



The Beginnings of an Adventure

For those of you who have reached a certain age as I have – whatever that age might be – you may be inclined to think that the passing of a ‘milestone’ in your life should be marked by some kind of memento: a party; a fine watch; a theatre visit or maybe a night ‘down the pub’ with your mates. This is all well and good but if you have no mates then a visit to the pub stands to be a lonely experience. I have been to the theatre once before. I don’t need to go again. I have a trusty Casio that set me back more than eight pounds so, as it keeps an accurate eye on the time then how fine is that! It may not be the most pleasing thing to look at but, ‘form follows function’ so no need to splash out on a replacement.

As for a party, I hate balloons and jelly and ice cream and as I have no mates then once again my invite list would be blank and all the jelly and ice cream would go to waste. And most of all, I needed sympathy. I had to come up with an idea that would include my family as they would be more likely to say yes to any proposal especially if free food and travel were included. There had to be a goal too so that we could work towards achieving something together and something that was a bit different to pubs and parties; theatres and horological jewellery. ‘How about skiing?’ I said. ‘Cross country skiing’. ‘A ski marathon’. ‘The Engadin Skimarathon’.

So began our family adventure. All of us blissfully unaware of what was to come both in terms of the race itself and the preparation that would be needed in the lead up to March 2018.

Training

There was a good deal of planning to do to enable us to get to the marathon on time and in some kind of appropriate shape. *Having read up to this point in the article then you, dear reader, are obviously keen to read more and anyone wishing to find out more about the planning that took place is going to be disappointed to learn that I simply haven’t got the will power to type it all out just now so, If you really want to find out more please get in touch and I can talk you through it.*

I found the Yorkshire Dales Cross Country Ski Club website and posted a message to Glynn Parry who kindly introduced me to various people whom I had never met but appeared to know what they were talking about. Three members of my family arrived one Friday evening at York Sports Village and met amongst others, Martin Roscoe and Richard Smith and I should add at once that if it were not for the work of Martin and Richard and others then we would not have achieved as much as we did.

Warming up by swinging arms and legs around in the cool evening air on a York cycle track is a highlight of our first training session that I will long remember. Learning about Martin’s little

'challenges' to finish off the evening ; doing as many 'crunchies' before a strange blue line on the track and, marathon skating to the finish line or to the coffee shop are all embedded routines and phrases that helped us to compete in the marathon.

Over the course of about five months two or three of our little band made our way over to York for training. Sometimes three of us made the journey and occasionally four. There was never a time when the five family members were present together and our eldest son only managed one session. Most of our time at the sports village was spent during the dark hours of Friday evenings at the end of the normal working week when a restful night in would have been welcome. So, often we arrived in the centre's car park to the booming sound of the boxercise class up on the centre's first floor where it looked dark and cold and miserable. We however would rush down to the bright and airy cycle track where a warm and comfortable strip of tarmac awaited. Skate 1, 2 or 3? Who cared? Who knew the difference? Who cared if they didn't know the difference? We just ate up the miles on our slick Swenors and our trendy Salomon Combi ProLink NNN ski shoe thingy's.

As October turned into November and then into December and this year, into January as well we realised that February would follow next and then March would arrive meaning only one thing: that the skimarathon was nearly upon us. No more time for training nor practise. Just get on the plane and head south.

The Engadin Skimarathon



Many of you will have heard of the Engadin Skimarathon and some of you have no doubt entered the race and completed it. The course is relatively flat for the first 10 miles or so beginning at Maloja in the western end of the Engadin valley then reaching a hill followed by a three mile section that takes competitors to the halfway point at Pontresina. The rest of the course is undulating and one simply glides over the finish line at S-Chanf some 42km later. Or that's what I thought and that's what I convinced the family that they were going to face. In fact according to the marathon website '... the track is mainly flat with gentle inclines'. Now, I'm no linguist but I am willing to suggest that there has been some application of artistic licence in the translation from Swiss-German into English-English. While it's quite true that the first quarter of the route is relatively flat it is then equally untrue to suggest that there are 'gentle inclines'. The first hill that skiers reach is best suited to those competitors equipped with crampons and a pair of ice axes. The joy of plunging down into St Moritz is soon swept away by the next hill; a forest section, more hills and then the infamous Stazerwald decent where it's best to check your insurance documents before proceeding. What skiers face after

Pontresina is anyone's guess as half way was as far as I and three members of our family reached on the day. Only one member managed the complete route in a time just over four hours.

We had arrived in Maloja, the starting point of the marathon having stepped off the free shuttle bus and walked amongst thousands of other competitors to a space where we could try to gather our thoughts and bearings in order to find out what to do next. Locating the Swiss Army trucks that would transport our redundant clothing to the marathon finish also led us to the heated tents where we sheltered from the South Easterly wind and snow that was sweeping by outside the canvas doorways.

Just after 9am we took our place near the start line with the penultimate group of skiers. 'The lantern rouge'. It was a cold 45 minute wait before our pack of enthusiasts were let loose by the officials and rather than being immersed in a sea of frantic action the pace of our fellow competitors was relaxed and we glided steadily north east blown on by the wind and a little effort from ourselves. To be truthful it wasn't quite as easy as you would believe it should be. We had never set out – as a family – to stick together during the event. Only Caroline and I would stay with each other



to our finish in Pontresina. Within seconds, quite literally, our children had gone. They were away. Impossible to see among the crowd. Quite quickly too people were passing us on both sides. Even classic skiers were gravitating to their finish lines faster than the two of us. I had remembered though that we must not panic but concentrate on our race at our speed and I really do think that this helped. Had we tried and (we would have) failed to keep up with our fellow competitors then we would have failed completely. Better to finish last than not at all.

The Kms came and went and our first stop at 5Km in Sils Maria provided liquids. The next refreshment point at Silvaplana / Surlej happened to be near to our Airbnb accommodation but any thought of sneaking off 'home' disappeared as we slid on to St Moritz Dorf and the first hill. It's at this point, 15Km when Martin's idea that Skate 1 can get you up Everest dissolved into the very ice beneath our skis. You must have to be a Marvel Superhero to use Skate 1 on that hill. A really sweet moment here too. A young local girl – maybe 7 or 8 yrs. old - told us in perfect English that we could

take off our skis here and walk up the hill at one side. Thanks but no thanks Jungfrau as a) how did she know we would speak English and b), would she have disqualified us if we had done as she had offered? No chance taken. Upwards and onwards in the herringbone style.

The first downhill section followed next with plenty of folk dressed in emergency / rescue / paramedic type clothing at the bottom of this incline no doubt waiting for a few late customers. We disappointed them and reached a public commentary point where each skier's name was called out to the watching crowd and cheered on by those waiting for some kind of embarrassing spectacle to unfold. We disappointed our onlookers once again and crawled past onto more inclines and yet more herringbone manoeuvres. It is in the Stazerwald section that it is well known for spectators who have some genetic connection to a committee of vultures to stand and wait and watch hapless skiers descending what many regard to be the most treacherous and dangerous part of the whole marathon.

Well, every cloud has a silver lining and there is a benefit to being at the back of a large and mobile group so that when Caroline and I reached the Stazerwald downhill with no other competitors in sight there were also no spectators in sight either. None at all. No one to shout and jeer nor applaud our attempts to get down in one piece save that is for a fairly large group of paramedic / rescue / responder types at the edge of the forest way below us. Thousands of skiers had descended amongst the heavily padded trees so the snow was rutted and uneven. We stood at the point of no return. We looked down at the officials and at each other. We knew that snowploughing would be useless but if we were careful and got the trajectory right then there was a direct line down past the trees and on into a meadow. We aimed our skis and set off. Picking up speed but riding through and over the bumps and hollows generated by 14000 pairs of skis and by the bottoms and elbows and knees and backs that had gone before us. We sped on and out into the meadow to the shouts of 'Bravo' from the officials who moments before must have been rubbing their hands at the thought of some last-minute business going their way. And then on to Pontresina between the guiding banners, barriers and ropes that say 'enough is enough' and to the finish line of the half marathon some 21kms from our starting point 3hrs and 49mins earlier.

Zeil

The experience of course was unique to each and every competitor including those of my family and for myself. We all feel the stimulus of our surroundings to a greater or lesser extent. We have hopes and fears and feelings but they can be subtly different and have a different effect on each one of us. We will never forget the past six months with all of its demands and the demands we placed on ourselves. We will not forget the impact of seeing thousands of people readying for their brief moment of involvement in one of the world's largest sporting events in one of the world's most beautiful places. We cannot forget the effort that was made by many to make the event such a success including once again the guidance, good humour and tolerance of our Yorkshire based tutors.

Reaching the half marathon finish for those that make it can be a real achievement and as such it is an uplifting occasion. It beats jelly and ice cream and going 'down the pub' too. So would we do it again? As some used to say in Barnsley, 'If tha dun't, tha daren't'. But it's not a dare. It's as safe and as organised an experience as you can have while still having an element of risk. So, for Arte who

completed the full marathon distance with experience and more practice than I, think yes, and yes too for Isaac and Syd. More 'crunchies', more tarmac Kms.

For Caroline and I, then I am not sure. With more practice and more kilometres under our belts then possibly. But for those of us whose milestones are increasing in even greater number then it had better be sooner rather than later.

Ian

