**SPOTLIGHT WITH COLIN DONNELLY, ERRI HARRIERS/CAMBUSLANG HARRIERS**







***Colin Donnelly Eryri Harriers/Cambuslang Harriers has enjoyed a long and successful running career and is the record winner of eight North Wales Cross Country Championship Senior Men’s titles, two of which were as an M40. Colin won the British Fell Running Championship 3 years consecutive from 1987 to 1989 and won the Snowdon Mountain race in 1988. Also in 1988 he set the record for the traverse of the Welsh 3000m with a time of 4-19 which stood until 2019. In 1989 he also finished second in the World Mountain Championships an event he represented Scotland in eighteen consecutive times between1985 and 2002 (he also ran in 2004).***

**1: How and when did you start running?**

I started running at school, doing the selection race for the school cross country team and scraping in. I always finished nowhere in the county championships but who cares……..I loved the challenging courses. Later, about the age of 15 I noticed the first ones back to the showers from the school playing fields (3/4 mile), got the HOT shower and no queue so I decided to TRAIN to get fitter to get back amongst the first. Almost nobody trained in those days.

The runs were only about three or four times a week, road and three or four miles blasting it!! No coaching or tactics. After a year of that not only was I first back for the showers, but I also won the county championship to my bewilderment but it felt easy. I joined a club at 17 and began to get ideas on how I should run.

**2: How did a Scotsman end up running for Eryri Harriers?**

I requested my RAF posting to North Wales (RAF Valley) as the Welsh Mountains were a draw for me and also I was fascinated by the language and culture.

**3: My records show that your first ‘win’ in the North Wales Cross Country League was in October 1985 at Newtown. Do you have any recollections of your first win?**

Sadly I can’t recall the race at Newtown but no doubt my diary would have a little excerpt about it.

**4: You are the second most prolific men’s race winner in the history of the league with 17 race wins. Any favourites?**

Favourite course or favourite win? Off the top of my head unsure of either but in general I liked a hilly course with a rough terrain rather than the sort of course around flat playing fields (***one of my favourite memories of Colin is at the very hilly Moss Valley course in a North Wales v Shropshire and the Isle of Man match. Colin started late and all I remember is him coming past me on the last lap like I was hardly moving - I was third at the time and Colin went through to win!!).***

**5: You are also the most successful athlete in the history of North Wales Cross Country Championships with 8 victories, two of which were as an M40. What do you put your success down to?**

I put my success down to effort in my training which at its core had the ‘Donnelly session’ – five miles on grass, laps, usually fairly flat or else four miles on the track. The sessions would be roughly five and a half minute miling with a graduation (ideally) of the first mile split being the slowest and every subsequent mile would be faster. As the body tires so the challenge gets harder. I took Colin Jones on it once but the muddy conditions at Bangor University playing fields left him struggling!!

**6: You finished 2nd in the World Mountain Championships and won the British Mountain Champs on a couple of occasions as well. Mountain running was where you were more at home. Tell us about your experiences.**

Years before I was a runner, I walked hills. My dad introduced me and I took to them 100%. I hadn’t considered combining that with running to give hill running until I did the Ben Lomond race in 1977, mainly to avoid doing a track race the club was expecting me to do. I loved it! Never mind a mediocre 22nd position. That summer, working in a Ross-shire hotel, I had the chance of training on local 3000ft peaks. Why not try it? I loved it and gained fitness as well as confidence. The next spring I finished third in the Ben Lomond. Who was this new arriviste, the old hands wanted to know! I never looked back.

However in those early days championships were of little interest. I wanted hill adventures, almost always alone and kept to certain races. My method of travel was bike and train so it did limit me. I had a crack at the British C0hampionship in 1986 and did quite well so decided I’d have a more serious attempt in 1987, encouraged by my wife who liked doing championship races indeed she was puzzled initially when she was going to a championship race and I’d tag along mainly because I wanted to do some long run I’d devised nearby

**7: Your record for the Welsh 3000’s stood for over 30 years and was only beaten in 2019. I’ve watched the video many times. Tell us about that run.**

It was former Snowdon race organizer, Ken Jones who thought I should try for the 3000ers record which was Jos Naylor’s. Why not? I knew the hills and routes pretty well and had the chance of further reccies. To do it properly I assembled

pacers for each section (who did a fantastic job), so it was a group effort. Luckily, the chosen day had fantastic weather, always the main consideration. In hindsight I ran the first section to Nant Peris too fast as I was running out of steam going up  Penyrolewen and then cramped so badly after Yr Elen, I thought the attempt could be over. I probably hadn’t drunk enough. The feeling I had on reaching the finish, the Foel Fras trig, and seeing a surprise group of well wishers (complete with champagne .....but how did they know?) is something I’ll always remember

**8: Which performances during your career gave you the most pleasure?**

The best performances are when they are least expected (and not always wins). The first of these was winning the Dumfries and Galloway schools XC championship, 1975. I think, winning the Ben Nevis at my first attempt in 1979.....only got shown the course the Thursday before. Winning the V40 world masters mountain running championship in Poland (2000, I think), when I had no notion of who my rivals could be. Winning Snowdon, one of my big races of the year in those days and a local race - who doesn’t want to win their local race? Every year the quality of opposition was such I thought I had no chance; after all if I’d done 64mins and still only managed a fourth, how would I ever win it?

My best ever cross country performance in the Scottish National was fourth, yet I can barely remember it and don’t regard it as a great performance. Had jogged over the pancake-flat course at Perth, around playing fields and it completely bored me. Mentally it had no challenge or interest for me and that’s when I don’t perform well. But I did. Maybe I happened to be very fit then or the field wasn’t as strong. Cross country, unlike hill racing, prioritises position over clock time.

I am proud of my 24hr run achievements; all were low key to give myself a challenge, some were totally unsupported; some involved my wife meeting me at road crossings with food/drink, maybe clothing. The longest was the South Wales traverse at 75ml; It’s a point to point covering all the 2000ft peaks in South Wales first established by Martin Stone. Perfect for a peak bagger! With that and also the Charlie Ramsey Round I was so pleased to just be able to finish.

**9: And most disappointing?**

Most disappointing…......getting disorientated on my penultimate peak on the Meirionedd Round, another 24hr challenge but a serious undertaking with a lot of very rough, pathless ground, and not making the 24hrs. Indeed I struggled to find where I left the car once I (finally) got off the hill. It ended up being headless chicken stuff. Was it low blood sugar sabotaging my decision making? Who knows....and does it matter? I challenged myself 100% (this was one of the solo, unsupported ones) and had 25hrs relying on myself finding my way round wild country.

The most disappointing race was Ben Nevis in the early nineties, the exact year I’m unsure. First to the summit and indeed most of the way down; hypothermia kicked in and the guy I‘d laughed at on the starting line for being ‘overdressed’, Gary

Devine, slipped past me when I was having difficulty getting my legs to respond and my body had a mind of its own. My own stupidity!

**10: What was a typical week's training at your peak?**

At my peak my typical mileage would be between 60-70 pw. I tried other mileages when bigger mileages were the running fashion, including 100pw but it didn’t work for me.....everybody is different. Work (mostly shift work) influenced my training significantly although I aimed for at least three quality sessions a week, i.e. 4-5miles at circa 5.5min miling; a gradated session whereby the mile splits were faster as the session continued. After all it’s to replicate how to race well.

In addition I would aim for a long run, weekly, of 15-20mls. If shifts allowed I would try to get in a weekly race. A race is worth two hard training runs is a belief I’ve always had. It was a hard regime. There were never days off but the day prior to a race would be a jog....the body isn’t a machine and can’t be pushed all the time.....or you’ll get injury. I would also get a periodic sports massage to iron out stresses and tensions in the body. If you listen to your body it’ll tell you:

1) What terrain it prefers

2) What mileage it can tolerate

3) How many hard sessions it can handle

**11: You’re still running now (winning the M60 title at the BMAF Cross Country Championships at Rhug the day before corona virus lockdown). How have you managed to maintain such a high standard for so many years?**

I put running first which didn’t help with career or relationships and I trained daily with a no pain no gain philosophy although not all sessions were intense. To get a balance I would have ‘explore runs’ maybe to check out an interesting feature I had seen on a map. That’s what helped maintain a high standard as I had to keep running interesting and stop burnout where the hard-but-boring sessions got me sick of it! Finally, a very competitive tendency in my nature helped with race performances........!

**12: How has your training changed over the years?**

When I was at school there was another pupil my age who was training 70 mpw but was nowhere in races. I later did some training with a Scottish cross country international whose training was usually three times a week, circa 25-30mpw.

Somebody questioned me on the authenticity of this – “have you ever been out on a run with him?” I replied I had.....and there was no respite! So quality is essential to improvement and doing well; it’s not the miles that count.

I briefly tried a 100mpw regime. The big mileages were fashionable then. I lasted four weeks. You have to listen to your body and mine prefers the lower mileages. In my younger and fitter days I settled into between 50-70mpw, dependant on shift work. I always liked the longer runs, the longer the better. Nowadays a fifteen mile run, once or twice a week affair, feels like a monumental achievement.

The hard sessions, usually three a week have gone since the last the three years. The local dogs in the park putting paid to that initially but now there is an attitude that a run is an exercise in achieving fresh air and a bit of exploration.....and at about ten minute miling! So I have retreated to jogging from running. It’s not been too hard to get your head round that.

By about fifty you are nowhere near the leading pack....some can’t cope with that. I can I’m still up for a category performance and the old fight is now redirected to that. As a postscript, pre-lockdown I was entered into the Manx Mountain Marathon on a wing and a prayer having rarely run more than 10mls. The driest spring on record and wanting to prove I could still tackle distance pushed my mileage up to 70mpw although it’s now getting to feel like a treadmill.

**13: Comments on:**

**(a) Running in North Wales**

My years in North Wales, certainly at first, coincided with my greatest fitness. With cross country and hill running I had the stuff I like. Apart from a trail race in mid Wales I did there seemed to be few of them. At times it felt like being a big fish in a small pond. I travelled to the Manchester area for some races and the contrast was of hundreds in races and quality opposition too. There was a good number of hill races to choose from and yearly they were being added to. Events such as the Tuesday evening series generated interest in hill racing. In contrast the cross country scene seemed stuck in its niche with many of the courses uninspiring. I remember suggesting a couple of beach based races would give some variety.

That was races, as for training most was running from where I lived and running up the nearest hill or failing that, something undulating but I never liked the system of ‘keep to the footpath’ as not doing that was trespass....my stubborn Scottish sense of a ‘right to roam’ interfering there. I used to regularly get on the wrong side of the farmer near the Snowdon ranger YH who believed he owned the railway line and would see off all intruders in the days before the line was resurrected and had a service again. Occasionally I’d get into the car and go a long beach /forestry run unhindered by trespass issues, fences etc. other times I’d exercise my keenness to explore and take a daytrip to as far as mid Wales, which I grew to prefer to North Wales, to visit new hills or an interesting corner I’d seen on the map

**(b) Eryri Harriers**

A great club. it drew its membership from much of North West Wales so that did mean a lack of cohesion compared to, say, if the club was just Llanberis Harriers. I was delighted to help them win various titles. At our strongest, we were taking on the best of the English hill running clubs

**14: Plans for the future?**

 I know someone in Norham runners who is chugging on in his seventies and loving the races. The Borders XC series had a runner in his eighties. But the older you get the harder it is pushing your body; retaining fitness.  When I was younger, I liked a challenge and for a number of years it was doing a 24hr run over the hills, nearly always solo, sometimes with support. That seems beyond me now, my head might think I could do it but my body would disagree. I never tire of challenges, not for getting in record books, certainly not for publicity.

Aged 20 I ran all the 2000ft peaks of southern Scotland/Cheviots in 10 days just for the adventure. I think Finlay Wild has the same spirit. You either have that spirit or (like most), haven’t. With me it’s still there. Before the corona virus sunk the race, I was going to do the Manx Mountain Marathon on a wing and a prayer; the 2020 challenge. Challenges are also for motivation. When you are no longer anywhere near the front in a race the challenge falls back to doing well in your category. That’s all that’s left!

I’ve had a crack at various XC and mountain racing masters championships at national and international levels and I’ll do that a bit longer, for how long I can’t tell. Long mountain runs on my own have always been more exciting for me than trophy hunting, especially as I dislike the glare of publicity, kudos etc from the latter. I’ve not particularly missed racing over the corona virus shutdown; I’ve missed going off to bothies far more.

**15: Any other comments?**

Over the years I have been disappointed by the leadership of hill running by the FRA. I helped instigate the formation of the Scottish Hill Runners Association appalled by their Anglo centricity. I thought their name said it all, ‘Fell runners’ in a body purporting to be UK-wide. What fells are in Northern Ireland or Wales? (who also decided to form their own national organisations with their needs prioritised). When I discovered a couple of years ago they had managed to get themselves

embroiled in the ‘controversy’ of GPS navigation I found myself chuckling at their latest gaffe. All GPS is doing is leveling the playing field....in other words local hill runners who could benefit from short cuts on their local courses in navigational races now found their (unfair) advantage removed by technology. Have the fell runners association pondered if compasses should be similarly disallowed as ‘technology’? When I used to race the Peris Horseshoe I would

have people following me as I’d no doubt lead them on shortcuts. It’s the way of the world. I think I’d have been quite happy for them to be equipped with GPS.

Hill racing in the 42 years I’ve been doing it has become too popular for its own good with a struggle to get into many championship races. About thirty years after I first suggested the FRA had to make provision for championship contenders, they finally seem to have got round to it! Maybe another suggestion of mine, that the FRA more closely vet the proposed championship courses for suitability. A few years ago they rubberstamped a Highland Games race with a narrow path and poor overtaking possibilities as suitable for a field of several hundred runners, or had 400 runners squeeze through a gate after 100m because the race organiser wanted to start from the usual place.

**16: Corona virus comments?**

In the early days of lockdown, travel was advised against but it surprised me local races near population centres with staggered starts over carefully thought out courses didn’t thrive as lockdown eased. While the virus persists surely bigger races or those confined to narrow paths will struggle?

***Colin is not only a truly remarkable runner but a truly remarkable man. I hope you agree that this in depth Spotlight is a fantastic insight into one of Scotland’s finest ever mountain runners, who was adopted by North Wales for a long time.***

***Many thanks Colin***