

Saturday July 20th 1985 started unceremoniously for the 18 year old Simon Merrick. A 6 mile run up the scenic but hilly terrain of Gnoll Park in Neath upon the instructions of coach, the late Gerry Batty, to be followed by a shower and then onto the Morfa Stadium to join the rest of the family at the Welsh Games.

The Merrick family had already made their way to carry out their officiating duties before his return and whereas previously in the Welsh Games he had been a flag bearer and ambassador for the club, meeting and greeting competing teams, on this occasion he was going to enjoy the day as a spectator. He was looking forward to observing his hero, one of Britain's greatest ever athletes, Steve Ovett in the Emsley Carr Mile.

A phone call was soon to change that however. Still dripping wet, Simon picked up the handset, and heard the unmistakeable voice of Welsh Cockney, Dai Jones, who blurted out that they required a pacemaker for Steve Ovett later that day in the Mile race. Merrick found it hard to believe that **Dai** was being serious but replied "of course". Thirty minutes earlier he had returned from a pretty tough training run to be asked to run with his hero, but how could he turn this opportunity down.

He thought to himself that there must have been a load of drop outs and realising that he was probably the 30th person Dai had asked, the pipe cleaner on a high fibre diet could not believe his luck.

He gathered his kit, that included his lucky purple satin shorts (that he couldn't fit over his arm these days), flame coloured spikes and polished his shark tooth earring. He used his sister's hairdryer to ensure that his long blonde highlighted hair was in perfect style and he set off to meet one of the greatest athletes the world had seen.

Ovett had seen his great rival, Steve Cram break his 1500 World record by over a second a few days earlier, and no doubt felt that he needed to send out a clear message to the Athletics World that he still meant to be a force in the business. He was a late addition to the Welsh Games, having had to withdraw from altitude training due to a cold, but sufficiently recovered he now wanted a tough race to gauge his fitness levels. He quite obviously hadn't competed at the Morfa stadium, with its unique undulating finishing straight and regular whirlwinds, of which was not known for benign conditions conducive to fast times. It was no different on this occasion, with a swirling wind.

Blustery conditions would negate any fast times but Merrick was met by Ann Hill (coach to the famous Tooby twins) who advised that Ovett wanted a steady 58 seconds first lap, whereby it would then be taken over for the next 2-3 laps.

After meeting the organiser and a number of dignitaries, Merrick was taken to the legendary red Moroccan leather bound book that was placed on a pedestal, in front of the main stand which held the large crowd. He was then instructed to sign his name alongside previous entrants and giants of the sport, such as Nurmi, Landy, Pirie, Keino, Walker and Coe.

The scene was set and a somewhat bewildered young athlete stripped off and prepared for a unique experience. The defining moment came when Ovett, who had spoken to the other pacemakers walked up to Merrick and said "don't open up a gap and sprint off and leave us behind". Words that would remain with the youngster forever.

The athletes lined up and the blast of the gun set them off. Merrick made off like a scalded cat. By the 100m mark he was already 10 metres up and although he felt like a galloping gazelle, he remembered the words of his hero and slowed down to allow the field to catch up. On the side-lines, the normally mild Andy Smith, was screaming out "What are you doing, go for it" But no, Merrick

stuck to his guns and a Tom Byers moment was gone. The race continued and as the 400m mark was approached, Merrick felt comfortable and looked at the time-57-58 secs-Perfect!!!

The crowd was going wild and a cacophony of sound filled the stadium. The adrenaline filled bullet decided to not follow the script entirely but continue, as the next pacemaker was nowhere to be seen. Merrick made it to the 600m mark, where he stepped off the track to allow the field to pass. He had completed his job and some. He soaked up the adulation of the crowd, coveting its warm embrace. Or so he thought.

Before he could get to his discarded tracksuit and kit, he was surrounded by reporters. Wow this was somewhat unexpected, the race wasn't over and yet this George Michael lookalike (others said this not him) was expected to provide a response.

He licked his lips with a self assured smile and cocky attitude ready for the first question "What are your thoughts on Ovett falling over?"

Merrick thought that can't be right, what did he say, Ovett fallen over, surely not, and as he turned to watch the field run past on their last lap, the Phoenix flyer from Brighton was nowhere to be seen. Oh no!! Had he been an assassin to his hero Ovett?

As the athletes made their way to the finish line, the winner turned out to be Ovett's training partner and Olympic Bronze medallist Mark Rowlands.

Merrick gathered his kit, received handshakes and signed a few autographs (what would they be worth now on Ebay I wonder) and hoped to meet his hero to gain some well thought out advice and to discuss what had happened. But he was gone, swept away back to the Highlands of Scotland to prepare for next race, of which he no doubt hoped to finish.

The World of Sport and Grandstand had captured it all and it was on the teatime National news. Merrick was the man who had thrown Ovett to the floor in his determination to get the better of him (not quite)?

Although he had many invitations to do so Merrick turned down the opportunity to adopt the role of pacemaker again. He woke up to newspaper reports of "Simon trips up Steve" and the only paper to support him was the Western Mail, who blamed Rowlands. To escape the paparazzi Merrick absconded to the other corner of the country to regroup (it was actually a pre-arranged holiday where he stayed with his Aunty in a small village near to Bury St Edmunds and not quite like Al Pacino in the Godfather).

To this day people seem impressed that this now much larger and slower Merrick, dragging his body around the muddy confines of the Gwent league, at one time shared the track with an icon of the sport and whose name sits alongside the greats in that magical book. He sometimes thinks back to that day, and the frenzied shouts of his friend and clubmate Andy, and what could have been had he carried on in the pace that he had set out. Would he have had the shock that Tom Byers did in the Bislett games in Oslo where that pacemaker led all the way and beat Ovett. Could this have been replicated-No chance!!! As Merrick feels that had he done so, he would have lost the feeling in his legs from the build-up of lactic acid and ended up like a dying fly on the track, carried off on a stretcher and thrown into the nearby River Tawe.

But what an experience. And although he continued to achieve success in the way of titles, records and championships, along with international representation in his chosen sport. And although he raced the likes of Moorcroft, Elliot and Coe following this, nothing could change the excitement and

experience of an 18 year old having had the chance of a lifetime to run against an Olympic Bronze medallist, and an even more illustrious multiple World record holder and Olympic champion in one of the most prestigious mile events in History.

What a day!!!

Simon Merrick.

Swansea Harriers until I die.