



WINTER EDITION CHRISTMAS 2011

Alan Thomas 1936 – 2011

Each year, at our dinner dance in May, we drink a toast to “Absent Friends”. Inevitably, that list of friends becomes longer year by year. Rarely though in our history have we ever had a member who has worked harder, or made a contribution which has enriched our enjoyment of the sport than that by Alan Thomas.



I would like to say thanks to everyone who recorded messages of condolence on the website. Articulating raw emotion can be very difficult at times. Thanks also go to club members for their generosity in monetary contributions for Macmillan Nurses, Alan’s chosen charity.

The emotional words of thanks by Alan on his final night at club, after receiving his Meritorious Award from Welsh Athletics will last long in the memory. So too will his funeral, with the many tributes paid, and learning of the many sides of Alan’s personality. I thought that Richard Brewer’s role call of the list of teams who had taken the time to record their thanks and tributes, in the identical fashion to the role call just before each leg of the Castles – was a very clever and poignant way of illustrating just how many people benefitted as a result of Alan’s hard work.

Thanks also to John Dowden for the following personal tribute:

Alan Thomas

What a sad loss to his family and we send our deepest condolences to Jean and the family. What a sad loss to the club. What a sad loss to his many friends but what wonderful memories he has given us.

It was always a pleasure running with him or sharing his company down the club on Thursday nights. Where I really got to know Alan was sharing our mutual enjoyment of watching cricket.

For many years now he has been my regular companion as we shared the despair and triumphs of Glamorgan cricket. Cricket is not for everyone but the pace of the game allows ample time for conversation. Over the days and years we must have talked and laughed at just about every topic under the sun. (You have probably noticed the world has become a much safer place to live in because of this.) During this time he became a very good friend. Alan was always easy and enjoyable company. Away games took us to places such as Lords, Edgbaston and a night game at Worcester where unfortunately the supporter's bus left us behind.

One of the main topics of conversation was always the Castles relay. I soon became aware of the massive amount of time and organisation he was involved in. His attention to detail was extraordinary. The more responsibility he took on, the more he thrived on it. Building on the good work of previous organisers, he expanded the event to include the 55 or so teams who now take part in the hugely successful Castles relay we enjoy today.

Alan's way of delegating responsibility or correcting someone, whoever they were, was simple. He would forcefully and effectively tell you face to face in his own distinctive way, as many of us have experienced. This direct approach, total commitment and attention to detail made him such an outstanding organiser.

At the cricket, when it came to refreshment time, alongside the pint of beer or traditional glass of red wine, he would unpack his hamper of food so lovingly prepared by Jean. There was always food on offer for me. "You are lucky having Jean" I used to joke with him. Of course he knew this and another regular topic of conversation was his family whom he cared for, loved and was very proud of.

People forget Alan was a regular marathon runner. Part of his motivation to run London marathons was his grandchildren. He wanted a medal for each one of them. As their number increased, so did Alan's London marathon runs. At the time of his last one he was up to date. I believe it was seven London marathon medals and seven grandchildren.

For those with the unenviable task of following Alan in organising the Castles Relay, they had better get it right. Otherwise they will feel the wrath descending from above from the spirit of one Alan Thomas.

Thanks for all those memories butty, you will never be forgotten.

John Dowden

Wedding Bells!



Very many congratulations to Jenny Hughes and Jon, who married on 18th November, from everyone at Les Croupiers Club.

The Story So Far

Three down, two to go! The Gwent Cross Country League has always provided us with a challenge for the winter months. Cross country is very much “horses for courses” and the three venues to date of Bridgend, Bath and Swansea have provided us with three very different challenges and in three very different sets of weather conditions.

In fact, about the only thing that remains constant is the huge numbers in which we continue to turn up (and the wonderful selection of cakes, of course). This always was the club’s greatest asset, and given that overall numbers invariably tail off in the league come the New Year, numerical supremacy is a huge asset. Just to quantify that claim – at Singleton Park we had 44 men and 24 lady finishers. No other club had more than 11 finishers in either race – so it’s little wonder we are dominating proceedings.

As in any sport, often the greatest danger lies within – in the form of complacency. There are still two fixtures to go at Brecon and Bristol, so we need to maintain our strength numerically. Our ladies are currently having their most successful season for years – we haven’t won the senior ladies Gwent League title since 2003-04. At the moment we lead the F35, F45 and F55 team events also, so it would be great to end the season with a clean sweep of awards.

With the men it’s a bit more of a mixed picture. Our senior team now lies second, just 56 points behind leaders Westbury. Given their home advantage in the final race, we need a major team performance at Brecon to have a realistic chance of regaining our title. However, one of the encouraging features is that our younger athletes are now beginning to dominate our team scoring. The over 40 team title last winter was secured by just 11 points from Neath Harriers, and a rerun is looking distinctly likely this time around as we hold a slender 49 point cushion.

No such problems face our over 50 team after 26 consecutive Gwent League team wins. However, the over 60 title is also in the balance after injuries curtailed our numerical strength at Swansea to just 3 athletes. We lead Westbury here by 8 points.

The International Scene

As usual, we were well represented in the Home Countries Masters Cross Country International at Bellahouston Park, Glasgow on 26 November. Croups’ ladies on show were Ali Hayes, Caroline Dallimore, Edwina Turner, Ann James and Clare Johnson, and amongst the men we had Nick Dukes, Jerome Edwards, Elio Lepore and Mick McGeoch. Phil Cook was a travelling reserve and Mel James was also a travelling reserve as well as officiating as Honorable Secretary of British Masters Cross Country. Congratulations to all, as well as those included in the original selections – Helen Jessop, Jane Coker, Richard Self, Mike Murphy and Mike Davies.

Cross Country Post Script

The cross country international in Glasgow wasn't a particularly successful one for Wales on the competitive front. However, one performance by a club member stands out for me – not just for quality but more importantly for longevity. Ann James placed 6th in the F60 section, and that was the highest individual position by any of the Welsh ladies. Ann has been a regular at this fixture for many seasons now, and was also in the Welsh team for the very first Home Countries Masters International at Wrexham in 1988.

However, a chance conversation during the course of the weekend at Glasgow led to me to discover that Ann's international career goes back much further than that. She was a member of the Welsh Senior Ladies team in the World (International) Cross Country Championships in 1975, 1976, 1978 and 1979. Sadly, Wales no longer fields a team on its own, after 1987 it became a GB team rather than individual nations. To the best of my knowledge, only Paul Wheeler amongst Croupiers members has also achieved international cross country status in this event.

Naturally, I thought I'd try and research Ann's performance – and looked up the 1976 result – solely for the reason that it was the last occasion that Wales hosted the event – and it was held on the impressive location of Chepstow racecourse. Ann was a scoring member of the Welsh team who placed 12th in the team event – the scoring members being 52 Jean Lochhead, 62 Ann Morris, 66 Bronwen Smith (later Cardy) and 67 Ann James. These may not be names who are familiar to most club members of today – but if you try putting them in Google it will soon become apparent what quality athletes they were.

I remember that occasion at Chepstow quite vividly. I was just 20 at the time, but I was a member of a young training group coached by Tony Elgie at RAF St Athan who were asked to be standard bearers for the pre-race parade of teams. I was the very proud bearer of the Scottish banner.

So who were the stars of 1976? The thing I remember about the men's race was that one athlete was (what seemed like) miles clear of anyone else – and no one knew who he was. Not even Tony Simmons, Maesteg-born and running for England, who finished second. The first question he asked after the race was "Who was that?" The athlete's name was Carlos Lopes, and he would soon become a hero for many. He won the world cross country title again in 1984 and 1985, and was 38 at the time of his last win. He won the Olympic Marathon in 1984 in Los Angeles aged 37 and broke the world marathon record in Rotterdam the following year.

The ladies race was won by Carmen Valero of Spain, and she was followed home by two Olympic champions in the making – Tatyana Kazankina (USSR – gold at 800 and 1500 metres, 1976 and gold at 1500 metres in 1980) and Gabriella Dorio (Italy – gold, 1500 metres, 1984).

In the only other race of the day, the junior men, the most recognizable name came fifth – Alberto Salazar. Alberto had an amazing marathon career, winning New York 1980-82, the 1981 race being in 2:08:13, which was a world best at the time (only for the course to be re-measured and found to be 148 metres short). Although he never won a major championship marathon, he later won the Comrades Ultra marathon in South Africa in 1994. Recently, he has become better known as the man who has guided Mo Farah from being a very good international athlete to becoming a World Champion.

My reason for writing all this is not just to praise Ann James for her impressive career. Not is it to simply reminisce about the stars of the 1970s and 1980s. It is mainly to emphasise the value to cross country – an essential discipline for humble club runners and Olympic champions alike.

CARDIFF PARKRUN #192 – 5TH NOVEMBER 2011

By the time this is printed it will be midwinter and quite hard to remember the unusually balmy early November we had. At about half past eight on the morning of Bonfire night I left the house and jogged through Birchgrove to the Gabalfa Interchange, then down along the side of Western Avenue to join the group of runners gathering on the bank of the Taff. The sun was breaking through thin cloud and the trees, undisturbed by frost or wind had kept a lot of their leaves, making for a colourful autumn.

Having warmed up on the jog here I ran at a faster pace to about the 400m point and back before taking up a spot at the edge of the path near the start point. The chatter of voices slowly faded as Phil began his announcements. We stepped onto the path and the run started with a minimum of delay. Having positioned myself quite near the front I was able to run at my chosen pace more or less straight away.

I'd had a frustrating year with 5k runs. I always like to do a sub 20 minute one at some point over the summer but this year I just hadn't been able to get near it. I'd run pbs and near pbs at other distances but over three point one miles it just wasn't happening. Towards the end of summer I wanted to concentrate on the Cardiff Half, but thought that a parkrun soon afterwards represented a last chance.

The Thursday after the Cardiff Half I picked up a 'niggle' on the club run and decided it would be sensible to forego running for a couple of days and go swimming instead. The following week I ran at a fairly easy pace. Suddenly I found myself waking on what might be the last really good morning of the year for running a 5K. I made a half hearted decision to have a go, telling myself that at the very least it would be good to run at a faster pace than I had for a little while.

I was working hard but feeling comfortable as we ran past the cottage and on past the weir. The first kilometre marker came up and I glanced at my watch, 3:51, probably too fast but I was in with a chance. This suddenly became more important to me.

Over the next three kilometres I tried to maintain the pace as best I could, the loveliness of Bute Park speeding by pretty much unnoticed as I tried to find people I could hang on to. Ahead of me, Liz and Jane were slowly pulling away, but at least I could try to keep them in sight, Simon Hazell went past me, then I went past him. Two kilometres was I think 7:49, three went by in 11:55. Shortly after this we passed Mick telling us to keep to the right, and headed round the long curve around the cricket pitch.

The same thing always happens to me on this stretch. Basically that nightmare comes to life, where you're trying to run away from something but it's like running through treacle. Slowly the stand of Redwoods at the end pulled closer and then I was searching for the 4K marker, which seemed to have been moved further away.

I forget what my time was when I finally passed the marker, but remember thinking I really couldn't relax at all. The next thing to aim for was the 400m marker and this too seemed to have been used to play a cruel joke on me. Eventually it showed up, nestling smugly in the undergrowth. Simon went by running incredibly strongly for someone who'd completed the Snowdonia Marathon days before. The 200m post showed up and a while later I passed the last of the markers. I tried to sprint but don't think I achieved any real acceleration.

Suddenly I was through the finish and for once remembered to stop my watch. I handed my barcode in and stood on the grass, sweating profusely and watching other people lining up in the funnel. My watch told me that I was under the 20 minute mark, and that evening a look at the website confirmed it. 19:52. Hooray!!

The goal I'd just achieved was by a lot of people's standards a modest one but it was important for me. Over the year a lot of other people have achieved things on the Parkrun, whether it's a particular time, or simply getting round. That's the good thing about it, every Saturday morning people get a chance to do their best. I don't often run it but I'm really grateful to the people who continue to make it happen.

Alan Mason

Drover's Run

My first year foray into this strange sport of running has been ups and downs, undulating like the Welsh countryside. Like the Welsh countryside, the experience seduces with the promise of so much more amazing vistas to explore and yet the journey to the 'promised land' so to speak, is fraught with much gasping, cursing, sprains and pains. Perversely and tentatively I decided after being in and out of injury that I would enjoy the whole experience anyway and be gracious that I live in a place which offers many great opportunities to run and in some ways, to escape the worries and angst of every day life. It's just me - the open road, the trails and the great outdoors. It is with such inspiring thoughts that I decided to sign up for Drover's Run, an approximately 6 mile multi-terrain race and then the panic began!

Drover's Run was supposedly to have been held in summer of this year which I thought, great as it will be nice and warm and the countryside will be really nice to run around it. Then, it had to be postponed because of lack of participant and the new date was set for 27 November and I thought then, maybe it was a good thing as it gave me more time to get myself used to running on different terrains. Though I was not too sold on the idea of running around in mud, rain and worse, wind.

Like a curse, on a summery day at a parkrun having just achieved a PB, my left foot finally gave up. It hurt like hell and I thought it as a little sprain or tendonitis or one of those niggles. The pain became quite unbearable and the foot getting more and more swollen. A visit to A & E the next day, confirmed it as a stress fracture. There was nothing I could do but rest, feeling sorry for myself and absolutely angry at myself. Anyhow, I thought, no problem I have months to recover before Drover's, all will be well.

My optimism carried me through the many weeks of recovery. After 8 weeks of not running and feeling like a tub of lard, I got back into running. Slowly at first after having failed at first attempt 6 weeks into my fracture because the pain returned. All was going great, 8 weeks back into running (16 weeks from fracture) and the familiar throbbing returned. I was deflated because Drover's was just a 3 weeks away. Nevertheless, optimism prevailed. Panic over. Well at least I thought so.

Finally, the day arrived. Set my alarm for an early rise. Looked at the window and it was lashing down with rain. It was howling wind outside and suddenly I felt quite apprehensive. Recovering fractured foot. Haven't been running well for a few months. Mud. Rain and the dreaded HILLS. It was just not bear thinking about.



So quick breakfast and went through the calming routine of getting dressed and ready. I thought, maybe the brisk walk to the club to catch a lift would help calm my nerves. So blasting music in my headphones, singing to myself in my head, got myself to the club and then ride arrived, and off we went. Nerves were a bit on edge but under control so far.

Then we arrived at Brynna Community Hall and the wind farm on the distant hills greeted us. They looked as though they were mocking me. They were majestic and set so, very, very high up. Try as I might not to stare at them, I did. I normally do not warm up and do stretches before a run or race but that morning, I needed to, just for something to do to distract myself from thinking about the climb up them hills.

And so there we all were, at 9:30am at the start and we went off fairly quickly, as it was a little downhill run down a country lane. Perhaps at about 100 metres or so from the start, the gentle incline started. I was quite pleased because I thought, it was not too bad, Penarth Hill is a lot steeper and I could run up that. The inclined continued gently, legs and cardio still feeling not too bad. The inclines went on and on and on and then it was no longer an incline but a proper hill. I braved on for a bit, legs got a bit wobbly. Cardio was still

ok. Legs got wobblier and hill got steeper. I could see others ahead of me stopped to walk and others behind me did the same. I thought, decision time - I could run out of steam trying to be what I am not and attempt to run up what seemed like an endless steep climb or swallow my pride and walk. So walked I did. Not proud of it. Hung my head down in shame and walked.

I don't even know how long the climb was but it was a long walk. As I approached the official photographer half way up, I shook my head and he said 'Come on.. Just a little burst' and so like a pretender that I was, I did a short sprint and was captured on film strangely smiling and appeared to be running! That of course didn't last long and slowly but surely I made it to the top of the hill, where the tarmac path stops and we are directed to off-road. Earlier on some lady did run past me up the hill and looked back to ask if I was alright. I just smiled and waved her on.

The off road route was just boggy, with grass, mud and puddles as we made our way up a gentle slope, heading towards the wind farm. This was the part of the race, I started to relax into and enjoyed because I could run most of it and even had time to look up around me and saw these majestic wind farms up ahead. It was quite a sight to behold. Green hills all round, and then these giant structures in front of you, it was quite mesmerising running towards them.

Then the route starts a slow gentle descend and I absolutely loved this part. Running down the hill, I could feel the sun on my back and in my face with a gentle breeze accompanying my descend. Picture perfect postcard views all around me and as I was running with music in my ears, I was almost humming a tune in my head!

All through the route, the stewards were fantastic - a few familiar faces from the park run were there (the guys were from Brackla Harriers). It was at about 5km mark I think, at one of the kissing gates, the steward there said to me, all the hard bit over now. I thought, thank goodness! The path then changed from muddy slopes to mud and gravel for the next 3 km. It was very tempting to pick up speed as it was now fairly flat, just uneven in parts and little undulations but I thought better of it. I didn't fancy slipping, sliding in mud or worse sprain my ankles in the process. So I slowly jogged and picked my way through. It was at this point that I looked behind me and in front of me. I looked behind me to check if I was last and I looked in front of me to see how many people I could possibly catch up with and perhaps, beat to the finish line. There was one behind and I think there were 4 ahead of me, including the lady who ran past me as I was walking up the hill.

And then like an angel, at the last kissing gate, a familiar Brackla Harrier face smiled and said it was now just 1.5 miles to the end and it was downhill all the way. I thought, I either take smaller steps to give myself some brakes going downhill or I let gravity do the work for me. Tentative at first but once I started, it was an exhilarating gravity assisted sprint downhill for the last 1.5 miles. It was quite fantastic! I think I shocked the lady who ran past me earlier when I sprinted past her.

It felt really great to finish at last. It was in no way a speedy race for me but it was not disappointing one either at 70 minutes. Total respect to all the winners. The guy who won it did it in 37 mins! Some amazing running that must have been. Free hot soup and bun devoured and it was time to get home after the prize giving. I came away with a sense of accomplishment and a little Welsh slate coaster. I have not done many races but I can truly say, I enjoyed this one very much. It was a small race with just over a 100 + participants in an amazing setting. Though it was quite a tough route, at least for me anyway, it is definitely a race I would return to and turn Drover's Run into a personal sequel called 'Drover's Return'.

Drover's Run is an approx 6 miles MT which was held on 27 Nov 2011 - start from Brynna Community Centre, near Llaharan. The race was organised in aid of The Chloe Bigmore Trust. More info here <http://www.chloebigmore.co.uk/>

Christmas at Les Croupiers

Christmas Day falls on a Sunday this year, which means that our regular Thursday night training and social sessions fall on 22 and 29 December. We have already arranged for club to be open on Thursday 29 December and the bar and kitchen staff will be coming in especially to cater for us. So it's very much a question of "Please make it if you can" and "The more the merrier!"

Our Social Secretary, Sasha Macken, has been hard at work, personally sampling the potential delights of nightlife in Cardiff – but of course with our collective enjoyment in mind. So please log on to the social page and make notes in your diary.

Parkrun – the race that never sleeps!

As you know, Parkrun is held every Saturday at 9.00AM. It's a great morning out, whether you're running or officiating. We have a landmark event coming up – the 200th Parkrun will take place on Christmas Day (yes, it is a Sunday, so it will be a double whammy if you've run the usual Parkrun the previous day), so come and support if you can.

There will then be the usual Saturday Parkrun on New Year's Eve. As a special concession, we will allow you New Year's Day off to recover, but in case you get withdrawal systems there's Old Father Time on 2nd January. As you're all aware, this has been a difficult year for race organisation, so I think it's appropriate that a special word is mentioned here in appreciation of all Phil Cook's efforts, and those of everyone who has helped keep the show on the road.

And so to the New Year!

All your old favourite races are on! Weather permitting of course.....

Monday 2nd January: Old Father Time 5 miles: This race started in 1989 and is a great way both to kick off the New Year and see old friends. Incorporating the Welsh Masters Road Race Champs, the race start will be at 1.00 PM as usual. Race base is Llandaff RC, John Griffin is the Race Organiser, and entries are just £8, or a tenner on the day.

Saturday 7th January: Kymin Winter Race 4 miles/1150 feet climb: 2.00PM kick off and a great way to start the club off road championship. Rod Jones is your Race Organiser, and Monmouth School your race base.

Sunday 22nd January: Handicap 10 miles: Always a classic. A great way to test how your winter training is going. It's also the race where everyone theoretically has an equal chance of winning. Some traditions never change – all runners are scheduled to finish simultaneously at 10.00AM. Your handicap time is strictly non-negotiable (unless you want to run even faster, of course!) Just £4 to enter with a free brunch thrown in.

And Finally.....

My thanks to everyone who has contributed to ACE this year. Please keep those contributions coming. Have a very merry Christmas everyone and good luck for 2012.