

# Father's Day

*For Oliver*

*15 June 2019*

The alarm wakes me at seven. Within two minutes I am dressed in my running gear and going downstairs to have a few moments quiet reflection at my desk over a cup of coffee. Everyone in the family knows they have to be up early for us to get to Exmouth Parkrun in time. One by one they appear, clattering down the stairs. First my sons Oliver (16) and Alexander (20), then my wife Sophie and finally my daughter Elizabeth (18). Down come Alexander's girlfriend, Soleil, and Elizabeth's boyfriend, Jamie, too. Not all of us are running: only my sons and I are planning to take part. But the others are all coming to watch. One of the reasons is that Alexander's best friend, Alfie Fell, came second at Exeter Riverside parkrun last week in a time of 17:41 – and that was on wet grass – so I have promised to take everyone for a cooked breakfast at the parkrun café in Exmouth if he beats that time. Of course, they all know that I am a bit of a softie and, even if he does not improve, I won't be so cruel as to disappoint them on the breakfast front. Alfie arrives promptly at 7:45, and ten minutes later the eight of us set off in two cars: the runners with me and the spectators with Sophie.

It pours as we pass around Exeter on the motorway. Oliver doesn't say a thing. Alexander and Alfie chat the whole way. Alfie is reading history at university and every so often sends a thoughtful question my way about some aspect of studying the past. At the junction where we turn off to Exmouth we start to discuss the nature of a historical fact. I explain that, although you have to regard all historical facts are only theoretically true – because you never know what further evidence might yet turn up to disprove them – if you have large bodies of evidence that correlate and no evidence that is to the contrary, you can say that some things are factual, for the probability tends so far in the direction of certainty that you can regard them as practically true. Such philosophical questions are not easy to discuss at the best of times but talking about them while negotiating a busy four-lane roundabout is particularly difficult. But we all survive and, at that point the rain stops too. When we get out of the car at Exmouth, the conditions are perfect. A mild breeze, not cold but not too hot, and clear skies across the wide sea and the Exe Estuary to the south.

At the start, about three hundred of us crowd on to the path. Bob Minting – a very fine veteran athlete and the father of Simon Minting, one of the organisers of Exmouth parkrun – sees me and greets me. He tells me he's read and enjoyed my book, *Why Running Matters*. Our conversation is curtailed, however by the run director, who calls with his loud hailer for applause – for the volunteers, for those who have birthdays today, and for several people who are doing their milestone fiftieth runs. One couple are doing their last runs as 'singlies' as he calls them, for next weekend they'll be married. As the seconds count down, Alexander and Alfie step to the front of the crowd and I shake Oliver's hand and wish him luck. And we are away.

I start very slowly, a bit boxed in, but not worried as I am enjoying the movement of my own body amidst the crowd of runners. Recently I had a stress fracture and had to take several months out to recover, so I do not take running for granted. Every pain-free step is satisfying.

Oliver runs ahead, seemingly determined to catch his older brother and use him as a pacer. I watch his black '100 parkruns' shirt move ahead of me, pursuing Alexander's fluorescent green 2019 Taunton half marathon one. Alfie, who is wearing an identical top to Alexander's, has gone right ahead and is up there with the guys at the front, already well ahead of the rest of us. Slowly Alexander pulls away from Oliver. My watch beeps to tell me I've run 4:18 for the first kilometre, a bit on the slow side for me. When we pass the lifeboat station at the quarter-way mark, 1.25km into the run, Oliver is about 20m ahead of me and his brother about 50m ahead of him.

We move on to Queen's Drive, beneath the cliff, aiming for the turning circle at the end. This is where we see all those in front of us coming back the other way. It is one of my favourite parts of the run as everyone shouts encouragement to one another, and everyone can see how their friends and family are doing. We can be both supporters and participants at the same time. Also, very conveniently, that turning point is the 2km mark. I see the leader coming towards me. Alfie is in third, about 100m behind him. Alexander in a bunch of men about 400m behind Alfie; and Oliver is pushing on hard, only about 150m behind Alexander. I shout 'well done' to each of them in turn. Then I too make the turn and begin the long straight back along Queen's Drive.

I know I will need my strength for the later stages and so I don't want to run too hard. But I do need to close up on Oliver if I am to catch him. He's suddenly started pulling away from me rapidly, and if I am not careful he will get beyond reach entirely. Last week, at Exeter Riverside parkrun, he ran three quarters of the distance ahead of me and I only caught up with him as we approached the last long straight. Afterwards, I asked him, 'shall we do Exmouth next week, to see if you can break twenty-two minutes?' 'That would be good,' he replied. 'For some reason I always feel inspired to run fast there.' I knew that before I asked. It is why we are here – not just to see if Alfie can do better than 17:41. But the truth is that this won't mean anything to him if I were to give up. Just as it was when his brother finally finished ahead of me at a parkrun, in December 2017, what made the moment special was that I had really given it my all. My full participation contributed as much to his victorious feeling as his own effort. And so I push a bit harder. *It's Father's Day tomorrow, I remind myself. Putting this effort in is not just what I have to do, it's what I want to do.*

Back at the lifeboat station again, Alexander is a long way ahead. Alfie is out of sight. But I have my eye on Oliver, who is now between 80m and 100m ahead of me. *This is going to be tough - but you have conserved your energy, Ian. You can catch him.* I'm steadily running around 4:20 per kilometre and I know that Oliver has set out faster than he normally does. Soon he will start to slow. For the moment, however, he's pushing on strongly. I am getting closer: the gap is down to about 60m. But this is hard. I have the stamina to keep going at this speed but not the strength to make myself go faster. All I can do is keep the pressure on myself. And as we pass the café, I realise I am catching him. The gap is down to about 40m. Then 30m. On we go, past the ice cream kiosk. My watch beeps to say that the fourth kilometre was only 4:29. *Too slow.* But I am tired. *Come on, Ian, this will mean nothing to either of you unless you try harder.* and at that point I see Oliver struggling. The gap is down to 20m.

When I am 200m from the final turning point, Alexander runs back the other way and shouts to me 'Go on, Dad, catch him up!' Heartened, I put on a spurt of speed. At the turning point, Oliver realises I am only a little way behind him. Normally we shout encouragement when

we see each other. Not now. He looks at me as if I am the enemy. He is going to fight for this. In his expression I see the core of his self – the animal part of all of us that puts ourselves first, and is determined to put up whatever resistance is necessary to overcome the threats and challenges we face. It is a fierce look, and it is mildly frightening to see it in him – he is normally such a mild-mannered boy – but that grim determination speaks volumes for how much this means to him. and how much he knows this moment matters to both of us.

The rest of the world recedes. This was never going to be just an ordinary run. It was bound to be a race between the two of us. I understand now his silence in the car on the way. The finish line is just 800m away. I know Sophie and the others will be there. I know they will all cheer him on. But he has to earn this victory. And the gap is now shrinking. I am almost on his shoulder, just 5m or so behind him. Then it is 3m. He can hear me, and he is picking up speed. *Heavens, Oliver! I've never seen you accelerate at this stage of a 5k run.* But he is doing so now. Back at the ice cream kiosk, with only 150m to run, I start to sprint. He hears me coming and sprints too. Almost the same height as me, he uses his legs and developing calf muscles to good effect. I cannot get past. Suddenly we hear the shouting as Sophie, Jamie, Sol and Elizabeth all yell their support for him. 'Go on Oliver!' Alfie and Alexander have already finished and are there too, shouting encouragement to him. Sophie calls out, 'he's right behind you!' Oliver turns and looks over his shoulder and sees me there, and sprints again. So his big bad daddy sprints again too. But he keeps going, he does not relent. And in those seconds before the line, he is able to hold on for just that little bit longer, and I cannot pass. He crosses the line just ahead of me.

At the finish, he keeps walking. He is too out of breath to hug or talk. My watch says I've run 21:58; so he's broken his target of twenty-two minutes too. I tell him. He just nods in acknowledgement, takes his token, and walks away. He wants to be alone for a moment. I can tell.

Sophie comes over and gives me a big hug, and says well done. I look out across the mouth of estuary, now bathed in a weak sunlight. I can see lines of hills on the south side of the wide expanse of water, rising one after the other, with the peaks of Haldon Forest in the distance. The view looks absolutely glorious, beautiful. It is a good day to lose. But it doesn't feel like I've lost. It's a bit like that old phrase when the father of the bride says 'I've not lost a daughter but gained a son'. I've not lost a race, I've gained pride in my son. I think again of the day that Alexander first beat me at a parkrun, a wonderful winter's day at Parke, not far from where we live. That was a special day. I reflected then that losing a race can be even sweeter than victory. These things are bound to happen. The moment of acceptance is a special one, and as I survey the view, I know the location and the feeling will all remain imprinted on my mind, probably forever.

I see Alfie there, as we all gather, and Oliver joins us.

'How did you do Alfie?' I ask.

'I finished third. There were some good runners here today.'

'Brilliant. And the time?'

He breaks into a massive grin. '17:22.'

Immediately there are cheers all round – as if Alfie is the fairy godmother announcing ‘You *shall* go to the ball!’ We all head off to the café, all very happy.

Later, as we sit there, I reflect on the meaning of the run. I really did try to beat Oliver. I gave it everything I had. True, my pace was not as fast as usual, but there is no getting away from the fact that, on the day, he set out to finish ahead of me and did so. Mission accomplished. But the fact that I tried so hard and *still* failed is what makes it all meaningful. It’s like reaching a peak with him – it’s not a mountain he’s conquered alone. And as I mull over the analogy of the landscape of achievement, it feels to me as if I too have reached the summit of a mountain and can see ahead a whole new world of opportunities. I have a new, true competitor at my side. A companion in endeavour. Can I get revenge next week? Will I ever finish ahead of him again?

At that thought the cynic in me says, *no, that’s it. He’s finally won. No point in prolonging the inevitable. He’s always going to be stronger than you in the long run. You can’t possibly stay ahead of him for more than a few weeks. Look at his brother: once Alexander had beaten you, you only ever beat him two or three times again. Now he is almost two minutes faster.* But therein lies the crux of the matter. Can I do better now? Can I give Oliver more of a challenge than I gave Alexander? Oliver has given me a gift in beating me today because to run faster than him in future will be so much sweeter. To give in and not even to try would be like choosing to retire. Like choosing water over wine. Like choosing to be nothing – of no consequence.

Like choosing not to be a father.

Tomorrow is Father’s Day. And although that’s a day when sons and daughters are supposed to celebrate their fathers, it also should be a day for fathers to celebrate what fatherhood means. We should look at this as being not just a day of indulgence – as if dads all had their own personal Christmas – but a chance to celebrate the positive roles men can play. Above all, it should be to celebrate the fact that, when our sons and daughters have scaled the heights in life that we hope they will achieve, and eclipsed everything we have ourselves accomplished, we don’t just resign ourselves to the inevitable path to the grave but understand that now life can have even greater meaning, and even greater purpose. That is what I have learned from today’s run, that it is important never to give in but to keep up the pressure right to the end, and to keep encouraging through endeavour, helping our sons and daughters to find even greater challenges – even more magnificent peaks – and scaling them, alongside them, even if we fall a little way behind.

Ian Mortimer, 16<sup>th</sup> June 2019

<http://www.ianmortimer.com/books/running/Fathersday.pdf>