

Chair's Report to the AGM 2024

There are areas in which we have undoubtedly seen some progress this year – notably the growth in membership numbers, and the recruitment of new additions to our coaching ranks – and, as always, there have been some excellent competitive performances to celebrate. The change of operator in February 2024 may yet prove to be a turning point in the fortunes of the stadium, but it is perhaps a little early to judge on that score.

But, as ever, I like to keep this in the context of knowing that there is still much to do. Before writing this report, I looked back at the reports I wrote during my previous period as Chair (2012-2015), and I was struck by the similarities between then and now in the issues facing the wider sport, which are unchanged over the past decade (and for some time before that). Matters such as keeping competition contemporary, the aging profile of the pool of officials, problems recruiting volunteers and coaches etc. And very clearly, that trend of decline continues, and possibly even accelerates, which is of great concern.

I also reflected that on returning to the club at last year's AGM, I expressed my belief that there was a need to tighten corporate responsibility, to address track and maintenance issues, prioritise recruitment of athletes and coaches, and to seek the improved transparency of governing functions.

So how has the year has been from the club's own viewpoint?

I will focus on a just a few, key areas, excluding the financial, as that is covered in the Treasurer's Report.

- **Membership numbers**

- Overall, a healthy trend; we need to increase total volume as precursor to improving quality of teams
- Part of our role is to provide a healthy pastime for children, although we must be wary of being taken for granted as a cheap, child-minding service. But competition remains fundamental to any athletic club, so this competitive focus needs to remain as we grow numbers.
- Membership 425 as at the end of year 2023/24
- Current headline membership number (renewals etc) for 2024/25 is 347, of which 283 are 'paying' against budget of 311 – well on course for this stage of the year
- 56% of total are juniors, vs 23% adult (including 'living away'), 18% 'free' and 3% second claim

- **Track resurfacing**

- funding secured for 2025/26, passed by full council Jan 2024; we need to encourage them to adopt a 'use it or lose it' approach!
- target for re-surfacing is August or September 2025 – realistic
- The possibility of any redevelopment incorporating a 3G pitch is still on the table – there may be a need for some compromise on our part here
- I stated the view in 2016 that increasingly BIAS would need to "wipe its feet" financially, and to achieve this would require a radical re-think in the medium to long term of how we structure our stadia and our clubs - probably more along the lines of the multiple sports club model of continental Europe (aligned to other revenue-generating activities and services). I stand by that view.

- **GLL / Fusion**

- In terms of our embryonic relationship with the new operator – GLL - it is still early days. There have been some good signs, albeit the pace of change is slow, but any optimism is still heavily laced with caution, as there is much to do, and we are starting from a low base
- Lengthy list of maintenance issues has been submitted, and is being chased up – next meeting with stadium management is next week
- Fee structure - we have agreed to divorce track fees from club subs – in this transition, GLL have honoured our historic 20% discount

- Catering: “Top Floor” have now had their contract terminated. GLL are looking at potential use of Mowsbury contractor, and/or increased club access to kitchen, as well as lounge. But first step is purchase of furnishing and vending machines (6 weeks away, as of the date of this meeting, I am told).
- **Competition format –**
 - Autumn discussion forum was held 2023 – we will repeat this in Sept/Oct 2024
 - Big acceleration this year in trend towards shorter meetings and more local, geographically clustered divisions, but perhaps this is too little too late to address the decline in league competition?
- **Officials and hosting – winter / summer**
 - Keysoe – again an outstanding success, for which we owe thanks to Hayley and Claire, and many others.
 - We are now in a position to offer to host an event at Keysoe again in season 2024/25
 - The Chiltern league’s existential threat is indicative of wider malaise (edit: subsequently this threat has been averted)
 - Track hosting – we achieved good outcomes, which we mustn’t lose sight of, and at times in the past this has been in spite of the poor level of stadium support (Caleb being an honourable exception!). Bob continues to bear the major burden with regards to our home fixtures, albeit with huge help from likes of Courtney, Allen, Graeme, Martyn, and Emma, but succession is urgent, and creating momentum around recruitment, and all the names that most readily come to mind are those that fulfil multiple other roles within the club. Tina and Jodi have been very successful in recruiting parents to help officiate at YA matches, but this resource is not available at senior competition.
 - Nine years ago, I noted that “there is still a trend towards our officials becoming both older and fewer in number.” This is still a future concern both for this club and the wider sport, particularly at senior matches where the parental help is less of a factor.”
 - I also felt that part of the solution might be in lowering the qualification bar, and recruiting on a more commercial basis. In the former case, the opposite has happened, and the latter is alien to the culture of our sport, and as such, is a hard sell.
- **Admin roles**
 - Front desk – we need to find someone to fulfil the ‘meet and greet’ role
 - New member emails/enquiries – this is time-consuming, so needs to be a standalone role
 - Kit – we have moved this to sub contract basis (No Limitz) – no exposure to risk, no need to provide labour
 - Website/media – Peter Webster is standing down at the end of the track season. Our thanks are due to Peter for his excellent service in this role for several years. Emma Smith has a growing role with social media and branding, and the club’s growing social media presence bears testament to her success
 - When I look back to 2009 and 2010 AGM’s, I note that we had 26 different people in admin posts, and an aspiration to fill 39 posts excluding team managers. Both the overall numbers, and the extent of our ambition in this respect, have reduced greatly over the intervening years, which is indicative of a declining trend. This is a society-wide malaise, and not peculiar to athletics, or to our club. But it is a problem to us, nonetheless.
 - Long term solutions are a combination of a simplification of roles, a reduction in the scope of activity, sub-contracting elements (as we have re kit), or, ultimately, a commercial basis to more roles (i.e. we just pay people to perform certain functions).
- **Coaching capacity.**
 - Samuel Arhin has undertaken a coaching course, and proved a big asset
 - Jake Reynolds is enrolled on a coaching course
 - Jim & Ewan have upgraded their coaching status, increasing our endurance capacity
 - Steve Janes has returned, and enabled us to develop a new group for years 3 and 4

- Gabriella Rudd is assisting Alan Watts
- Nick Rimmer is already qualified, and has provided valuable support to Gavin and Simon's girls' endurance group
- Parental helpers – we have a number of such helpers across sprints and endurance groups. This is a good way to start people on the 'coaching pathway' via a low-key introductory level, but even if they do not choose to progress into coaching, the additional support and capacity that this role provides is very welcome.
- **Coaching hierarchies** – I continue to be of the view that an imposed "hierarchy," if too rigid, will on balance prove counter-productive in this (volunteer) environment. I am conscious that there is a constant balancing act for a coach in judging when it is right to pass on an athlete, or when to engage outside help in a particular area. Coaches will always be possessive of their charges, and rightly so in many ways, but they need to balance this with still being able to assess when the time is right for an athlete to move on.
- **Age group changes** – we were initially opposed to these changes, but after consultation and lengthy committee discourse, I was surprised to find not only myself, but the committee generally, were in favour of the changes, albeit I/we did not feel that the 'consultation' was handled well. EGM on 10th June 2024
- **Competitive outcomes**
 - Previously, this has featured at the start of these reports, but I wanted to end up with this, as it is the focus of everything that we do
 - Team-wise, not an easy year, but maybe some encouraging signs. The context is a need to re-invent team competition as mentioned earlier
 - List of individual achievements took a lot of research, which is testament to the fact that there is actually a lot to celebrate.

Team competition:

- NAL – we were 12th of 16 clubs in the championship division in 2023. This year, given the heavy southern weighting of the league, we are in a new 'northern' sub-division of 6 clubs under the new, more regionalised, structure
- SAL – having placed 13th in division 3 (north) in 2023, we are now in a much more regionalised version of div 3 (N) for 2024 with only 6 other clubs
- EYAL – after a 14th place finish in 2023, the early signs are that we should improve on that this year, with a reasonable influx of new blood into our younger ranks
- YDL LAG – we have now broken away from the Bedfordshire composite again, and won our first match of 2024 in Div 1c (albeit with home advantage), the second fixture being this coming weekend
- EMAC T&F – 1st team in 2023
- Cross country: The National didn't happen this year, so nothing to report there. The SM had a commendable 5th place finish at the SEAA champs, at which the U17 women were 4th team – an excellent result.
- Chiltern League – 4th team overall, with senior men 2nd, junior's 4th overall, and wins for U17 men and vets men.
- A good spread of results at the National XC Relays, head by U17W 6th, SM 11th
- Likewise at the Autumn Road Relays, there were a variety of good results (National - U17W 9th). Very encouraging to see more YA teams, both boys and girls – for instance, it's a long time since we fielded x 3 teams in U17M at SEAA.
- 12 stage – 4th southern, 9th National

Individual performances:

- Raph Bouju reached SF at Worlds 100m, and was second in both 100 and 200 at Euro U23, setting a club record of 10.01 in the semi
- Tia Wilson (6th World Students XC and Europeans 34th in U23)

- Lyla Danobrega 2nd ESAA S/C and schools international
- Thaila-Jade Mason – 2nd ESAA LJ and schools international (6.00m), 2nd national indoor U17 LJ, SEAA indoor gold, SEAA indoor pent silver, outdoor gold 2023 in both LJ and hept SEAA
- Zaphaniah Bryan U17M HJ SEAA indoor gold
- Noah Champion – selected for Seville (2nd) and Elgoibar (DNS); 2023 ESAA SB 3000m 4th
- Etienne Maughan – 2nd SG 100mH ESAA 2023, BUCS gold 2024
- Gracie Wall 4th SG HJ ESAA 2023, 7th HJ at UK champs, U20 gold 2023 England champs
- ESAA 4 x 100 mixed relay 1st (all BCAC?)
- Jack Goodwin – Home Nations 5k Cardiff (5th)

Thanks to all volunteers: When I come to consider and list all those who assist the club over the course of a year, it makes me realise that despite our often bemoaning the lack of new volunteers that we are able to recruit, there are actually considerable numbers who do contribute to the running of the club in one way or another. My thanks are due to all those of you who have supported the club in many different ways over the past year.