

The ups and downs of a racing year

By George Dayantis (RRC 12965)

I reckon that 2010 is likely to be one of the most memorable years in my running career.

Despite being a Veteran 45 for 3 years now, I have found myself generally improving over the years, especially in the longer distances. I have never been a particularly fast runner and having achieved what I believe it to be my fastest times in the shorter distances, ie 10 km (36:03), 10 m (60:32), Half Marathon (80:05), I had already decided over a year ago to concentrate more on the longer distances, marathon and beyond.

I don't tend to enter many races, usually between 8 and 12 a year for the past 10 years, but when I compete I always make sure I am fully prepared and always strive to give my best performance; that is to say I am serious about my racing; and although until last year I had never actually won a race, I have consistently been finishing closer and closer to the front, usually within the top 5%. Still, I never enter a race with the slightest expectation of winning, as I am not really competitive by nature in the sense of trying to prove that I am somehow better than others. It's all about personal performance, achieving a set target time. After all, finishing position is only a matter of chance, largely based on the quality of the field.

Having said that, I have to admit that when I won my first race last year, the Barry 40, it was a good feeling. It did spur me on to decide to attempt even longer distances. Finishing 3rd in the North Dorset Village Marathon with a PB (2:48:43), 5th in the Boddington 50 km (3:23:16) in May, 3rd in the Dartmoor Discovery in June with another PB (3:54:57) and 3rd in the New Forest Marathon (2:49:28) in September also boosted my confidence.

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So the plan for this year had to be a more ambitious one. After some careful consideration, I decided to focus on 3 big races: 1) Barry 40 in March, 2) Crawley 12 hour in April and 3) Boddington 100 km in June.

The objective for the Barry 40 was naturally to improve on last year's time, realistically aiming for a time of 4:15. I was familiar with the race and confident about my training plan. Based on how good I felt the month before the race I should have been able to achieve my target. Unfortunately, this turned out to be my first 'down' of the year, a really disappointing performance, finishing in 4:31:19, despite a 20 mile split of 2:07:11. Curiously, I still won the race, but this was no consolation. What went wrong then? Well, shortly after I finished the race I came to realise the reason for my performance drop in the latter stages when I noticed the deep colour of my urine. I had foolishly allowed myself to dehydrate. This was really inexcusable especially

on a track race where fluid availability is so abundant. It just demonstrates that I am really still a novice in the ultra scene, but hopefully I have now learned my lesson.

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I had to put that behind me mentally and quickly recover physically in order to focus on the next race. Here I was in completely new territory and fear of the unknown was the overriding feeling. How do you train for a 12 hour race?

Well, I didn't! I just carried on where I had left off with roughly the same load of training, averaging 100+ miles a week. I was just going to give it a go, tentatively expecting to reach 80 miles. The main factor here was going to be how my stomach would react to solid food intake, something I had not tried before in a race.

Almost everything went according to a loosely laid out plan. I probably took too many fluids during the first few hours, which meant frequent toilet stops, but I felt much happier that way. I started with a relatively fast pace, at least compared to the rest of the field, so I was in the lead from the start and kept on getting away. My stomach seemed to cope just fine with gels and light food, so I had enough energy to keep me going.

The main problem, which inevitably slowed me down in the latter stages of the race was the increasing pains in my leg muscles. My legs were so stiff after 8 hours that I felt if I had to stop running I would not have been able to get going again. So I didn't (stop)!

I really don't know how I managed to keep going. There was not even much pressure from the competition, since Richard was about 5 miles behind after 9 hours. In the end I managed to clock just over 88 miles to win, but this time it felt like a real achievement. This was definitely an 'up' moment.

And it was shortly to be followed by another 'high', when I got selected, on the strength of that performance, as part of the England team to compete in the Anglo-Celtic plate 100 km in Boddington. This is an annual Home Nations International with each Nation entering 5 runners with only the first 3 to score. England has always had the strongest team and this year was no exception. I was probably the weakest member on paper, but anything can happen in such a race.

This was already the 3rd big race in my calendar, but to enter it in an England vest was a real honour, possibly a once in a lifetime opportunity? That of course added some extra pressure. After a slow recovery, I continued with an

even tougher training regime. Once again, the distance was an unknown, but having already run a lot further at Crawley, where my 100 km split was 8:11, I was confident I would finish and moreover I should be able to come under 8 hours. However, the target I set for myself was slightly more ambitious at 7:30. The course consisted mainly of 28 laps, each lap around 3.5 km. My rough plan was to start with 15 minute laps, expecting to slow down to 16-17 minutes in the second half. I wanted to reach 50 km around 3:30, thus giving me a reasonable cushion, since I had no confidence in keeping an even pace over that distance.

Race conditions were almost perfect, mostly cloudy with a strong breeze, but preferable to the hot sunny days preceding it. We were also privileged to have an excellent support crew from the England team management, handing out our pre-prepared drinks, water and gels as required at each lap. So there was no excuse for under-performing, or was there? Everything was going to plan, till about 45 km at which point I felt sick and threw up, so was forced to ease off on the energy drinks/gels and inevitably dropped the pace. Although I did recover shortly after that, I was still apprehensive and let myself drift within my comfort zone.

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My 50 km split was around 3:36 so at this point I was still on target for 7:30. However, I was now clocking mostly 17 minute laps and from lap 22 even dropped to 18 minutes and most importantly I did not have the mental capacity to do the maths.

At first glance this may not sound like a major drop, however the lost minutes have a tendency to add up and before you know it you have missed your target. This was another lesson to be learnt. In races like this, where you are running on your own most of the time, ie with nobody to chase and help you maintain your pace, and where the checkpoints are a reasonable distance apart, ie more than a mile, you need to keep a pretty sharp focus to stay on target.

Soon after the half-point, I already knew that at least 3 of my teammates were well ahead (because they had already lapped me once), but the 4th had dropped out with injury. Other than that, I had no idea of relative positions, or how far ahead of me the next runner was – so I was running ‘blind’. And on this occasion, because this race was primarily about the team result rather than individual performance, I could not afford not to finish, just in case of another mishap.

Perhaps I was using this as an excuse at the time, but I did take it easy on account of these considerations. Fortunately, in the end my performance was not required, since England finished 1-2-3 to win the Anglo-Celtic plate comfortably, led by the overall winner Brian Cole. I was very pleased to see Brian overtake/lap me (for the second time) shortly

before he went to finish, while I still had 2 more laps to go (despite the race officials insisting I only had 1 lap to go, since my microchip had failed early in the race). And yes, by that time it was sadly clear that I had completely missed my target and had even slipped to a couple of 19 minute laps. I did pick it up a bit on the last lap to finish in a disappointing 7:48:23, in 5th place overall and 1st V45. So I failed again.

This was a comparatively ‘mild’ disappointment, mainly because I knew I could have done better, even though (or perhaps because) it would have made no difference to the race standings or the team result on this occasion.



George Dayantis in his England running kit.

Overall, after all these races, despite the ‘ups’ and ‘downs’, or because of them, I feel I have gained a lot of experience in ultra competitions which gives me a good basis for doing even better in the future. Furthermore, for the first time after 10 years of gradual ageing and improvement, I have finally managed to achieve the RRC 1st Class Standard (V45), based on these 3 performances. And this was definitely one of my targets for this year. And I hope to be able to stay on that standard for as long as possible. (It does seem to me that the standards tend to be easier to achieve in the longer distances, at least for me, or am I biased?).

So, what about my plans for next year? Though it's still early, I will be brave and commit to the following challenges: 1) Barry 40 in 4:15 (and not win it!), 2) Crawley 12 hours for 90 miles and, if all goes well, 3) 24 hours for 150 miles (240km). I am going to have a little rest now.