with 2:10:55. The famous winners over the course, who did not achieve as fast a time as Adcocks would make any marathon book. They include Abebe Bikila, Jurgen Busch, Akio Usami, Colin Kirkham (Coventry Godiva), Ian Thompson, Rodolfo Gomez, Ron Hill, Gerard Nijboer, Douglas Wakihuri and Abel Anton.

Back in 1965 Bill Adcocks surprised the aficionados of marathon running by winning the AAA's marathon in Cwmbran in 2:16:50, ahead of his clubmates, 1962 European & Commonwealth Champion Brian Kilby and Juan Taylor. The latter was the older brother of that great cross country and track runner Dick Taylor. In 1966 in sweltering heat of 85°F/29°C, with an uphill climb towards the finish in Kingston, Jamaica, Adcocks was a close second in the Commonwealth Marathon Championships in 2:22:13 behind Morpeth's Jim Alder (2:22:07.8).

In 1968 Bill Adcocks ran a European record time of 2:10:48 in Fukuoka, Japan. In actual fact when he was 27 years old he was the first man in the World to run four marathons under 2:14. He was also handy over 10 miles with a best of 46:24 for the distance. Bill Adcocks' father Albert never actually joined an athletic club but he did well in good handicap racing. Bill's wife Kay has been a great support to him and they have twin daughters Claire and Elizabeth, born in 1973. Bill Adcocks is Information officer for UK Athletics and was President of the ECCU in 2004-5.

I talked to likable and forthright Bill, on March the 13th 2010, at the World cross country trials at Crofton Park, Birmingham.

When did he start being interested in the sport?

*I started running cross country at the age of 12 in secondary school back in 1954. I liked it from day one. Even before that I had been interested in athletics. At junior school I could only get in the sack race. I was not good enough for any of the sprinting. I was just not fast enough but I was always fundamentally interested.*

*In the first year at secondary school we were not allowed to run cross country so, it was in the second year. As soon as I ran I was hooked on it straight away.*

I thought Coventry Godiva must have meant a lot to him

with so many fantastic runners in the club. It must have been a marvellous move for him?

*I joined them in 1955. I was 13 then. I never looked at it at the time as being a marvellous move. I just went down the local club and that was Coventry Godiva. In those days there was only one athletic club. These days there are loads of athletic clubs but they were the club. I was into athletics and that was where they did athletics so, I joined them.*

As he progressed through life and became a youth did he have highlights?

*As a youth I did not have any highlights. I finished third in the Midland Counties cross country Championships at Worcester in 1958 behind Alan Dean and John Cliff. 48th was my best in the 'National' as a first year youth. As a second year youth I was about 78th.*

His memories as a junior runner are interesting and I remember seeing him at Cambridge in his final year in 1963, when he was 2nd to John Farrington (32:02). Bill's team were first team (2 Bill Adcocks, 3 John Hammond (33:01), 32 G. Horne, and 81 R Fletcher) 118 points ahead of Birchfield Harriers 148 and Derby & County 163.

*That was really my first, in small letters, success as in my first year junior race I was 102nd then 32nd and finally 2nd which was a bit of a surprise. I was a long way behind John Farrington but nevertheless I was the first man for Coventry and we were the winning team.*

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Did he have any indication then that he was going to become one of the top marathon runners in the World?

*No idea at all. Right from the word go I was fundamentally barmy about running. I was very fortunate as I was in the environment, as we have already said, with other good runners around me, older than me. As they were not major competitors but they were there. When you are changing next to a European 'champion and Olympic silver medallist (He obviously meant Brian Kilby and Bas Heatley) it can't help but effect you but I never thought I would beat them. I sometimes trained with them and eventually did beat them. That is a natural progression. That is what happens.'*

*I am not interested in what people tell me they can do when they are 15/16. It's what you actually do do. I think that is the trouble with a lot of the Athletics Press as they are full of that. They tell us about what people are going to do. I am only interested in what they do.*

*I think again, with an open mind you don't produce barriers. Your goal is to be as good as you can be and hopefully progress. Within that framework, if you do that, hopefully to be as good as you can be and if that is the best then that is a real bonus.*

Road relays must have been good things to do in his day?

*Road relays were fundamental. All through the Winter we did not talk about the 'National' cross country. We talked about the London to Brighton (The National relay of the day). Who was going to do what leg? Right from October through to March or April time it was all about the road relays.*

*When I became a junior I was able to get into the team, just as we were on the rise as a club. The first time I went to the London to Brighton was about 1959. I think we were 13th and then within a couple of years we won it. We had fantastic club teams, some that never won the event. There was Portsmouth, Bristol and Derby & County. They all had a great spread of runners. I was very fortunate on the back end of that time. I remember the first time I ran the Brighton, I was on leg one from Old Palace Yard, Westminster and I finished second to Ken Wood. Ken Wood was the 2 mile British record holder at the time so, to finish second behind him I thought "We must be getting somewhere!"*

*Again it was a continuous straight line up. However there were a lot of ups and downs. It was a gradual increase. Times, mileage and the things you require.*

Bill Adcocks' first marathon?

*'Welsh Open in 1964 at Port Talbot and I was 2nd (2:19.29) to Juan Taylor who did 2:15.37.*

*Two major things stuck out in my mind. One was the Athens 'Classic' Marathon and the other finishing 5th in the Olympic Marathon in Mexico. I held the course record in Athens for 35 years. Mexico Olympics in 1968 at the dizzy heights of high altitude the Result was 1 Mamo Wolde (Eth) 2:20:26.4; 2 Kenji Kimihara (Jap) 2:23:31; 3 Michael Ryan (NZL) 2:23:45; 4 Ismail Akcay (Tur) 2:25:18.8; 5 Bill Adcocks (GBR) 2:25:33, 6 Merawi Gebru (ETH) 2:27.16.8. Immediately behind that were in order Derek Clayton (Australia) Tim Johnston (GBR), Akio Usami (Japan), Andrew Baychuk (Canada) and Gaston Roelants (Belgium). 57 finished the ordeal.*

*Fifth is something but in the scheme of things people today are not even where the Olympics were in 1968, never mind that it was at altitude and the effect on athletic times.*

*My first experience of altitude was when I got off the plane in Mexico City. I said to Bill that Chris Finnegan, who won a boxing gold medal for GB made an amusing comment when I asked him about altitude - "From what they told me. If you brushed your teeth you fell flat on your face!" A lot of myths have been dispelled over the years. What people must remember that in those days they had very little experience or knowledge of altitude and we were really guinea pigs in that respect.*

*If a British runner goes into the World cross-country Championships, he may suffer because of the speed for the first mile and he will not be in contact with the leaders. The reason for that is the majority of those taking up the pace have the benefit of living, training and racing at altitude. When they come down they can go faster at sea level because of what the altitude does to the system.*

*I think the problem, if it is a problem, is quite complex and very individual.*

*'What we tend to do now is look at the Ethiopians or Kenyans and, obviously, they are the top of the tree for whatever reasons. What we have got to start trying to do is for our best blokes to replicate the standards that were being set twenty five, thirty years ago or whatever Brendan Foster and Steve Cram and the people of my day were doing. If we can't achieve that first, don't let's think about beating the Kenyans. Let's do something about the general standards to get up to the level where we can start thinking about that.*

*When I look back and remember in 1974 in Rabat, when Ian Stewart won the International 'World' cross country, he beat the top miler in the World, John Walker, three of the top marathon runners in the World, Bill Rogers, Frank Shorter and Waldemar Cierpinski and Olympic 10k silver medallist Emile Puttemans. With that in mind do you think he could still be up at the front with today's top cross-country runners in the World?*

*I think he would. The thing to remember- people might say "He would say, that wouldn't he!" The people of the day if they were best in the day end of story!*

*Comparing means nothing. It is no good comparing me to a Kenyan or whatever. I was one of the best in my day. You can only beat those who were setting the standards or whatever. I was setting the standards.*

*What people of today ought to do is emulate my standards before trying to emulate Gabressalies'. One thing at a time before trying to emulate Gabrselassie. The whole scene is a ladder. You have got to go rung by rung with that ladder. You don't just all of a sudden arrive at the top of the roof. You have got there somehow by going rung by rung. (You would have trouble if there were rungs missing!)*

*20 mile racing was important racing in those days. In the annual Finchley 20 miles race the course record is 1:39.6 and who is the one who still has that course record set in 1972? None other than Bill Adcocks.*

*That was my last decent race. I was always a firm believer in 20 milers. You can run 20 miles every week but you can't run a marathon every week. That was a good guide to how you were going. Again it was part of the progression. Now we have people running a half marathon in 66 minutes and then they have got their calculators out. What time would they do for a marathon? It has got no relevance, a half marathon to a marathon. It's a different ball game altogether. The energy systems, the fatigue. All those type of things that come into play in a marathon.*

*You don't start scratching the surface in the half marathon. It is like chalk and cheese. It is like saying our Tom Cat is going to become the next lion down at the zoo.*

*They are completely different because we have not got many of those races now, those stepping stones. I think that is a retrograde step.*