

Forty runners set off in near perfect conditions at 12 noon on the Saturday to circle the 400metre track at the superb south London venue of Tooting Bec athletics track. Unlike a standard marathon or a 100km race where a fixed distance is covered in a certain time, in a 24 hour race the time is fixed and the distance covered, as laps are meticulously recorded, determines the end result. Men's pre race favourites were Chris Finill(Harrow) and Jim Rogers(East Hull) and it was these two who showed at the front after the race settled down. Rogers looked the more purposeful and relaxed in the first few hours and it was the Yorkshireman who reached the 50 mile mark first in 7hours 9mins 51secs from Finill(7.20.41).

Sharon Gaytor who had topped the woman's UK 24 hour rankings for the last 11 years led from North Devon's Vicky Skelton at this point by 10 minutes: 7.44.21 to 7.54.18. By 100km Rogers still led Finill by almost 8 minutes and Gaytor had increased her lead over Skelton to 13 minutes. Experienced observers know that this is still "Early Days" in a 24 hour race. Approaching the half way mark Rogers left the track to seek help from the physio's for a hip problem. Gaytor also appeared to be moving less comfortably and Skelton maintaining her steady pace took the lead. Gaytor although starting comfortably was possibly feeling the effects of missing a lot of training in the summer due to injury, and shortly after the 12 hour mark sensibly retired from the race. Roger's too although trying his best to keep on the track also retired about this time. This left Finill and Skelton as clear leaders and as the hours passed by they relentlessly kept churning out the laps, taking short walking breaks every so often to drink or have a small snack but never once leaving the track except for changing gear and the occasional "call of nature". Both seemed focussed on pressing on ..and on.. and by the time they had reached 100miles Finill in 15.11.49 and Skelton in 16.55.05 their respective goals of surpassing their previous bests now looking distinctly possible.



Pic: Finill and Skelton stay focussed as the night wears on.

By the time Finill reached 200km(124.5miles) in 19.22.37 the prospect of not only surpassing his best of 142 miles but also, if he could hold things together and stay motivated, reaching Steve Mason's current G.B. best for 2008 set at the Perth 24 hour in Scotland 4 weeks previously of 148+ miles looked possible. Skelton also had similar ideas. Although going through a lengthy bad patch early in the morning, she reached 200k in 22.14.40.and was now focussing on reaching 130 miles and Pauline Walkers current women's best 2008 distance, set in the same Perth race. As the clock counted down the last hour arrived and with calculations duly done by support crews as to what was needed to reach respective goals the final surge was on. It is always inspiring watching a 24 hour race unfold to see runners actually lift themselves. Even after being on the move for 23 hours!!

Finill duly passed Mason's distance and it only remained for him to find that last little effort to go for the Big one and smash through the 150 mile mark which had not been achieved by a British athlete since 2000 by William Sichel, who co-incidentally was also running in today's race. Skelton also broke through the 130 mile barrier only bettered amongst British women, apart from Walker's recent performance at Perth, by Sharon Gaytor in the last few years.

Throughout the field runners were giving one last effort as the final minutes approached to beat respective goals. Chris Carver consolidated on his victory at Hull earlier in the summer and made the 140 mile mark to seal third position. Previous winner Ken Fancett showed remarkable consistency to just miss out on 220km and the tall long striding Swede, Stefan Lindvall added 10 km to his pb. Fellow Scandinavian and multi day specialist from Finland Ashprihanal Aalto astounded everyone by seemingly hurtling around the last hour. His experience of being five times winner of the remarkable 3,100mile self-transcendence race in New York obviously making 24 hours seem like a sprint! Right throughout the field Self-Transcendence was happening.75 year old Geoff Oliver set new British age group records at 100miles and 24 hours. William Sichel completed 200km exactly one month after covering a similar distance in the Perth event and Fellow Scot Ritchie Cunningham also achieved the guideline qualification for the Scottish team for next year's commonwealth ultra distance championship.

And a remarkable Irishman rewrote the Irish record books Travelling from Ireland alone without any dedicated back up crew(Most sensible people ,hoping to do a good distance, bring a crew to help them with there food and drinks, but this wisdom hasn't got through to people like Eoin ..or Ken Fancett for that matter) Keith a very experienced ultra runner and member of the Irish adventure racing team had obviously prepared well for the event , breaking the record for the 132 km long distance trail "The Wicklow way" just a month ago. Tony Mangan's previous Irish 24 hour marks stood at 228km on the road and 223 km on the track. After starting the race seemingly cautiously, he wasn't even in the top 10 at 50 miles. He seemed to really get into his stride as night fell and looked to be, along with Finill by far the strongest runner on the track throughout the night. He reached 100km in around 10 hours; 100miles in 16.06.56.He knew Mangan's 24 hour mark was now achievable .The trouble was three other Irish runners were running in the World 24 hour event in Korea this weekend also, who Eoin thought might be also capable of beating it. Figuring out the time difference meant the Korea race would be over. Efforts were made to find out the results of the Seoul event. No wireless connection at the track

,but a phone call to Edinburgh and ultra enthusiast John Sneddon was able to tell the organisers that all the Irish seemed to have "Bombed", the best of them only reaching 138km. This news seemed to put a spring in Keith's step and Mangan's marks on road and track were both comfortably passed and the final new Irish mark was being pushed up with each lap as the finish approached. Indeed 146 miles 1034 yards (235.910km) may well last for a while. It is only as this report is being written that I realise Keith's 100mile time of 16 hours 6 minutes 56secs is way inside Mangan's listed Irish record of 16 hours and 58 minutes and as there doesn't seem to be a listed Irish record for 200km we will claim Eoin's 20.14 20 for that as well.

All in all a successful event with 21 runners surpassing the 100mile mark and an emotional prize giving, as results are read out, and the enormity of what people have achieved throughout the field starts to slowly sink in. Chris Finill, slightly the worse for his endeavours, joins others in praising the organisation and along with his winners trophy, he is a fitting recipient of the trophy donated by THE ROAD RUNNERS CLUB in memory of our good friend Ongkar Tony Smith and presented by Ian Champion to the first RRC member in today's race. Ongkar, who was the inspiration behind today's event for many years, will be delighted and proud of the continued tradition that his daughter Shankara and the Sri Chinmoy Athletic club crew have continued since his passing.

