

Nigel Aylott Relay 2008

Prologue

Did you hear the one about the Irishman, 19 Aussies, navigational instructions and a straight road?... more about that later. Firstly, let's review the action leading up to the event.

Dark, wet & windy. That was the weather that greeted the runners at Romsey in 2007, & the forecast for this year's event wasn't looking much better. In fact, if you could believe the Bureau there was every chance that we were going to have a second successive wet event. However, as it turned out the forecasters were wrong (again!) & the weather was kind to us. The sun shone brightly all day, & a fresh nor-nor-easter promised a very different day's racing to the previous couple of years when sou-sou-easterlies were the prevailing winds. It was a day where sunburn replaced hypothermia.

As always the teams gathered outside the Romsey pub for the most important part of the day; team selections. There had been much debate over the seeding order, which is par for the course, but the captains were all in the same boat & all had to decide whether to trust the informed judgments of the organisers, or their own instincts.

The top 5 seeds were House, Bevo, Smoothy, AL Prez & AW, which meant that it was up to AW to get the ball rolling with possibly the toughest choice of the day. Needing someone to cover for his own renowned lack of hill climbing ability, would he take the invisible man, aka Troy Boy, who hadn't been seen since Bundoora, or would he select one of his Magpie scumbag teammates, Mitho or the relatively unknown Patrick O'Keefe. AW chose Mitho, which made AL's choice an easy one. So Troy Boy who had never won a Relay, joined AL who no-one can remember losing a relay. Smoothy opted to follow the seeding list, picking up Patrick O'Keefe, & Bevo did likewise by selecting the Webmistress who was wearing less hair than his last Romsey appearance.

House had the double pick & followed the seeding list, picking up the debuting Bacchus & the most experienced Romsey veteran, GG. Bevo followed suit once again selecting Harris, but that was the last selection that followed the seeding list. Smoothy became the 1st to bypass LG, opting instead for the ailing GGO who had most vocally explained to anyone with sense that he would really be struggling. AL followed Smoothy's lead & also skipped LG, selecting the unknown Luke "Duke" Grima, before AW joined the party by ignoring LG twice, Irish twice, & even Marvin, as he selected the Milers' very own crash test dummy CC & the dinosaur formerly known as Grunter. That means that AW had 3 selections & ignored the seeding list 3 times. That's a lot of ignoring. Or is that "ignorance"?

The captains still weren't finished with LG, & AL bypassed him for the 2nd time, opting instead for Irish. Just when LG thought that he'd be left on the bench until last, a situation reminiscent of his school days, Smoothy took pity on him. Bevo was true to his previous selecting form & picked up Marvin, who was the higher seeded of the 2 remaining runners. That left Jimmy as the last pick up of the day, & the teams went their own ways to sort out their team cars & stage allocations.

The Teams

House of Horrors

Stephen "House" Paine, Paul "Bacchus" Marsh, Glenn "GG" Goodman & Jimmy Grelis

Bevo's Bombers

Simon "Bevo" Bevage, Matt "Webmistress" Sandilands, Craig Harris & Colin "Marvin" Marson

Smoothy's Debacle

David "Smoothy" Venour, Patrick O'Keefe, Gary "GGO" O'Dwyer & Luke "LG" Goodman

International Rules

Anthony "AL Prez" Lee, Troy "Troy Boy" Williams, Luke "Duke" Grima & Sean "Irish" McGaughey

Forty Odd Foot of Grunt

Anthony "AW" Weiland, Anthony "Mitho" Mithen, Chris "CC" Osborne & Mike "Grunter" Bialczak

It looked like AL Prez had made a monumental mistake at the selection table. He had failed to select anyone with a car. So it appeared that the team would be running from stage to stage, which could have made a very long day. Fortunately for the International Rules team, Smoothy's Debacle (nice guys that they are) allowed them the use of their spare car. So with all that sorted out, the teams made their way to the familiar start line.

Stage 1 – Timetrial (3k)

The timetrial requires teams to nominate 2 runners to complete this stage, while the other 2 runners get their chance in the afternoon equivalent. This stage is normally run by teams numbers #1 & #2, although some teams have toyed around with this tried & proven formula & put their #3 or #4 on it. None of those teams have been particularly successful though, & this year none of the captains were prepared to defy conventional wisdom. So it was the #1s & #2s who prepared to get the race on the road.

There was still one more hurdle to overcome before the race could get started though. The start line has historically been a line drawn in the gravel, level with the tree on the service road. However, the service road had been bitumenised & to cap it off there was a car parked opposite the tree, making the starting chute too narrow for 10 runners to start side by side. Reason prevailed though & the runners sorted themselves out, with some #2 runners lining up behind their #1s. It seemed like a reasonable idea at the time, because no #2 would beat his #1. Would they?

The clock struck 10 o'clock & (almost to the second), the runners were given the signal to go. House went to the front from the other likely contenders, Bevo, Smoothy & company. Going through the 1km mark & House had opened up a handy lead, with Smoothy, Bevo, Troy Boy & Pat keeping close company. The Anthony's were fairly tightly bunched with Bacchus having a lonely run well ahead of the Webmistress. We think Matt was spooked by a sign that he thought said "Hidden VAL officials", but it was actually only a sign advertising a housing development at Hidden Valley.

The field played out pretty much like that for most of the stage, with the placings within the groups changing only slightly. Consequently it was House who crossed the line first, a mere 9 seconds off the stage record set by the Kiwi mountain goat Simon Knowles in 2005. Ten seconds later, Smoothy crossed the line a few seconds in front of Bevo. Next across the line was a surprise. The overlooked (by AW) 7th seed, Troy Boy, crossed the line in 4th place. Pat was next in, with daylight to Troy Boy's #1 AL, looking much more like a #2 than a captain. The other captain to get beaten by his #2 was AW who trailed Mitho by a few seconds, leaving Bacchus & Webmistress to complete the stage. That gave Smoothy's Debacle a 34s lead over International Rules, with House of Horrors in 3rd ahead of Forty Odd Foot of Grunt & Bevo's Bombers.

Stage 2 – 5 Mile Creek (3.6k)

Runners assembled for the massed restart. This is an undulating 3.6k, largely into the wind. Duke got away to an early lead, with Grunter, LG & Marvin keeping very close company for the 1st km, with Jimmy rounding out the field. As the hills got steeper, Grunter took control while Duke, LG & Marvin kept battling it out to be best of the rest. The longer the stage went, the further Grunter extended his lead. He tagged CC 29s ahead of his closest pursuer, LG. Duke was hot on his heels, with Marvin just a few seconds further back, setting the scene for a good 3-way battle between GGO, Irish & Harris. Jimmy came in 46s back. Interestingly, that was the 4th year in a row Jimmy has run that leg & he beat last year's time despite having a headwind this time.

Stage 3 – Ochiltree Hill (3.9k)

So the pack set off on the stage that resembles our beloved Tan quite closely both in terms of distance & topography. Times around 15 minutes sounded reasonable, but this was possibly the weakest bunch of #3s ever seen at Romsey. With CC showing a clean pair of heels, it didn't take long for the order of the chasing trio to be reversed. Irish quickly accounted for GGO, followed by Harris doing likewise. Then Harris repeated the treatment on Irish as he moved into 2nd & set off after CC. By the time Harris tagged his captain Bevo, he'd turned a 36s deficit into a 17s lead on the road. CC held onto 2nd narrowly ahead of Irish, with GGO clearly in damage control mode & looking as unfit as he'd claimed to be a further 7s back. GG completed the field, narrowing his team's gap to the leaders by 13s.

Stage 4 – Rochford (4.2k)

As the Bevo's Bombers skipper headed into the distance, the #2s from the other teams gave chase. Mitho had AL & Pat snapping at his heels, while Bacchus could only watch from a distance. All runners on the stage were shown a clean pair of heels by GGO who wasn't even running. His feet were sticking out the rear window of the Smoothy's Debacle car, as GGO was virtually collapsed on the back seat wondering why he hadn't gotten EM to run instead of him. The day's first major navigational issue came up as the leading runner, Bevo, turned onto Monument Track to find his team wondering if that was the changeover point. Fortunately for Bevo's Bombers those nice guys from Smoothy's Debacle were on hand to clear up the misunderstanding & Bevo continued without having lost too much time. Pat was looking like one of the picks of the day by this point, as he left the higher seeded Mitho & AL in his wake. Indeed, AL was looking very ordinary, as GGO kept up with him just jogging back to his team car. It was downhill though. At the end of the stage, it was Bevo with a 36s lead over Pat who had moved Smoothy's Debacle into 2nd on the road. AL's International Rules were in 3rd a further 15s back, with Mitho coming in for Forty Foot another 11s back. It was daylight back to Bacchus & House of Horrors, who were living up to their name.

Stage 5 – Monument Track (4.7k)

With PM not in the field this year no-one was concerned about runners' navigation, but this is a stage where the cars don't follow the runners. So to avoid a repeat of the unfortunate incident that befell Vinnies Tigers back in '04, the cars went in convoy to the next changeover point. Webmistress started the stage with a handy lead, but it was Smoothy who was expected to appear first. That wasn't to be though, as Troy Boy burst out of the trees in the 4th fastest ever time for the stage. That sent Duke off for International Rules with an 8s lead over the Smoothy's Debacle runner, LG. The best part of a minute further back was Webmistress for Bevo's Bombers, a scant 3s ahead of Forty Foot's AW. House managed to reduce his team's gap by a full minute with a barnstorming run of his own, that was only 2s slower than Troy Boy's.

Stage 6 – Seven Roads Corner (3.25k)

With just 2 stages to go before the lunch break it was getting interesting in front. Duke had a handy lead on the road for International Rules, but LG's team Smoothy's Debacle did have a bit of a cushion from the stage 1 timetrial. No-one knew for sure who was leading the relay at this point. All the while Grunter was defying the odds & blazing through the field. After starting the stage in 4th place, he moved Forty Odd Foot of Grunt into 2nd. Marvin ran a strong leg, taking a couple of seconds off LG, with Jimmy now a long way back.

Stage 7 – Cloverlea (3.7k)

Irish took the tag from Duke with a 35s lead over CC. A further 25s back was GGO wondering how he could claw back some of the International Rules lead from a runner who had already proven quicker than him once that day. Harris was a further 47s back in 4th, with GG having it all to do. Stage 7 has a few small undulations in the 1st km, then is downhill or flat to the finish in Lancefield. The 1st surprise of the stage came when GGO caught & passed CC in the undulating section of the leg. He was even making up some ground on Irish, while Harris & GG were trying to claw back some of the deficit faced by their respective teams. Remember that line I opened this report with, about the Irishman & the straight road? Well, with about 1200m to go Irish decided to veer right onto the shoulder of the highway rather than veer left to follow the bike path. Once again it was team Smoothy's Debacle to the rescue, with GGO immediately veering left to show Irish the ~~right~~ correct way to go. Unfortunately this confused Irish even more than he already was (& that's saying something!). As a result, Sean stopped, turned around & prepared to backtrack to the side road on the left, before his team managed to put him on the right track. Some detractors have suggested that GGO's sudden divergence was an attempt to place doubt in Irish's mind, but there is no evidence to back that theory. With all runners back on the right path, GGO continued to close on Irish as CC fell back into the clutches of Harris & GG. At the line GGO had taken 56s out of Irish's lead. CC hung onto 3rd by 11s from Harris who produced the fastest time of the stage. GG also had a good result, clawing back a minute for his team.

Lunch

After taking the timetrials into account, the standings at the lunch break were:

- 5th place (1:52:09) - House of Horrors
- 4th place (1:50:44) - Bevo's Bombers
- 3rd place (1:50:25) - Forty Odd Foot of Grunt
- 2nd place (1:49:22) - International Rules
- 1st place (1:48:52) - Smoothy's Debacle

The 1st 2 seemed to be the teams to watch for the afternoon, with a close battle looming for the bottom step of the podium.

The lunch break was the usual affair, with runners relaxing & trying not to seize up. GGO insisted on taking the full 45 minutes scheduled, but I think it would have taken a lot more time than that for him to get ready for the afternoon's stages. With all excuses aired & ignored, it was time to head to Musty's Bridge to get the afternoon underway. The first stage of the afternoon is the timetrial for runners who didn't compete in stage 1, which in this case meant the #3s & #4s. As with the morning timetrial, this is a 3k stage with a fairly gentle, but long climb.

Stage 8 – Timetrial (3k)

The runners toed the line, which this time was marked in the gravel & the race was back on. Harris shot out to a big early lead, followed by the experienced duo of Grunter & GG. An interesting battle was developing between runners from the 2 leading teams with LG carrying the hopes of Smoothy's Debacle as GGO dropped off the back of the pack. The international Rules duo of Duke & Irish were both in the thick of the battle, with CC trying to hang on. Meanwhile GGO had now dropped behind even Marvin, with only Jimmy between him & the start line they'd just left. As the hill ground on & on, the gap kept stretching. In the midfield battle, Duke had asserted his authority & left LG & Irish in his wake. At the end of the stage it was Grunter who had again defied the critics & scored his 2nd stage win for the day. This time against all of the #3s & #4s. GG also got past Harris, while Duke had closed in to within a few seconds of the leading trio. LG narrowly beat Irish & CC hung on to finish within 10s of that duo. GGO used all of his course knowledge to time his finishing sprint just well enough to beat Marvin by 4s, with Jimmy rounding out the field.

The human calculators from the International Rules & Smoothy's Debacle teams went into overdrive & worked out that AL's team had a 7s lead overall after the timetrial. That left them in the enviable position of knowing that all if they took line honours on the final stage then they'd win the day. Smoothy's Debacle on the other hand needing to not only beat International Rules across the line, but do it by at least 8s. Forty Odd Foot of Grunt weren't out of it either, as they were within a minute of the lead, but their lack of hill running depth didn't forebode well for the afternoon. Bevo's Bombers were in 4th on corrected time, but would have needed something very special to climb higher, while House of Horrors had it all to do just to avoid the wooden spoon.

Stage 9 - Big Hill (3.6k)

So it was back to a massed restart for the infamous Big Hill. The teams each put their hill specialist on the course. That was AL for International Rules; Pat for Smoothy's Debacle; Mitho for Forty Foot; Bevo for his Bombers; & House for his Horrors. As the runners took off House grabbed an early lead & never looked in danger of losing it. In fact the other 4 seemed quite content to just run together through the early stages. About 2km into the stage Mitho looked like he was labouring, while Bevo & Pat looked set to put a move on a tired looking AL. Coming into the changeover point House had a big lead. He tagged Bacchus with a 22s lead from Bevo who sent the Webmistress off on the Elk Club stage. Patrick was next in, beating AL for the 3rd time & making it look like the Magpie scumbags have a reason for feeling optimistic about XCR09. Pat's efforts had turned a 7s deficit into a 7s lead overall. Mitho was a minute further back, & he was probably wishing more than anyone at that point that AW had picked anyone except him.

Stage 10 – Elk Club (4.45k)

Bacchus lead was vanishing quickly as the runners made their way to the Fenney's Lane hairpin. Smoothy was first to negotiate the turn, with Troy not far behind. Bacchus was next to appear with AW & Webmistress completing the field. Still no-one had gotten lost on the day. Well, not completely lost. The race out front was heating up, but the pace of the team cars was slowing. The Smoothy's Debacle car was held up so much that GGO didn't have time to change into his racing flats for his 4th & final run of the day. At the changeover it was Troy Boy by a mere 2s over Smoothy, tagging Duke & GGO respectively. Bacchus was next in to send GG down the track, with Webmistress tagging Harris just 4s ahead of AW tagging CC.

Stage 11 – Fenney's Lane (4k)

A couple of years ago, The Fenney's Lane stage was the scene of possibly the most out-of-control running never to be caught on camera, when GGO flailed past a shocked NFM only to find that his team wasn't ready for him. Much of Smoothy's Debaacle's team hopes were hinged on history repeating itself. As the stage wore on though it was Duke who kept extending his lead, with GGO clearly struggling. With a little over a kilometre left to run, Duke had a big lead, but GGO obviously wasn't done yet. As the combatants stormed into the changeover area, it was Duke by 8s over GGO & the race was far from over. The battle for the minor places was heating up too. GG had a lonely run in 3rd, with Harris taking 21s out of Bevo's Bomber's deficit to the House of Horrors. Things weren't looking very good for Forty Foot though, as CC was a distant last to complete the stage.

Stage 12 – Malone's Rollercoaster (4k)

The biggest stage selection surprise of the day came with Bevo's Bombers sending their #4, Marvin, to run the gauntlet of Malone's Rollercoaster against #1s House & AL, & #2's Pat & Mitho. If you've seen this stage then you know why it has the reputation that it has. If you haven't seen it, then I suggest that you make the trip yourself next year, as nothing I can say would adequately describe the tortuous nature of this stage with its breakneck descents & heartbreaking climbs. One runner was completely undaunted though. AL was first to complete the stage, stretching his team's lead over Pat & Smoothy's Debaacle by a further 5s. Hot on their heels though was House who produced the individual run of the day. A stage record breaking run that took over a minute out of the 2 runners ahead of him, to have his team only 19s off the lead on the road. The gap to Marvin in 4th & Mitho in 5th was over 5 minutes.

Stage 13 – Pounce's Delight (4.5k)

The penultimate stage of the day consists of undulating highway running, finishing with a quad smashing downhill. The perfect way to end a day's racing. Troy Boy had a 13s lead & was running scared for the 1st time in the day, knowing that Smoothy was chasing. Bacchus was next in line, with Bevo & Mitho rounding out the field. As the stage progressed it was clear that Troy Boy had Smoothy's measure this time & was extending his team's lead. Bacchus was having a lonely run in 3rd, while Bevo had left Mitho in his wake.

Stage 14 – Meet Me at the Weighbridge (3.7k)

At the final changeover it was International Rules with a commanding 39s lead as Troy Boy tagged Irish, who was no doubt feeling like a hare just before the hounds are released on its trail. Smoothy was next in, sending LG in pursuit. It would take a huge run from LG to not only catch Irish, but then to put a gap of at least 8s on him before the finish line 3.7km away. Bacchus was next in a couple of minutes later, tagging Jimmy for the Bombers' run to the finish. Bevo produced the 3rd fastest ever run on this stage to give his team an outside chance at 3rd place for the day. Especially with Webmistress primed to have a crack at the stage record. Mitho rounded out the field for Forty Foot, making the final tag of the day to send Grunter on his way.

Two kilometres into the stage & the unthinkable had happened. LG wasn't just closing the gap to Irish, but he'd caught & passed him & was on target for an historic win. Irish in turn appeared broken at that point, but International Rules had one last ace up their sleeve. Having left the selection table without a car, AL decided to finish the relay the same way. In scenes never before witnessed at a MMM relay, he abandoned the team car for the last kilometre & paced Irish back past LG & all the way to the finish where they took line honours. LG battled on valiantly, crossing the line 6s later in second place. The big remaining question was whether or not Jimmy would be able to hold off the fast charging Webmistress, & the answer was Yes. Jimmy had saved his best for last to cross the line 29s ahead of the Webmistress who missed both 3rd place on the road & the record. Grunter jogged home in a distant last place, obviously resigned to his team's fate.

The Wrap Up

The final standings after 59.6km of racing were:

5th place (3:50:14) - Forty Odd Foot of Grunt

4th place (3:49:11) - House of Horrors

3rd place (3:47:33) - Bevo's Bombers

2nd place (3:42:11) - Smoothy's Debacle

1st place (3:41:58) - International Rules

Despite the supposed lack of quality in this field. The International Rules team was only 2s slower than the team that placed 2nd last year, while the time of Forty Odd Foot of Grunt would have beaten 3 of last year's 7 teams.

After the initial back slapping it was time to get back into the team cars for one last time, as the runners made their way back to Romsey for the post-race BBQ & presentations. There ensued the usual debates about what might have been had selections or strategies played out differently, but in the end none of that matters. Winners medallions were hung around the necks of AL Prez, Troy Boy, Duke & Irish. A mixed bag of perennial winner; perennial loser; & two debutants. Runner of the day was a close call, with House possibly a bit stiff to miss out. House's 4 stages included the 2nd fastest ever morning timetrial, 6th fastest ever on Monument Track & Big Hill, & a stage record on the Rollercoaster. However, Troy was seeded well below House (maybe too far below, but that's an issue for the auditors), & ran his fastest ever timetrial, the 4th fastest ever Monument Track & Elk Club, & the 2nd fastest ever Pounce's Delight. So the award & voucher went to Troy Boy.

So that's Romsey done & dusted for another year. Thanks to everyone who helped to make the event the success that it was. The organisers, the seeders, the sledgers & sledgees, & the competitors. All that's left now is for the anal-ysts to pick through the results & let everyone know where they went right or wrong.

See you all next year.

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