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ATHLETICS

# INSIDE TRACK

Athletics news with Bill McGuirk



## Nick targets French date

ALL-TERRAIN specialist Nick Swinburn has competed abroad on three occasions this year and is hopeful his travels aren't over as he targets a trip to the European Cross-Country Championships later in the year.

While Swinburn admits he loves the challenge of racing up hills and mountains he has also done the business on the roads, on the track and over the country during the past few months.

Prior to competing in the European Mountain Running Championships in Portugal and Course Pedestre Thyon-Dixence 16k uphill international in Switzerland, he took to the track in Oorddegam, Belgium, recording 14min 15.54secs in an international 5,000m event.

However, the Morpeth Harrier is hungry for more and hopes to make the GB&NI team for the European Cross-Country Championships in Hyeres, France, in December.

Swinburn said: "I wasn't too disappointed not to be selected for the World Championships (in China) though I felt I was on the top of my form at the time having finished third in the National and fifth in the Inter-Counties."

"But that's all behind me now and I'm focusing fully on making the team for the European Cross in December. I've not raced since early August so I'm really excited about my first outing since then which will be at the end of this month in the National XC Relays in Mansfield."



■ Nick Swinburn

## Legend steals show on Saltwell's big night

DESPITE former Saltwell Harrier international John Hillen being given star billing at the club's 125th Anniversary Celebration Summer Ball it was Ronnie Walker, the Grand Old Man of the club, who had the packed Gateshead Old Town Hall in raptures.

Unfortunately, the club president was unable to make the special function but his heart and mind were certainly there after fellow Saltwell member Phil James used his digital technology skills to bring Walker's thoughts about everything athletics onto the large screen, set before an audience who hung on to every word he said.

Now 94, Ronnie – who has been with the club 77 years – has seen Saltwell's fortunes fluctuate greatly over time but he is hopeful, as he keeps in touch via social media, that the good times are about to return.

On screen he reminisced about the unrelenting efforts of his workmate, Tommy Bone, in persuading him to give up football and join Saltwell. And, in his first race, he lined up for the "sprint-in" that was incorporated into races those days and which favoured his ability – "I was flying. I was good at that," he chuckled.

He went on to say how he has recorded 138,863 miles over the years and he explained the lengths he went to in order to clock up 50 miles a week, but he also recalled the early days when such mileage would have been frowned upon because the tradition was to train only on Tuesdays and Thursdays!

Indeed, one runner he knew, who had been spotted training outside of club training hours, was summoned to appear before the committee for trying to gain an unfair advantage in preparing for a race in which medals were at stake.

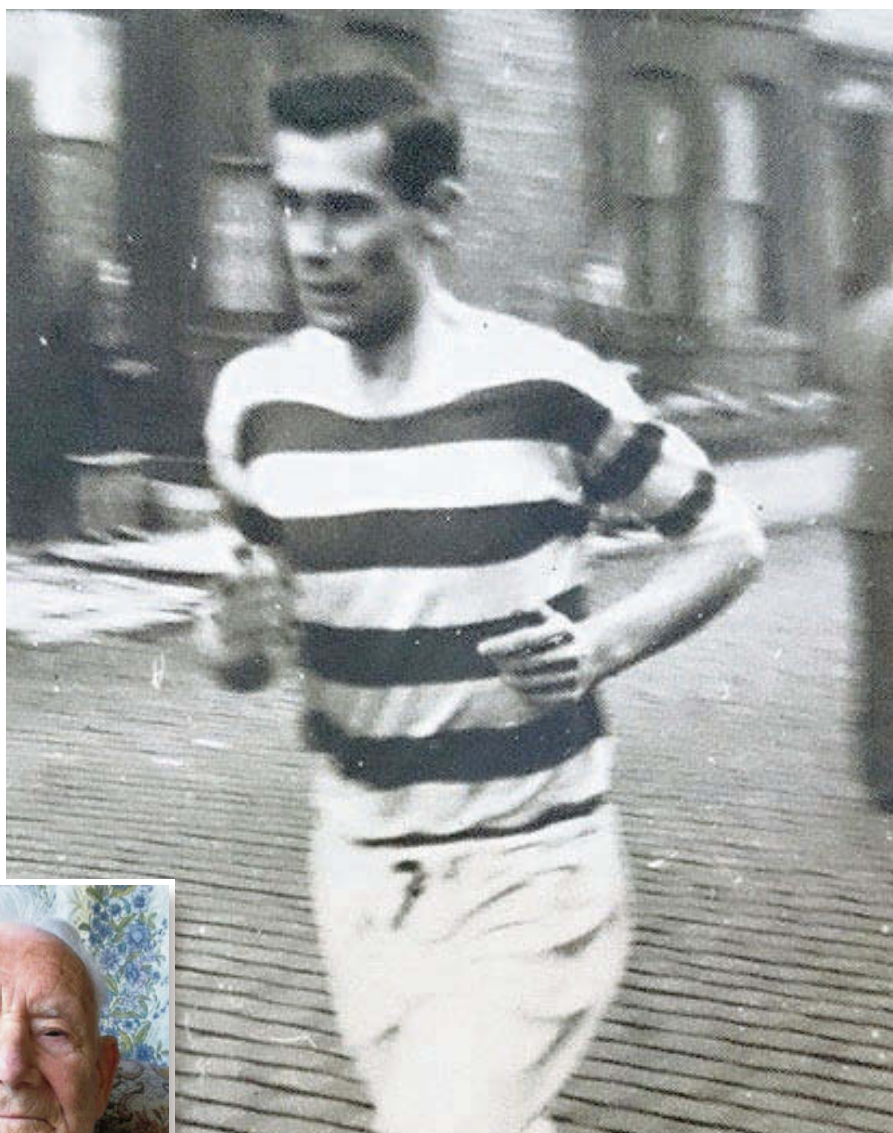
Ronnie also had his opinions on the issue of performance-enhancing substances. He reflected on various delusions that athletes had been under in the past when trying to improve their ability – taking things like pure orange juice, iron tablets and, in one case, a certain brand of cough medicine.

He then went on to reveal how his wife's attitude towards his running suddenly became more positive when he started competing abroad and taking her with him.

However, the pair were rather bemused when, on visiting Sweden, they went for a walk and ended up in a nudist camp!

His views were mixed, and sometimes controversial on the advent of the fun run, which he regards as the biggest change in the sport during his time.

However, on the positive side, he added



■ Ronnie Walker in action during his early days with Saltwell Harriers and inset left, pictured now as a happy 94-year-old

that the runs have brought a lot more people of all ages into athletics though competition has become less intense

and people are more concerned with personal best times than positions against other runners and, as a result, race finishing times, on average, are not as fast as they used to be when club stalwarts John Anderson and John Hillen were on the go.

When asked what he thought of current club members, Ronnie said Saltwell Harriers has had its ups and downs but the club looks to be on the way up now.

He observes the club's progress on the internet and Facebook and thinks they have some marvellous organisers.

They enjoy themselves more these days than in the days when competition was

much more competitive, but good luck to them. However, as time was running out, Ronnie ended with words he had spoken time and time again in recent years and that was the hitherto lack of mentions of Saltwell Harriers in the Chronicle.

But thankfully, that was put right when current women's club captain, Gemma Bradley, made the headlines earlier this week after her success in winning last Sunday's Kielder Marathon.

Club historian Walter Fraser has put together a fascinating book tracing Saltwell's history back to when it was formed in 1890 and it makes interesting reading plotting its founding through to the club's glory years in the 1950s and 1960s – when international stars Anderson and Hillen led the club to numerous honours – right up until the present day.

## ATHLETICS DIARY

■ AFTER a successful opening fixture of the North East Harrier League at Tanfield – hosted by Gateshead Harriers – cross-country attention turns to the Sherman Cup and Davison Shield competition this weekend.

Once again South Shields Harriers host the popular event at Temple Park on Saturday when there will be a 'try cross-country' run for under-11s. They will open the 10-race programme at 12.15pm.

■ DERWENTSIDE AC's annual Hellhole Multi-Terrain 10k Race takes place on Sunday, October 11 with a 10am start.

Postal entries have closed but late entries will be taken at the race headquarters, the Louisa Centre, Stanley, until 30 minutes before the race.

A fun run over one mile opens up the day's action at 9.30am.

■ THE Northern Cross-Country Relay Championships take place in Graves Park, Sheffield on Saturday, October 17.

There are events for all age groups from under-11 to seniors.

The programme opens at 11am with the under-17 Women's 3x2300m relay with the senior men's 4x2-mile contest closing proceedings at 2.15pm.

Online entries only at: [www.race-results.co.uk](http://www.race-results.co.uk)

■ THE National Trust, in partnership with Blackhill Bounders, promote the 19th running of the Gibside Fruit Bowl Trail Race on Sunday, October 18 with a 9.30am start.

Entries, which are limited to 500, close this weekend and go to: Amanda Phillips, 12 Bainbridge Close, Delves Lane, Consett, Co Durham DH8 7EG.

No entries will be taken on the day.

■ HEATON Harriers' Memorial 10k Road Race, supported by Quorum Business Park, takes place on Newcastle Town Moor on Sunday, November 8 with an 11.01am start.

The main race follows a series of junior events starting at 9.30am.

Postal entries, which close on November 4, go to Race Secretary, 40 Netherwitton Way, Gosforth, Newcastle NE3 5RP. Online entries also at: [www.racecentry.co.uk/heaton10k](http://www.racecentry.co.uk/heaton10k).