

# Torbay Velopark parkrun,

## Run Report

Event number 118

23<sup>rd</sup> March 2019

All over the country people talk about the effect parkrun has on the weather – how rarely it rains at nine o'clock on Saturday morning. As I look outside my door today, it is grey, overcast – and, yes, it's raining. The magic weather effect has stopped working, or so it seems. But the small team of us from Moretonhampstead – two runners, Alfie and Oliver, and me, today's volunteer photographer – are undaunted. We set off for Torbay full of enthusiasm. Perhaps that's the real magic: we never notice the rain because we are so enthused by the running and the people we are going to meet.

Simon, the run director, does the usual announcements with characteristic good humour, despite the drizzle. He is kind enough to mention my book *Why Running Matters*, which was published a week ago. The first run in that book was the very first parkrun here at Torbay, on 31 December 2016. It was overcast that day too. Great things can come out of grey skies, though. Here we all are – 287 of us – still heartily enjoying the same Saturday morning exercise. Nothing much has changed except the direction in which we set off. (The first run went the other way around the track.)

I take photographs as the run unfolds. All the many different coloured shirts are soon strung around the 1,500m velopark circuit in a seemingly unending line of people, all finding their way through their individual struggles, all embracing the joy of simply moving through the air. It is tempting to say 'as normal' but if there's one thing I've learnt from running with other people it's that there's no such thing as normal. Every run is different, unique, and meaningful in different ways. As the leaders turn off the circuit and head for the final mile around the field, I wonder what I would write about today if this were another chapter in my book. The man running in second place steps off the track to give his family a hug. Perhaps I would write about that? Two people stop mid-run to ask me for a copy of my book. Gosh, *that* shows enthusiasm. But I know the real story, when it comes, will be unmistakable. Messages and meanings simply unfold from parkrun. It is almost inevitable. As surely as there are a million and one stories that lead us here, so there are a million and one tales that come out of running together. They might be triumphant victories over illness; they might be longstanding rivalries with family members; or they might be anecdotes of personal achievement beyond parkrun. To be part of parkrun is to be part of a million and one great stories.

Today's story eventually comes from a lady called Tania. And it turns out to be a profoundly moving one.

Before I speak to Tania, however, I watch the leaders come in. Shaun McKernan finishes first, in a time of 18:08, bringing up his thirteenth first place. He's finished first here more times than any other man and is second in that table only to Naomi Flanagan, who has twenty-six first-place finishes here to her credit. Twenty seconds later, there's a bit of a sprint to the line between second and third runners, in which Nicholas Clarke just pips Lewis Keywood. Fourth is John English and fifth, to my delight, is Alfie Fell – one of the gang from Moreton, finishing in 18:44: a new PB. Sixth is Alex Magee who graciously turns around to congratulate the young lady who finishes just behind him, Iona Farquharson. Her seventh place in a time of 18:51 is a very impressive

performance. She's in the 11-14 age group, and that's an age grade of 84.70%. Astounding! But as Iona crosses the line, quietly back there, still slogging her way around the field is Evalyn Flanagan. When she finishes – the third lady to do so over the age of fifty and the first over the age of sixty-five – she has notched up an age grade of 85.38%. Wow! Deep respect. I want to be able to run that fast when I get to her age. The third runner today with an age grade over 80% is David Rose, whose 19:32 is a new PB. Amazing achievements.

But such is the nature of parkrun that there are amazing achievements in other ways all around the track. Many of them you'll never know. Many of them are simple resolutions quietly accomplished. Many will be completely private. And a few won't actually be realised until years later, when someone looks back on their fastest-ever time or highest-ever age grade.

When I am taking photos of the runners by the barcode scanning desk, Tania approaches me cautiously. She looks at the cover of my book. 'Why Running Matters,' she reads aloud, in a slightly quizzical way. 'What I want you to tell me is why I come here every Saturday and do this. I love parkrun but I don't enjoy running'.

'There are so many reasons,' I reply. 'That's why I wrote the book. You learn so much about hope, encouragement, personal struggles and people's sense of achievement.'

'That's true,' she says. 'Have you done a marathon?'

'One. Accidentally. I couldn't find a half marathon in December 2017 so I had to run a whole one.'

'I've done two, *accidentally*.'

'The second one could not have been an accident,' I insist. 'You'd have known what you were letting yourself in for.'

'I had had a few drinks when I signed up to do the second one.'

'Okay, fair enough. I can see how that could be called an accident. But what about the first?'

'It was to save my son's life. He phoned me up from Afghanistan, and he was very depressed. This was when we were losing men over there almost every day. He said, "Mum, I can't take it anymore. I'm not coming home. I'm phoning up to say goodbye." I told him, "but it's only ten weeks and your tour of duty will come to an end". He replied, "Ten weeks is a long time. Too long." To which I said, "but that marathon I said I'd do last year, that's only ten weeks away – and there's not enough time for me to train for it now. That's how short ten weeks is. Ten weeks is NOT a long time. Please. If you promise me you'll come home, I will run that marathon.'

After ten weeks Tania's son did come home. And true to her word, she ran the Eden Project Marathon. As she was facing the last few gruelling miles, and doubting her ability to finish, she said to herself, 'If he could stick it out over there for the ten weeks when he didn't think he could, then what am I doing, thinking I can't keep going for another hour.'

That is what running does for us. Sometimes in very small ways, sometimes in life-changing huge ones. It might be a parkrun or it might be a marathon – it doesn't matter. Running together connects us with life, with purpose, and even with those we love in ways we can't always predict. It gives us strength and resilience, and it allows us to channel our passions and to express purpose. It saves lives in many ways and it enriches them in even more ways. And in coming together to tell stories such as the one that Tania told me today, it lifts the spirit high – higher even the grey clouds and the rain, which I now realise magically stopped falling just as today's parkrun started.

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