

## Southern 50 2009

This is a new event for us as we have been doing the Essex County Marathon for 5 years and wanted to give something different a try. In fact what we really wanted is another chance to have a crack at beating the notorious Halstead Undertakers, who are invincible in the Essex Marathon and in whose honour we are named!

We run scouts on Friday night until 9.30, so it wasn't until 11.30 we arrived and checked in. Getting some sleep that night was a bit tricky due to the hard floor and people arriving at random hours of the night, but at 5am we were ready to go with breakfast and kit check. The slick organising team were very impressive and after precisely 2 mins with the map during which time we were able to mark on most of the checkpoints, we were off at 6.44 with Sean and Lister setting the early pace, Martin cracking the early jokes, and me making a pig's ear of trying to refold the map without having to stop.

As novices we were starting early as the 3<sup>rd</sup> team out, after a good start we were able to overtake the 2 teams ahead of us and be the first to the first checkpoint and heading the field, which is where we stayed most of the day. We found that there were one or two disadvantages to being first as a couple of the bases didn't expect us so soon and we couldn't get any food! Luckily base 12 at Stoke Row, where the explorers had started, was well prepared and we gratefully grabbed some burgers. We lost 5 mins looking for the base after the rookie error of failing to make the connection between the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary balloons and the Southern 50, now in it's 30<sup>th</sup> year! Being first on the road also meant we had nothing to aim for, as teams behind us would be able to track our progress but we had no idea if anyone was chasing us.

After Stoke Row we started coming across a few Explorer teams, some of them making some rather interesting navigational deviations so it was a good thing we were always carefully checking the map! We did pretty well getting through a woodland using the compass but then the one map error we did make allowed team 53 to pass us where they spotted a minor shortcut we didn't take after base 15. Not that it would have made any difference as they were much faster, and when they passed us they were running and one even carrying two backpacks. As we'd read the reports from previous years we assumed they must be the Phoenix Flyers, 3 time winners but we subsequently found out in fact that they were 'Team Extreme' the eventual winners this year and all credit to them for a pretty amazing performance.

All of this meant that although we knew we could no longer play for the win, we had to keep it up and hope to keep the Undertakers and the Flyers behind us. Still having no idea whether or not they were gaining on us was difficult and our pace was slowing but we kept it up the best we could. We briefly kept pace with Team Extreme and they were just leaving Santa's Grotto (Base 17) when we arrived, but we couldn't live with them on the long uphill slog before Nuffield Common and base 18, after which the hardest part of the walk came: two uphill slogs across ploughed fields where the mud was so bad it was two steps forward one step back. Martin, previously our slowest 'overtaker', was even setting the pace at one point by using his special technique of keeping on the move by walking round in circles at the bases rather than actually stopping!

Finally it was through the quagmire of the ridgeway path and a short hobble down the road back to the school in Watlington. The second 50km team to finish, we had managed to keep the rest of the opposition behind us but only just, because the Flyers arrived a few mins later. As they had started an hour behind us, we knew they had taken 2<sup>nd</sup> place – but had we beaten those Undertakers? A nailbiting time followed waiting outside the school entrance but with a groan we welcomed them back 45 mins later, beating our time by about 15 mins. To cap it off, just as we thought nobody else could overhaul our time teams 49 and 46 arrived at the last second to take 4<sup>th</sup> and joint 5<sup>th</sup> with us respectively as amazingly all 3 of us teams were separated by just 1 minute after 9 hours of walking!

We were more than happy with 5<sup>th</sup> place and proud joint winners of the trophy for the fastest novice team. Congratulations to all 31 teams on the 50km and it looked like they all enjoyed it as much as we did. At least they did the day after anyway, after a night of recovery! A big thanks to all the organisers and checkpoint staff who were brilliant, a great event all round – see you next year.

Richard, Sean X, Lister and Ginger – 1<sup>st</sup> Runwell Overtakers.