

Puglia Half Marathon and the Life of Duracell Bunny Ashley Middlewick

THE racing year has ended in triumph for one of Reading Roadrunners' most endearing characters.

After an exhaustive search around Britain and Europe for a suitable course, the inimitable Ashley Middlewick hit the jackpot with a big personal best in the Puglia Half Marathon.



His 80-minute target was finally beaten in the race known as the Marathon of the Cathedrals in southern Italy with a time of 1hr 19min 18 secs and a fourth-place finish in an international field.

“I was over the moon with that,” he said. “My sub-80 goal had been verging on an obsession. It had seemed possible since I ran a big pb (1:22.41) at the Watford Half in 2015.

“At the start of every year our group coach Tony Canning gets us to share our running goals for the next 12 months and that sub-80 half became my primary objective.

“My first attempt in March last year was on the Lisbon course where Zersenay Tadese ran 58.23. I was very well prepared but on the day I found conditions too hot and the course was pretty dull, with little support. I managed a pb but only by a few seconds.

“The second attempt of the year was in San Sebastian in November. This time the conditions were much more favourable but I had been suffering with a cold the week before. It affected my performance and I clocked my third time between 1:22 and 1:23.

“My next attempt was in Eindhoven in October this year. Unfortunately I allowed myself to get too dehydrated on the day before the race and then ate a bit too much calzone for my pre-race meal the night before.

“This along with a poor choice of running socks made for another unsuccessful attempt.

“I immediately started looking for another half to enter and came across the Marathon of the Cathedrals a week before Christmas.

“This fitted the bill... a fast, flat, scenic course, but my preparation wasn't very good, with not enough rest the week before and no decent training runs since Eindhoven.

“However with a proper rest the day before and a good diet I felt like I could pull it out of the bag. Conditions were ideal, the course was great and everything went well. I was very happy to look at my watch after crossing the line and see I'd finally done it.”

It was a personal triumph for a great clubman who has become a legend among his pals... but who has not always given himself the best chance of success.

Some of the stories about Ashley's madcap race preparations are so weird you could not possibly make them up.

When I lined up alongside him at a half-marathon in Salisbury a couple of years ago I asked him: "Why aren't you warming up properly like the rest of us?" Another Roadrunner cut in: "What are you talking about? Ashley has just cycled here from Southampton!"

He has previous for that sort of idiosyncratic behaviour... he once cycled from Reading to Worcester to run in a full marathon.

And his team-mates in the latest Endure 24 were somewhat stunned to learn that he ran 12 miles to get to the event before the endless treadmill of five-mile reps kicked off.

He defies pretty much everything the coaches tell us about rest and preparation, but if there's a race on somewhere in the world he'll find it. Even if it means a flight out on a dodgy budget airline and a flight home on another even dodgier budget airline.

But, true to form, although he was able to source an obscure race in an obscure part of Italy, he returned home absolutely clueless about dates for the upcoming local cross-country fixtures right on his doorstep.



Now, even more true to form, he plans to be at all of them in January and February, either running or marshalling or supporting his club-mates.

If it's running, and you don't know him, he's the guy who will be dressed as the Duracell Bunny.

If it's marshalling or supporting, he's the guy who will be wearing a green wig.

Ashley began the year running a glut of marathons and finished in style. He may never give himself the best chance to realise his full racing potential, but we'll all love him for the way he goes about it.

Now he says: "I've no plans to try to better this in 2018. I'm going to enjoy a change of focus by taking on some mountains and trail marathons and ultras in the Canaries. Those and Endure 24 are next year's big ones."