

Running machine

WILL COCKERELL meets **Chris Finill**, winner of the Self Transcendence 24 Hours and one of the few London Marathon ever-presents

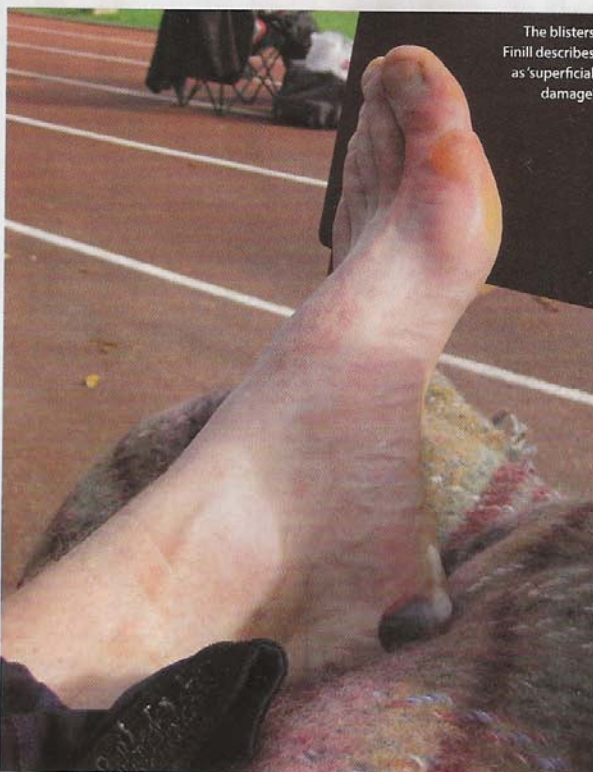
DRIVE to Cranleigh on a crisp, sunny January Sunday morning to meet the man whose career stats never fail to startle me: an ever-present at the London Marathon, a county cross-country medallist aged 50, a former regular in GB's ultra-marathon squad, and now the No.2 ranked runner in the Commonwealth for the 24-hour run. We were going to have plenty to chat about – it was like a kid with a sweet tooth meeting Willy Wonka.

We ran through Cranleigh village, up through Smithwood Common to Winterfold then to Peaslake and through the grounds of Duke of Kent

Assistant Andy Smith applies massage at 19 hours during the Self Transcendence 24 Hours at Tooting Bec last October



Julia Finill



The blisters Finill describes as 'superficial damage'

Julia Finill

School where Finill serves as bursar. From there it was a steep climb up Pitch Hill, which lends the awe-inspiring view from where George Harrison wrote Here Comes the Sun. It was a highly scenic, painfully undulating, run over challenging terrain, which answered many questions about why this man doesn't ever tire of the sport, and also about how he maintains his undeniable tenacity. Road running is an easy business after this.

Finill's interest in running began, as with so many, with laps around his parents' garden, aged seven. "I'd run round and round and call the laps out to my mother," Finill recalls. He enjoyed cross country at school and knew he'd be one of the better runners. The great day finally arrived: the trials for the under-11 cross-country team. "How did you do?" I ask. "I ran away and hid and didn't compete," he replies to my amazement. "I couldn't face the possibility that I might not be the best." So a highly competitive beast was emerging.

Finill joined the exclusive athletics

club the Old Gaytonians (membership restricted to alumni from Harrow County and Gayton High Schools) and, although they had some impressive success, their limited catchment area led to the formation of Harrow AC, with whom he has been since 1974. He is still a key team man, running an immaculate race at the Middlesex county championships this month and picking up a team silver in 31st place.

His first marathon came when studying in America in 1979 at Detroit where he blew up badly. He tried again in 1980 back in England – better. And then he heard that London was putting on its inaugural event the following spring. Finill knew he had to be there. Like so many great achievements, however, it almost didn't happen. The dreaded lottery was in place, and only 7000 won places for the first "London". The organisers set the proviso that entries mailed from the post box at Trafalgar Square would be given priority. The keen young Finill duly obliged but was still rejected. A clubmate knew of someone who wasn't a runner at all,



A hero's welcome for Chris Finill after 24 hours of running

Paula Finill



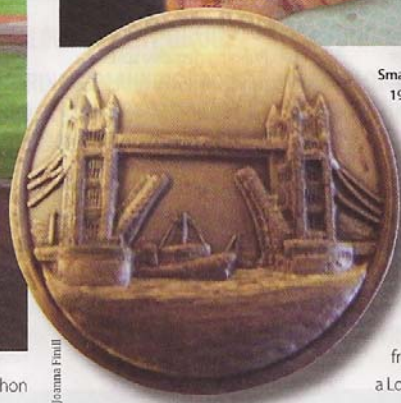
Finill's remarkable London streak began when he ran with someone else's number and he is still going strong 28 years later

Paula Finill



The aftermath: receiving emergency fluids at Tooting Bec

Paula Finill



Small beginnings: Chris Finill's medal from 1981 is the size of a two pence piece

but had won a number. He got injured in the training, and the number was passed along to Finill, who thus ran his first London under another name. He ran a 2:32, London later corrected his name in their records, he gained a place in the 1982 race and he has never looked back.

The London Marathon Ever-Present club is down to 22 now, with roughly one athlete per year ending their streak. I ask Finill if he gets a little tingle of excitement each time he learns their number have dwindled. "No," he replies, "we are fighting the distance, not each other. Perhaps there's some subconscious competitive thing going on, but we're all part of the same family now, and it's always sad to lose a member."

Finill's record in the London Marathon is steadily becoming a phenomenon in that he has always broken three hours. Who else in marathon history can compare? "I've not started to research what the record might be for this [most consecutive sub-threes in a single marathon], but I guess I must be getting close to a few," he says. "I want to focus on getting to 30 first, and then I might start thinking about the record."

Of the marathons that have been around longer than 30 years, the granddaddy – Boston – throws up an immediate contender via Johnny A. Kelley, the man voted "Runner of the Century" by US Runner's World. Kelley fired off 61 Bostons, completing 58. He placed in the top five 15 times, and

was carding sub-threes between 1934 and 1967. That's 34 years – but are they concurrent? No. He flunked in 1952 (3:04); he didn't start in '56, and there was a wild 3:14 in '63. So Finill is safe on that count.

How long can Finill realistically keep the sub-threes going for? Kelley will provide him solace: he first started to regularly flirt with three hours in 1954 (2:50, two minutes slower than Finill in '08), which he then continued with for the next 13 years. Thus, a streak of 42 could be on. The sub-three barrier was broken by three men in the M60-65 category at last year's London (the only Brit being Hercules Wimbledon's gnarly

Steve Badgery), which stretches the possibility to around 44. Thereafter the waters will start to get very choppy, but Finill is proving in his career that boundaries may be smashed whatever their form.

Sporting a London best of 2:28 from 1985, Finill comments: "To be a London Marathon ever-present is a happy piece of good fortune. I was just lucky to be in the right place at the right time." He takes no chances with the ghastly transport served up on race day, staying with his sister close to the start. "It's okay to break the streak if you're dead, but for it to be because you miss the start would be awful."

He has only had flu once in the 28 years, in 1998, where he grimly set out at 2:57 pace, and relaxed in to a 2:58 close to home. He has never run injured, although has had the odd 100km race still in his legs, which can't feel pleasant.

By his late thirties, Finill felt that he needed to stretch his boundaries a little more. A couple of London to Brightons were completed, and he was

then invited to partake in the Barry 40 in Wales organised by Les Croupiers, a 160-lap track race, which he won by four minutes in 4:21 and piqued the interest of the national ultra-marathon selectors. He then competed in the Anglo-Celtic Plate for several years, recording a 100km best of 7:17.

He asked a colleague, ultra man Jim Rogers, how old one should be to contemplate the descent into madness of the 24-hour race. "Forty-five," Rogers replied, perhaps truthfully, maybe cannily, since Finill was 45 at the time.

So, in October 2005, Finill entered his first 24-hour run, at Tooting Bec track, organised by Sri Chinmoy. He explains how the race is "a battle between food consumption, sleep deprivation and running, in that order." Of course, he acknowledges that running ability is still important, but that in the world of 24-hour running, nothing is at it seems.

For instance, in the early stages of a 24-hour race, Finill not only doesn't mind being lapped by those ahead of him, he is quite happy to see the leader go by him again and again. Why? "The leader is thinking that every time he goes by that he's stuck another knife into me, whereas I think, that's another nail in his coffin. If he's travelling too fast, he'll collapse eventually and will have to withdraw, and I'll have hours to catch him at will."

Finill, and his mentor, ultra-specialist Andy Smith of Woking AC, who attends to all his needs during the race and keeps him informed of his splits and progress, tend to break the 24-hour race down into three sections of eight hours. In his first attempt three years ago, he had quite a major blow-up, running 54, 46 and 37 miles for the eight-hour segments. But it was enough to see him contend two world championships



The leaderboard displays Finill's PB and Commonwealth 'A' standard distance

in Italy and Canada, where he ran last year when it was 94 degrees Fahrenheit in the shade, and placed 24th. Last October he was back at Tooting for his magnum opus: 151 miles covered and the three segments a much tidier 55, 50 and 46. Running negative splits in a 24-hour run just isn't an option. "It's too hard to say to yourself, 'Okay, I've been running for 16 hours now, time to speed up.' Those last eight hours are all about damage control," he says.

Although the blistering on both feet is severe ("nothing serious, just superficial damage"), the main physical agony in the race comes via the quadriceps. "They are absolutely screaming for the last several hours," he notes. There is an excruciating, but necessary massage that can be administered by Andy Smith at the 19-hour mark – 7am.

Although the latest 24-hour race was a success for Chris and he had ticked all the boxes – a comfortable win by some six miles, a huge PB, and the Commonwealth 'A' standard – problems arose after the race was over. He was unable to keep anything down and getting liquids into him was proving impossible. An ambulance was duly summoned and he was taken to hospital and wired up to a drip for the day.

One may think that all this ultra running means that Chris is putting in the ultra-miles in training, but he's not – far from it – rarely venturing more than 40 miles per week. "This is why I never break down," he explains, as he is always slightly 'under-cooked' rather than 'over-cooked'; the trap a majority of runners fall into. Besides, he has 35 years and some 70,000 miles on which to fall back. The key to Finill's success appears to be a tremendous natural "read" on the game, and the patience and confidence to go with his instincts. There are many superior runners to Finill who would be unable to hack it in the sport because they were always trying to do too much or the wrong thing at the wrong time. He also notes that good running technique is crucial for ultra running. "Look at my head," Chris orders, as we run along. It is as still as an owl's. "There must be no wasted energy, everything must be in sync."

It is unclear quite how many



733.6 miles of running: Chris Finill's London Marathon medals from 1981 to 2008

competitors England Athletics will send to Keswick, Cumbria, for the Commonwealth Games demonstration event this September, but Finill will be there. "Can we come too?" ask his children, who along with wife Julia are ever-supportive of Dad's highly original avocation. Daughter Joanna, 18, will tackle her first London this April. Who knows how many she has her sights on, but she has a four-year head start on the old man.

Before attempt 29 at London, Finill will limber up at the Barry 40 in March ("I'm not really looking to win, it's just a great day out"), and after his sojourn in Keswick, there is yet another grandiose scheme in the offing – a run scheduled for autumn 2011 from San Francisco to New York, which will make the 24-hour run seem like a sprint.

But that's another story.



Catching up on sleep during a traumatic post-race period