

## **My Lockdown Tale**

*To Joyce. The greatest bus warrior of them all...*

"Owen there has never been a better time to discover something new, write a book or even study the welsh language." These are the words of my friend Zoe. It is a Saturday night and I am getting absolutely hammered in a quiz as normal. Zoe is the quiz master. It feels like I have known Zoe and her brothers all my life since we were growing up on the street. Now Zoe has a management role in Cardiff. She is the club secretary of the social club just down the road from where I was brought up. She hopes to travel to America when the pandemic is over.

I feel the idea of writing a book inspires me. In Covid I thought about writing a book based on my running career. How it all started in 1984. 'Wham bam I am a man'. It can be that far back for some. I feel it would still be a developing story of highs and lows. An important and ongoing chapter would have to be my survival in Covid. It has been well documented in the media it is not easy for single people living in flats and I feel in doing this I can talk about my feelings.

I'm horrified, I just don't know how else I can put it. Training sessions at the club have been cancelled. It is Monday evening and Boris Johnson has put the country into lockdown. It is eight o'clock in the evening - only essential retail and one form of exercise a day is allowed. I fear for my canaries. My good friend Laura messages me at 11pm to tell me pet shops will be part of essential retail. I have nothing to worry about. I am already fearing for the sport. I have not had a good start to 2020, battling and blown to pieces at Settle. I feel I do not want any interruptions. I just want to quietly get on with training for future events.

On Tuesday morning I write an email to my employer asking for a morning of annual leave. I write that the situation is pretty serious and I must make sure I have enough supplies. How can he refuse, he has already given me a computer to start working from home. I walk through Oldham town centre, it scares me. It feels like an unnatural ghostly atmosphere. I catch the bus to Pets at Home. I am asked the reason for my visit.

I have only worked from home on very limited occasions. I'm shell-shocked from what is going on. I feel tears in my eyes setting up my workstation, saying to myself only I can do this. My first day went well and I surprised myself. It became easier and easier. Now I work from home like switching on a light switch.

I thought it would last a few weeks. Race after race cancelled. No return to the club.

It is about the end of May. I have signed up for a webinar about club engagement in athletics. It is organised through my contacts in Wales Athletics. There were many ideas discussed that we had already adopted. Many clubs had taken time and effort to keep their members engaged. I thought to myself the whole evening, this is alright and important but I really want to know about the return of competition. Spen, who was running the group, was of high stature in athletics, a laughing German who had spoken to the Danish national football team the night before. On a boiling night when my canaries were singing to the top of their voices I wasn't afraid to ask Spen when he thought athletics would return as we knew it. In reading this it is important that this conversation took place in May 2020 before any vaccine was found. He answered he thought it would be at least a few years. I was horrified.

Ken had known me since I was a junior athlete. It was good he joined the webinar that night. I asked if it was alright if I spoke to him afterwards and we must have spoken for half an hour. He asked about

my parents and I asked him about his sons, who I ran against in my junior and into my senior years. The one piece of advice Ken gave me was that I had to forget this year. I didn't know what to do. I had always competed. Athletics and running had always been promoted as an accessible sport and I had always received encouragement and hoped I had encouraged others.

I'm not on Strava. It could be a Scandinavian furniture shop for all I cared. I knew the benefits of Strava but didn't feel over-interested in using it. I thought, why do I want to follow someone on Strava? My school friend Cheryl really motivates me. She is a born-again runner who started running when she was 40 as a way of losing weight and staying fit after starting a family. I have been to Cheryl's 50th and 100th parkruns, I spend time to look at how far she has logged in her running on Facebook and have to be part of her Body Shop presentation on a weekend, but I still didn't want to log and follow people on Strava. I then come on to virtual events. Although I ran the summer 'Bimble in the Park', raising £12 for the NHS, the thought of entering an event, picking up a medal or T-shirt and running by myself didn't appeal to me. I did regret not doing this year's Mad Dog as I would have quite liked the T-shirt. Although no party animal, I was missing the social of the pub, going out for dinner and wasn't sure how well I was coping. I had to think of something. The best plan for me was to carry on as normal or as close as I could to normal.

I must admit I have always been one on his own. I found a good international running website that was full of European events both virtual and actual. I ploughed through it trying to set goals. I noticed the Reykjavik Half Marathon was at the end of August. I could do a repeat visit from 1997. I was very interested in the Allotting Half Marathon at the start of September in Germany. All countries by that stage had different requirements of entry and no guarantee these events would take place.

Sometimes one phone call can be a game changer. I had sent an email to Glenn Grant in Northern Ireland. He replied by inviting me to give him a ring. Glenn was very reassuring about the events he was providing in Northern Ireland. Time was going to tell but in 2020 the Covid infection rate was lower in Northern Ireland than in England. He told me about runners who had travelled to his series from other parts of Great Britain. There were two women who had travelled from Cardiff Athletics Club to do the 5K, one of whom had probably run herself into the Welsh rankings. My mind was made up. I was off to Lisburn and to the Down Royal Racecourse for the 10K in August.

In the meantime there were other events. I supported parkrun in logging virtual times as a notparkrun. This is an honesty system where you can use your own stopwatch. I have logged over 20 notparkruns and am excited about parkrun returning in June. I travelled to Brighouse to do the Runable 5K. Wayne did an excellent job in organising us in groups of six. When I turned up on 5th September and told Wayne it was my birthday he asked, "Should I tell the other runners not to turn up so you will win?"

Over the coming months I considered my results as poor by my own standards. I just could not adapt to the new normal in running. In my final Runable 5K of the year I was aiming for sub-20 minutes. At 4K mathematically I was well inside. I wasn't sure whether it was the nature of the course but in the last kilometre it just slipped away from me and I was a few seconds over at the finish. The 10K in Ireland was disappointing, I felt totally refreshed to get away and to have a break for the weekend but I knew it was a poor result. The queue to get into Wetherspoons was a mile long as I thought to myself this isn't like going out in Oldham and Saddleworth, I'm in the city now. Lads shouting on a stag night felt like I had gone back to the old normal. Glenn had successfully organised the event. As a race organiser he had told me the object is to get people on the start line and to get them away as quickly as possible. There were no serious Covid cases left in Northern Ireland at the time and a rule had been brought in that social distancing could be broken for up to 10 minutes at a time for such an event to

be organised. I predicted that maybe in one year's time it could be more like this in England. I am optimistic of seeing this vision through but sadly for Northern Ireland cases were going to rise.

After picking up the canaries from my pet minder Molly I sat down and re-evaluated. There was still no sign of competition returning in England and I was best sticking with Glenn to get any sort of meaningful competition. I looked at his series. I noticed in October a marathon was part of the schedule. The previous marathons in the series had been poorly attended but I considered what it would feel like to compete in not a virtual but an actual. Could I be the only person in the club to have done an actual in 2020? I then realised I was getting carried away. As mentioned I didn't really feel on top of my game and there was not a lot of time to prepare. The series was based on points for races and I thought about returning and doing a 5K in the morning, some sandwiches, and all I had left for a 10K in the afternoon and just see if I could rise up the table. There were runners competing in the 5K, 10K and half marathon all on the same day on other events in the series.

However my mind was made up. I wanted to do the afternoon half marathon. It would be my third half marathon of 2020.

I really motivated myself all I could. I posted my picture on Facebook at Manchester Airport hoping people would get behind me. Another good flight and good accommodation. I preferred this accommodation to the first place. I watched the morning 5K at the Down Royal. There were around 200 runners in the 5K, all divided into waves. Most were Irish parkrunners grateful for the opportunity to compete.

It was now my turn in the half marathon. Glenn was his witty self. Many suggested he should receive an award from Northern Ireland athletics for the effort he put in. He replied before we set off, "They could make me the Dalai Lama, then I could be known as Glenn Dalai Lama Grant."

I headed out on my first lap of the race course with two runners from County Omagh. I remarked that my boss was originally from Omagh. It was seven laps around the Down Royal Racecourse, a real marathon of the mind. A cross-wind blew, the sun came out intermittently but it wasn't cold. In passing seven or eight miles I felt in trouble. I hadn't realised there was a water table after every lap. I thought I read in the instructions runners had to provide their own water. I was in trouble.

At the top of the hill I was gone. A runner caught me who I had been talking to before the start. He was a parkrun legend in these parts. He had survived a nasty brain operation and was the same age as me. It was too little too late but he managed to get me back into my rhythm a little bit. When I was younger I had more running ability but less stickability - now I am older I have less ability but got better at stickability. If I was a younger man I knew it would have been a DNF.

I was glad when my heavy legs could see the holding stand of the race course for the last time and I was going to enter the final straight. At the finish I virtually collapsed. A medic had to come and help me. I put it down to some sort of dehydration. It may have been October but I still needed some sort of fluid for the half marathon.

I had a lay down at the hotel. When I got back to the same Wetherspoons I found that there was several hours wait for food. I ate some Kentucky Fried Chicken and found the cinema. "How do I go to the cinema?" I asked the cashier. "You pay me," he said. The film was pretty good. It was the new Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure.

I felt like a bear with a sore head. All that I had got to show from two trips to Ireland was two personal worsts.

I entered the Heaton Park 10K with RunThrough. A massive heavy shower before the start made the hilly course slippery in starting in a big snake formation. It felt nothing to write home about.

I was due to run the Tatton Park 10K the following Sunday when fate took over. It was 11th November (Armistice Day) when I fell hard on the canal at Greenfield in the last half mile of my run. I had a fractured humerus. I later read in the Saddleworth Independent about the planned works on the canal and the surface was certainly uneven. I put it down to a sheer lack of concentration. My head was drifting from my disappointments in Ireland and my despair of lockdown. I recovered but another lockdown, flight corridors, Northern Ireland as well this time. There was nothing I could do.

It is 2021 and as we unlock I feel positive. I am about to do Brighthouse again and my deferred Tatton Park 10K as my pre-season. I look at the 2021 club championship. In 2022 I may decide to do all races in the championship and go for a medal. I know I will not win it again but it is something I have never achieved.

I want life to go back to normal but if it doesn't I am more prepared. I feel the whole experience has made me a better person.

I wish athletics the very best in its roadmap back to recovery. It is what it deserves. I wish everybody all the best in your running goals.

Owen Flage