

John Henning

The man who worked all night - and ran all day

By Terry Eakin

Terry writes: I'm a keen M60 runner with links in Belfast and London. My friend Pete Mullholland suggested that I send you the enclosed article which I have written on John Henning. John was elected to membership of the RRC in 1953, the same year as Jim Peters, as member number 179.

The half-marathon through south Belfast was almost over, most of the runners had finished over an hour ago. After the prize presentations, I started the long drive home through the busy traffic on the Lisburn Road. Suddenly, out of the winter gloom, appeared the solitary figure of an elderly man, slowly shuffling his way towards the finish.

On that dark, wet afternoon I could sense that he was no ordinary runner. Although last in the race, his eyes had a look of determination more akin to an Olympic marathon and he seemed totally oblivious to being soaked by the rain.

Many years passed before I discovered who this figure of my curiosity was. Later in life, I was pleased to get to interview John Henning; one of the most extraordinary ultra-distance runners Ireland has ever produced. This is his story.....

Early Life

John was born in Lisburn in 1910 but spent almost all of his life on Belfast's Shankill road, an area that he described as The Heart of the Empire.

John was one of a family of six and incredibly he spent only four years at school (Jersey Street Primary) before starting work soon after his tenth birthday. He recalled: "My first job was as a paperboy selling the Belfast Telegraph. Later I spent many years with the Corporation Cleansing Department; I started as an apprentice bin-man and was eventually promoted to become a cleaner of road gullies".

The name John Henning first became known in Belfast sporting circles when he played football for Linfield Swifts and was runner-up in the NI Amateur Boxing Flyweight Championships.

However, John soon decided that he wanted to be a runner and his night-shift working allowed plenty of time for training during daylight hours. He remembered "My first runs were around the busy streets of the Shankill and Crumlin Roads but I quickly gave that up when I discovered the solitude of the slopes of Cave Hill and Divis Mountain".



The only photograph of John Henning that I have been able to find is this mural on the end of a Belfast house wall.,

Ulsterville

In 1929, John joined the Ulsterville Harriers, one of Northern Ireland's oldest clubs, who were then based in the Deramore Park area. John's first ambition was to be a champion sprinter but he achieved little success. In those early days, there were few athletics meetings and runners spent most of the time training. Paper-chase events were regularly held through the fields surrounding Belfast; local farmers didn't seem to mind packs of yelping youths crossing their land in pursuit of a trail of litter.

John remembered his first proper cross-country race: "*I completed the course in a pair of borrowed shoes, three sizes too large, stuffed with grass to stop them falling off*"

First Races

One day John was advised by Dick Murphy, a local athletics coach, to take up distance running and he replied: "*No way. The short stuff is hard enough*". However, John was eventually persuaded and he achieved notable success in 1936 by defeating the East Antrim star, Charlie McCooke, in a 14 mile go-as-you-please race from Belfast to Whitehead. John won first prize in both the open and handicap races; for his efforts, he was presented with two identical clocks!

Thinking back to the pre-war years brought a smile to John's face: "*In the mid 1930s, I was selected to run in three international cross-country races. Then I lost interest and by the time I had reached the age of 26, I had retired. Then the War came and I decided that (apart from running away from the Germans) I was too old for athletics*".

Early Training

However, shortly after the War, John was attracted by the new athletics boom. He joined Duncairn Nomads and resumed training despite the protests from his wife who told him that he was past it.

John said he was going to try anyway and embarked upon a training programme which was criticised by most of his fellow runners at the famous Ballygomartin Road club. They didn't think he could sustain his plan to run 20 miles alternating with 15 mile walks on successive days. To prove them wrong, he stopped the walks and ran 20 miles every day.

Nevertheless, as distance runners now know, it takes this sort of dedication to bring results and John Henning was one of the first runners to prove the advantages of high mileage. In later years, the great Olympic champions, such as Emil Zatopek adopted similar techniques with remarkable success.

John had by now decided that he wanted to be a marathon runner and he remembered his daily routine: *“I worked night-shifts from 10:00pm to 8:00am, getting home in time for breakfast, then I had a bit of a sleep before heading out on a long training run around lunchtime”*. Training runs from his Derry Street home took him all over Belfast and up onto the slopes of the Belfast Hills. He ran in rubber-soled gutties, costing two shillings (10p) from Woolworths. A pair of these lasted him only a few weeks before they had to be replaced.

Before long, John had increased his mileage to around 140 per week and had started racing in England at weekends. It was common for him to leave Belfast on Fridays, to travel overnight on the Liverpool boat and then undertake a long train journey to compete in a marathon race. The journey home followed on Sunday and then he went back to work and resumed normal training the next day.

For his first marathons he was advised by Sam Ferris, the Dromore-born silver medallist in the 1932 Olympic marathon. Sam lived in London at that time but he sent weekly letters to John to advise him on training. John always retained a faded copy of Sam’s definition of a marathon champion: The marathon runner must have will power, supported by patience, perseverance, determination, concentration and the temperament to undergo arduous training with no grumbling. These qualities were all part of John Henning’s personality and he developed them with spectacular success over the following years.

Northern Ireland Marathon

Shortly after resuming running after a nine year break, John finished second to Tom Orr in the 1945 NI Marathon Championship. Henning then went on to win this race for the next ten years. During these years marathon running was nowhere nearly as popular as it is nowadays and the numbers taking part were very small. John said *“Usually people ran marathons after they retired from other events and in some years I had virtually no competition”*. On average only about ten runners competed in each race, John remembers one year when he had showered, changed his clothes and was on his way home, before the second runner appeared. The courses were very different from today’s Belfast Marathon route; they usually started at Balmoral Showgrounds and made the return trip to Moira. In later years Celtic Park was used and the race finished with a lap of the track.

Post War Years

After his first few marathons, John was advised to seek better competition by running in England. He ran many races in Britain, where marathon running was now becoming a major spectator sport. The name of Belfast-man John Henning soon became well known following his wins at the: 1947 Manchester Marathon, 1948 Sheffield Marathon and the 1948 Liverpool Centenary Marathon.

Back in Ireland, John also increased his fame by winning the 20 mile Balbriggan-Dublin race in 1948-49 setting a new record of 1:54:04.

Olympic Games Selection Controversy

The Olympics were suspended during the War and there was great excitement when the 1948 games were awarded to London. For a population deprived of major sporting events for so many years, the Olympics marked a new dawn in sport and the competition for selection was intense.

Back in Belfast, John Henning had for many years been spoken about as a possible entry for the marathon and his victories in major English races had by now brought his name to the attention of the British team selectors.

John laughed when he recalled his preparations during Olympic year: *“Three years after the War, Belfast shops were still only supplying food to holders of ration book coupons and expensive food items were in short supply. The rest of my family helped greatly by surrendering their share of our egg allowance; I ate these raw as part of my special diet! Then a letter arrived saying that I was to receive food parcels from Australia to help my Olympic preparations. When these big parcels started to arrive, I suddenly became the most popular man in Belfast”*.

Panic set in when I realised that I was totally lost and well off the proper marathon route.

However, John wasn’t worried about his popularity; his only concern was to gain selection for the British team and all depended upon his performance in the official Olympic trial.

The marathon trial was to be run in conjunction with the famous Polytechnic race from Windsor Castle to Chiswick. In earlier times, the ‘Poly’ was the race which determined the marathon distance of 26 miles 325 yards, when in 1908 the start was slightly adjusted to allow the Royal family to view the start of the race from the Castle.

John remembered the race very well, *“My preparation was different from what people do today; I ran in the Isle of Man TT Course race (38 miles over some pretty big mountains) the previous weekend and then travelled to London, after work, on the following Friday. The journey by boat and train took so long that I only arrived at Windsor about 90 minutes before the start. My coach Sam Ferris advised me to start slowly and for an hour everything went to plan. However, disaster happened at about the half-way mark. My eyesight has always been poor and on the outskirts of London I suddenly felt that I had become detached from the rest of the field. Panic set in when I realised that I was totally lost and well off the proper marathon route. Suddenly it began to look like years of training were about to come to nothing and that probably my last chance of Olympic selection was lost. When I eventually got back onto the proper course, spectators shouted to me that my main rivals: Jack Holden, Tom Richards and Stan Jones were now far ahead. Holden and Richards were top runners but the Welshman Jones was a virtual unknown who was going to steal my Olympic place unless I could catch him. So off I went in hot pursuit but disaster struck again when I arrived at White City Stadium and found myself at the wrong entrance.*

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More time was lost but when I did get inside, amazingly I could see that Jones was half-way around the final lap of the track. I sprinted like mad but couldn't quite catch the Welsh runner".

Heartbroken, John made his way home to Belfast. He knew that he was one of the top runners in Britain but he also knew that the selectors would stick with their policy of selecting the first three runners in the trial. Sports writers and correspondents to magazines appealed for Henning's selection for the Games but his chance had gone. Fifty years later, he still carried that sadness.

Post 1948

Many others would have retired but, in typical fashion, John bounced back the following week by winning the Northern Ireland Marathon.

Rivalry between Henning and Jack Holden was resumed at the 1949 Polytechnic Marathon, when John ran 2:39:51 to finish second. This was one of John's toughest ever races. He had to stop after 14 miles as he felt unwell but managed to get going again only to collapse 4 miles later. After receiving medical help, he regained consciousness and resumed running despite frantic protests from onlookers. Eventually, he reached the finish and collapsed again which resulted in him having to be carried to the changing rooms. Sam Ferris who was still acting as John's coach said: "Next year I will bring a gun because the only way to get John out of a race is to shoot him!" It is a remarkable fact that in 23 years of running marathons, John only failed to finish one race.

Ultra distance races were now becoming popular and John's dedication to training enabled him to become a leading contender for races and record breaking attempts. He remembered: *"I decided to enter the 53 mile London to Brighton race and came second in 6 hrs 33 mins. This gave me confidence to have a go at a track race being held at Motspur Park in London, which had been planned to attack the World records for 40 miles and 50 miles".*

John finished second in the race but broke the previous records for both distances by recording the excellent times of 4:21:38 (40 mls) and 5:35:19 (50 mls). There are two remarkable facts about this race; first, John ran the 200 laps of the track without knowing his lap times and secondly, he completed the entire 50 miles without a drink!

At the age of 48, John was selected for the 1958 Empire Games marathon in Cardiff. This made him the 4th oldest person ever to compete in athletics in the history of the Games. It is thought that he may have been the oldest ever runner in a major games. He finished 20th in the race.

During the post-war years, John became bored if there was not another goal to aim for each Saturday, there were still not enough races to satisfy John's quest for competition. He remembered how he started to devise his own series of long distance challenges: *"I had heard of a record, set away back in 1929 by a runner called John Buchanan, for a run from Cushendall Post Office and the GPO in Belfast. The course followed*

the hilly coast road and was almost exactly 50 miles. Buchanan's record stood at 8 hrs:8 mins. I decided to train seriously for the run and lost 9 lbs in the weeks leading up to the big day. My plan was to set off at 8 minute mile pace and take lots of liquids during the run. In fact I got through 5 flasks of tea and 3 bottles of lemonade mixed with glucose and salt".

John's record attempt had been well publicised in the press and local bookmakers had taken bets on his finishing time. It was no surprise, to those who followed athletics, when John crossed the finish line in a time of 5:49:45 thus shattering the old record by well over two hours.

Amazingly, he did not stop at the GPO in Royal Avenue but decided to continue running to a sports event which was being held the same afternoon at the Albert Foundry Sports Ground at Paisley Park on the West Circular Road. This involved a further 2½ miles of uphill running. John remembers feeling totally shattered running up the Shankill Road but not being able to stop because of the support he was getting from his friends and neighbours.

Other challenge runs quickly followed. John ran from his home to athletics events in Lurgan, Armagh and Banbridge; sometimes he also competed in races when he arrived.

"The run was OK but the shower nearly killed me"

The most well known of John's challenges was to run to every Irish League football ground. John was a member of the Howardville Blues Supporters Club and he attended Linfield matches on a regular basis. He quickly knocked off the 'easy' part of his challenge by running to the grounds around Belfast. He usually completed his runs by circling the pitch before kick-off and he well remembered the banter from Glentoran fans at the Oval, who all knew that he was an ardent Linfield supporter.

During a period of a few months, John then ran to matches at Lurgan, Portadown, Newry, Ballymena and the long 60 mile run to Coleraine (which was completed in 7 hrs 30 mins).

Eventually, only the trek to Derry City remained. This was going to involve an 80 mile run, coupled with the ascent of Glenshane Pass – Northern Ireland's highest road summit.

The journey to Londonderry was certainly a long day out. John left home in total darkness at 4:00 am and had only got as far as Glengormely when he was stopped by the Police. It took some time for him to convince them that he was on his way to a football match in Derry!

John was accompanied by Sammy Haveran a long distance cyclist who had the job of carrying his food supplies and Linfield scarf.

The plan was to have a flask of chicken soup for breakfast at the top of the Glenshane Pass. But due to punctures and a strong headwind, John arrived there before Sammy and he had to wait until he arrived.

The pair eventually reached Londonderry and John suffered much barracking from the Blues fans who accused him of trying to save money on the bus fare.

More problems followed after the match, the members of John's Howardville Supporters club had decided to stay on for a meal in a pub. John never frequented pubs; so he had no alternative but to walk around the streets of Londonderry in the cold until the club bus was ready to bring him home. There is little doubt that John slept well that particular Saturday night!

Dublin Run

One of the highlights of John's life came in 1960 when he decided to celebrate his 50th birthday by running from Dublin to Belfast. The 108 mile effort involved a great deal of preparation; John increased his weekly mileage yet again and had to gather together a team to help him with all the arrangements for the run.

It was eventually decided that he would start at the GPO in Dublin's O'Connell Street at 11:00 pm on Friday 12th August and that he would finish, the next afternoon, at the Ravenhill Rugby Ground in Belfast. Ravenhill was selected because the Belfast Highland Games was scheduled to take place that afternoon and several thousand spectators would be present to witness John's final lap of the track.

During the run, John was accompanied by two runners (Jimmy Kennedy and John Cranston) who would run part of the route in relays and a cyclist (Billy Sands). Also in the party which left Belfast by car were John's son Roy and a reporter from the Belfast Telegraph.

John had a very clear memory of the car journey down to Dublin on the Friday night: "We had arranged to meet the Lord Mayor of Dublin but we seemed to be in good time; so we stopped at Santry and I had a pre-run meal of banana, tea and toast. However, when we got back to the car, it had a puncture and there was a mad rush to get this fixed in time to allow us to meet the Mayor".

They arrived on time and John got changed quickly, shook hands with the Mayor and set off in a northerly direction. Despite the late start, the streets of Dublin were lined with people attracted by John's epic record attempt. But before long he was running alone through the darkness of the countryside.

As usual mid-race drinking was not high on John's agenda: "I ran virtually non-stop with only a brief refreshment halt at Dundalk to quickly drink a cup of tea".

He can also remember how the record attempt nearly came to an abrupt end when in the middle of the night he strayed onto the wrong side of the road and was nearly flattened by a lorry. He found the hilly stretch between Newry and Banbridge hard going but at no time did he doubt that he would make it home to Belfast.

John arrived at Ravenhill during the Saturday afternoon and recorded the excellent time of 16 hrs: 20 mins for the 108 miles. The Northern Whig reported "The large crowd in the stand rose to their feet and applauded 50 year old John Henning when he ran into the ground. First to congratulate him was Belfast's Lord Mayor (Alderman Robin Kinahan) who said: How are you feeling John? To which Henning replied: I'm fine Sir but a wee bit tired".

The run had obviously taken a lot out of John and matters were not helped by the fact that there was no hot water at Ravenhill: "*The run was OK but the shower nearly killed me*", he joked. After the shower, he was shivering so much he had to be helped into his clothes. Later that night his wife was so worried she decided to go out to buy him a whiskey – that was the only alcoholic drink John ever took in his entire life.

The next morning, he still felt very weak but he was determined not to break his record of attending church at 8:00am every Sunday morning. He spent ages trying to complete the short walk to the church which was just around the corner. He told me: "*I had to lean against the walls of houses all the way along our street; I was glad that there were not many people around to see me*"! True to form, John went to church twice more on that Sunday and was back training the following day.

Final Races/Runs

Few people are still physically active after their 50th birthday, but in later life John just kept on going. He entered many races and managed to win World Veteran Championship medals in Toronto 1975, Hanover 1977, Gothenburg 1979 and Christchurch 1981. He still kept up his links with Linfield and ran 100 laps around Windsor Park at the age of 60.

One of John's proudest moments occurred shortly after the football club appointed football legend Jackie Milburn as their new player-coach in the late 1950s. 'Wor Jackie' as he was known, quickly decided that his new team were not fit enough. John recalled "*somebody told Jackie that I was a fitness fanatic and during pre-season training a coach load of players regularly arrived at my front door in Battenburg Street*".

John took the players out for long runs on the Belfast Hills and, needless to say, none of them could keep up with the Shankill pensioner!

When the Belfast marathon was born in 1981, John was asked to come out of semi-retirement to run one last race. He remembered increasing his training mileage for this race: "*At that time I was running around the Shankill Graveyard on a winding ¼ mile long path which the City Council workmen had made especially for me. I built my training up to 50 laps of the Graveyard and was well pleased to finish the marathon in 4:30, ahead of almost 200 other runners – not bad for a 70 year old*".

When he reached the age of 80, John was still a very fit man. His daily training workouts at the Shankill Leisure Centre consisted of weight training sessions and 20 lengths of the pool, in addition to his runs around the graveyard.

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John made so much use of the Centre that he was awarded an honorary life membership and thus joined an elite group which also includes footballer Norman Whiteside, and boxers Davy Larmour and Wayne McCullough.

Just when it looked like he would never stop, John's running career sadly came to an end in the 1990s due to injuries received when he was hit by a car.

Random Thoughts on Life and Running

The famous running coach Franz Stampfl said of John, "He has the rare capacity for self-absorbing enthusiastic activity. Once he set his mind on a job, he will finish it without permitting any distractions to deviate his entire interest and attention. No matter how trivial an activity, John Henning has the same approach".

John told me that his motto is "*I want to make a good job of whatever I do*". Anybody who has ever been described as Ireland's greatest ultra-runner will inevitably know what hard work means and John was no exception.

Apart from running, John was active in other fields. In his mid-40s, he went back to college to study Maths and English so that he could make up for time he lost as a boy.

One of John's favourite pastimes in later life was training greyhounds. He said, "*You can't get the best out of your dogs by lying in your bed. I often had them out for a 40 minute walk at 5:00am; followed by another 1 hr in the afternoon. My two best dogs – Rocks Rukura and Brent Close – were never as fit as me but they won more money – over £700 in total*".

Long distance running requires the ability to occupy the mind and John had some unusual techniques: "*I ran along reciting nursery rhymes, singing hymns (There's a Green Hill far Away was my favourite) and doing mental arithmetic (I was particularly keen on vulgar fractions)*".

Diet is now becoming increasingly important for runners. John always took care in what he ate. He took daily doses of wheat-germ oil and consumed raw eggs for breakfast each morning. Following advice from Franz Stampfl, John did not eat potatoes for a week before any major race.

In 1951, the magazine Athletics weekly asked John about changes that he would like to see in athletics. He replied: "*I would like to see clubs taking more care of their novices; too many lads are burnt out owing to too much fast running and gruelling racing before they are properly developed. I would advise them to put themselves in the hands of a qualified coach and pay heed to what he tells them and not to pay any attention to advice offered by anybody else*".

Wise advice but we can also learn from the last words that John whispered to me a few years before he died: "I'm well over 80 but still acting like a wee lad – it's been a great life".

Spitsbergen Marathon

5th June 2010

By Tim Boone (RRC 11182)

It was cold.

No, I mean, it was really cold!

Which figures, I guess, seeing as how the Svalbard archipelago – including the main island of Spitsbergen – is just a few hundred miles from the North Pole.

And this far north, way above the top of Norway, the sun shines 24/7 in summer – even in the middle of the night, when I arrived. Unless it's snowing hard.

Midnight, 3rd June. Broad daylight and snowing. The thermometer at the one-shed airport read -1°C.

"Yes, it's got a lot warmer in the past few days," said the taxi driver as we lurched and bumped along the main (only) coast road. Out in the fuzzy grey-white fjord, thousands of lumps of pack-ice jostled together like ice cubes in a G&T.

I shivered.

And was still shivering the next day on the marathon start line. Three tops, long bottoms (which felt like I was running in pyjamas), gloves and hat. Not a bare arm or leg in sight. All forty of us had stayed in the warmth of the community hall until the very last minute.

What – on the roof of the World – was I doing?

Stamping my feet and swinging my arms in a pathetic attempt to keep warm, I wondered how bemused Phidippides – the ancient Greek messenger – would have been, seeing this frozen homage to his epic run of 490 BC (after which, allegedly, he dropped dead). This was a world away from the heat and humidity I experienced when I ran the 'Classic' Athens Marathon a few years ago.

The Spitsbergen Marathon claims to be the northernmost marathon held on solid ground – as opposed to the North Pole Marathon, run on ice – although with half the route consisting of loose gravel tracks, I question their definition of 'solid' ground.

And it's hilly, which I hadn't expected. There were long grinding hills, not quite steep enough to justify walking up, and short, brutal descents that were torture on the tops of my legs.

But the distant views were truly stunning. (The snow had stopped. The sun had come out.) Sparkling snow-covered mountains all around. An intensely blue sky above a deep, azure-blue fjord scattered with sugar-lump ice-floes.

The nearer-to views weren't so stunning. Shades of grey. Not green. Grey. No trees, no grass, no bushes. Just bare



raggedy-rock mountains. And raw slopes of scree, shale and slag from the abandoned coal mines, whose leaning pit towers and derelict machinery lay everywhere; rusting, crumbling and ice-shattered.

During the permanent darkness of winter, temperatures drop to forty below and even in summer, the ground never thaws. Which explains the network of bulky, lagged cables and pipes – water, waste and sewerage – that lie everywhere like dead anacondas. These are the sprawling entrails of a town that you never normally see, and they all make for a slightly sad, post-apocalypse ghost-scape, littered as they are with piles of dirty snow. Like a film set for *Mad Max* in Winter or something.

But beauty is crowding in, as if the pristine wilderness is trying to heal itself. A clean, icy-fresh wind blows in constantly from the nearby glaciers and snow-smothered mountains. Wild reindeer wander around town, snow buntings sing from fences, barnacle geese circle overhead. And within a kilometre or two of the ‘town’ centre, you can easily expect to see Arctic foxes, seabirds in their tens of thousands, Walrus and several sorts of seal. You might also meet more dangerous animals!

The marathon consisted of two laps, mainly because Longyearbyen – the main settlement of Svalbard – only boasts about twenty kilometres of vehicle-usable roads and tracks. After that it’s snowmobile, dog-sledge or boat into a wilderness of snow and ice, which visitors aren’t allowed to enter without an armed escort, on account of the polar bears.

There are thought to be around 3000 bears on Svalbard. And perhaps 2000 people. So that works out at two-thirds of a person per bear, although in sixteen years not a single runner has been eaten during the marathon. That’s thanks to the vigilance of the armed race marshals. (On my visit, I got used to seeing people wandering around with rifles hanging from a shoulder.)

Is this melodramatic posing for the gullible tourists? No.

Up here, in this clinging-to-existence frontier town, people are not at the top of the food chain. Polar bears eat humans – although they probably prefer a juicy seal. Only the previous week a bear had wandered into Longyearbyen, where it was darted and air-lifted to safer hunting grounds.

I may have said this already. It was chilly. It felt like the Arctic... oh, it was the Arctic!

But there were moments, running with the wind behind me and the sun on my face, that I was almost not cold. I don’t mean warm. Just not cold. But then I’d turn a corner and be hit by blast-chiller winds. It was like ... Whoa!

Evil or what? Teeth-clenching, face-numbing, finger-snapping COLD!!! Eyes streaming with tears that I’m sure were actually freezing to hailstones before they hit the ground. I’d never thought I’d be so happy to be given warm water (and warm cola) at the drinks stations.

What else? Oh, yes ... the low-flying ducks. Our route went past a colony of Eider, and King Eider Ducks. (HooooOOOOooooo! – for those who speak Eider.) Let’s just say that amorous males in hot pursuit of fleeing, hard-to-get females don’t always concentrate on where they’re flying. Luckily, nobody got hit that I heard about.

So, brain-freezingly cold ... long stretches of pot-holed and rutted gravel tracks ... two laps ... hills ... running on my own for most of the time (only 120 finishers in full, half and 10K combined) ... horrendously expensive and with the chance of being a Scooby-snack for a passing bear.

I’ve got to say, this was one of the most magically-brilliant, totally-good marathon experiences I’ve ever had.

My time, of 3.39 was slower than normal, but that, and my 6th position were fairly meaningless in the grand scheme of things. Most runners were foreigners (from about a dozen countries) but we were all made extremely welcome, both during the event, and afterwards at the ‘banquet’ awards ceremony, which included some singing by local children and a brief talk (in English) about Svalbard’s history.

Accurately measured and marked (as confirmed by those with Garmins), efficiently organised and cheerfully marshalled, this had the feel of a friendly village fun run that you’d definitely want to do again.

And unlike Pheidippides, nobody dropped dead when they finished.

