

SOME LIKE IT HOT! – P.B-K - August 1984

One sunny summer Sunday last year my old chum Les Roberts lay peacefully on the grass outside a Kentish pub blissfully unconcerned about the pressures the morrow might bring. We were at one of the Panther Car Club's regular meets and after a skinful were recovering by doing a passable impression of two badly embalmed corpses. Food poisoning from the night before had indeed left me halfway to the undertakers but early the next morning I had recovered enough to drive Les down the Brighton Road to Crawley. Laughing and joking, pre race nerves were non-existent; it was hard to believe that we were on our way to the European Vets track and field championships.

Early in the afternoon it was our lad's turn to perform in the 5000m and as he ambled off to the start line wearing my lucky black shorts I had a feeling something special was going to happen although, as the sun had risen high in the sky, it was apparent that the temperature would preclude any super-fast times. The start line had a stellar quality about it with familiar names of yesteryear in attendance like Alan Rushmer, Tim Johnston, Gunther Mielke (German 2:14 marathon man and hot favourite and Hubert Jansen of Belgium. Having trained with Les over the previous weeks I knew the mood he was in and informed Chris Woodcock, who was also spectating, that it would be a foolish man who didn't put money on him.

The race was soon underway and with Les doing more than his share at the front, the field was soon whittled down under the merciless sun and laps hovering consistently around the 70s. At the bell Les had only Gunther Mielke left in tow. The German confidently made his move with 300m to go and opened up a sizeable gap down the back straight. At this point everyone in the stadium, except me that is, assumed the race was over but I smiled knowingly as Les gathered himself together to close on Mielke and then pass him in the final 90m. The crowd went berserk; eighty year olds were running around like dervishes waving their sticks and toupees and clattering their teeth as they cheered on our boy. Looking as if somebody had fired a cruise missile into his rear quarters, Les tore across the line a good six or seven metres clear as the new Vets 5000m champion of Europe. On the presentation podium afterwards Les grinned boyishly around and Alan Rushmer, who finished third, shook hands sportingly and also seemed to be enjoying himself. Mielke, however, in contrast, looked as if he had been force fed on Irish wolfhound droppings. While Les was doing a few warm down laps afterwards round the outside of the track someone remarked, "He must be a veteran, they wouldn't have let him run otherwise".

Next on the day's agenda was a bash into Brighton for a celebratory meal and many bottles of wine at Jean Jacques Jordain's famous Laughing Onion Restaurant but not before Les had satisfied an urge to plunge into the sea. He said it would do his legs good for the Wednesday. That was probably the only time talk broached the subject of the 10,000m still to come.

That day soon came and the conditions were better; still very humid but there was a slight drizzle. A fast pace ensued as 5km was passed in well under 15 minutes with Rushmer this time taking control. Les, still on a high, coasted into second spot and stayed there crossing the line comfortably clear for a silver medal to add to his gold in 30m 21s, ten seconds behind Rushmer. This time, Mielke, who held onto 3rd place some 25 seconds adrift, didn't even turn up for the presentation. Gunther Mielke cow perhaps? The atmosphere over those few days was magic. A momentous period both athletically and socially. I'm hoping that when I get my shorts back they might do the same for me!

P. B-K