

Performance

Ultra Running • Triathlon • Ironman • Adventure Racing



72

COMRADES OF THE 'CHASE

Rf talks to Steeplechasers James Wilkinson and Rob Mullett

Comrades

OF THE 'chase

James Wilkinson, 23, and Rob Mullett, 26, topped the UK rankings for the 3000m steeplechase in 2013. Both are 'nearly full-time' athletes, fitting in training alongside part-time work – James in Loughborough, Rob in Indiana, USA. *Rf* caught up with them to talk about the special demands of their event, how they got started, and their ambitions for 2014

Interview: David Bradford • Pics: Mark Shearman and Mark Robinson

Running fitness: Rob, you ran an indoor 3000m in 7:59 and a 4:06 indoor mile at the end of January, whereas James, you had a good run in the English National Cross-Country Championships at the end of February, where you finished fifth – so it looks like you're both in decent early-season shape?

James Wilkinson: "[The English National XC Champs] was the first race back where I've shown that I'm getting there fitness-wise [since returning from an Achilles injury]. Fifth place matches my previous best finish in the National. I seem a bit jinxed in terms of [missing] medals since becoming a senior, but it was miles better than other races recently. I was pleased to be back mixing it on the national level, and to be up the front. It's starting to come together again."

Rob Mullett: "It was all going quite well, but I managed to injure my calf, a little tear, running on the treadmill. That mile race was the start of my problems. I'd been a bit run-down going into that race, then, the day after, I became fully ill and missed a few days' training. A couple of days after that, I hurt my calf."

"Going into that race, everything had been going really well. The 3000m [in 7:59] was the fastest I've ever opened [a season], so that was a good sign. The mile was a disappointment, as I was definitely in better shape than that. I'm not too worried; everything's gone pretty well, so no complaints."

RF: Last season you both had good steeplechase performances followed by injury problems. Rob, you ran 8:32 in May, but your season was cut short by an injury in June.

James, you had rather better luck and ran a PB of 8:28 in June and qualified for the World Championships, but also ended the season injured. Tell us what happened.

RM: "It was on the second water jump at the European Team Champs at Gateshead [on June 23]... I bruised my left talus [bone in lower part of ankle] pretty badly and had a few minor tears on my medial ankle ligament and a little bit of damage to my Achilles. I was out for about 12 weeks, so it pretty much ended my summer right there. It took a bit of time to get my motivation back from that. Because I'd trained really hard, I was more disappointed about having nothing to show for all the work I'd done. I'd felt in a really good place, so to injure my foot as badly as I did was... just not a great experience."

JW: "[My 8:28 PB] was a breakthrough! I took a chunk off my time and it got me to the World Champs and opened a lot more doors. The difficulty with the steeplechase is getting into the right races. I got quite lucky, unlike Rob – he was meant to be in the race where I ran my PB but he just missed out."

The World Champs was a great experience; the race itself [heat two on August 12] could have gone better. It started really slow and I lost the chance to qualify [for the final]. I ran OK, but the experience was the big thing – watching what others are doing well, and what I need to do, was positive in that it showed I'm not a million miles away."

Through last summer, I'd had a bad Achilles, and when I finished the season, I took two weeks off, but my Achilles didn't respond well to the rest, so when I tried running again, I was back to square-one. It was a bit frustrating."



ABOUT THE WRITER
David Bradford is a freelance writer (dbfreelance.co.uk) and runner with a marathon PB of 2hrs 28mins. He tweets at @DeeBeeFree



RF: What are your major goals for 2014?

RM: "The Commonwealth Games [July 23 – August 3] and the European Championships [August 12-17], I'd like to do both, and aim towards similar [times] to those I was doing last year – I was hoping to run close to 8:20 last year, and I felt that the training had been done to do that. I've not lost a year's training, I've just lost a year's racing."

JW: "Likewise, the Commonwealth Games and Europeans. First step is qualifying for both, with the Commonwealth's selection taking place on 1st June, so I've got a window of about a month and a half between when the track races start and when the teams are selected – not ages. I do have a qualifying standard from last year: that 8:28 gives me one B standard, so I could effectively be picked regardless, but I don't want to rely on that."

"The Europeans are selected a little bit later, at the start of July, so that would be a case of going to a trial and having to run a time again. In other words, I've got to run sub-8:30 for both teams, that's the aim."

RF: Why did you choose to specialise in the steeplechase?

JW: "I first did a steeplechase race in 2004 or 2005 [as a junior]. In Britain, the traditional way of getting into it is in track league races – clubs compete against each other across all the events, and steeplechase is a notoriously difficult event to fill. So I gave it a little try and did quite well, got some points, and eventually got to the English Schools, which is the pinnacle when you're a school athlete. I got there as a steeplechaser, which I probably wouldn't have at the time as a flat runner. So having that success from steeplechasing helped, and then I just stuck at it. The next year, I finished second at the English Schools, and again I wouldn't have achieved that on the flat."

RM: "I'm not really sure. I just liked the look of it, I guess. I tried it out in my first year as an under-17. I ran a few that year, and remember running a pretty decent one on a very wet night at the track in Kingston. It just seemed to be an event that I transitioned pretty well into. It was something that I tried and was relatively good at – so I thought, why not keep doing it."

RF: What makes a good steeplechaser?

RM: "Just being really, really strong. A decent amount of coordination and a bit of speed, but it definitely varies. I remember from that 8:32 I ran in Germany [on May 31, 2013], there was a guy [Ion Luchianov], a Moldovan guy who [ran an 8:18 PB] PIC: at the Beijing Olympics, and honestly he just didn't look like a runner. He looked like a weight-lifter! You get other guys who are more on the slight side and have a more traditional runner's

PIC: MARK SHEARMAN



PIC: MARK ROBINSON

James Wilkinson is a PUMA Running ambassador and wears the lightweight Faas 300 v3, available at www.ProDirectRunning.com for £65. For more information on the Faas family head to www.PUMA.com/FAAS



PIC: MARK SHEARMAN



PIC: MARK ROBINSON

physique, a bit skinnier. You definitely need enough strength, as it does beat you up a bit."

JW: "Being strong is important; you've got to be quite robust in terms of holding off injuries, and being able to break your stride quite a lot. It does go quite well with cross-country running, and my background in cross-country precedes my steeplechasing. I guess that showed I was able to break my stride and deal with changes in pace, and all that kind of stuff. Flexibility and hurdling ability too, but that can be taught – I wasn't the most natural hurdler."

RF: Is the psychological element important too? Those barriers look terrifying.

JW: "Yes, 'being strong' applies in so many ways – strong as a runner, strong in terms of dealing with injuries and strong psychologically. You're going to have bad water jumps, bad races, bad hurdles, and you're going to have to be brave. Before you get to European or world level, you go for years without having many people around you [in domestic races], whereas [in international races] there could be 10 people approaching a water jump [all together], and you could be smack

bang in the middle, surrounded by people, and you have to be brave enough to deal with that."

RM: "Definitely. It's something you learn more as a senior. As a junior, the only race where you might have people around you is the English Schools, but as a senior you're in a pack a bit more, where it's more psychological because you have to worry about barriers when you can't see them. It's twofold: being confident with the barriers, and later in the race the feeling of extreme fatigue."

RF: Rob, your dad Bill represented Scotland in the steeplechase and ran a PB of 8:40 in 1969. Was it he who got you involved in the sport? James, do you have an athletic family background too?

RM: "Honestly, no. I had no idea about what my dad had achieved until I got into it. He never forced it upon us, me or my sister... and my mum ran [at national level] as well, but they just let us get on with whatever. I ran a 1500m [at school] and it was definitely a positive experience. At the time, my sister was swimming at Lewes swimming club, so it was almost just convenient for my mum that I trained at the [Lewes AC] track, as it's right next

to the pool. Only once I got into it did I start to find out more about what my dad had done. That said, it was nice to finally run quicker than he did, significantly quicker, because I think he ran his PB on a cinder track, so it was nice to be beyond the realms where he could apply a conversion factor!"

JW: "No, I don't. It's quite strange – my parents weren't really sporty at all. When I was at primary school I showed some talent in cross-country running, won a fun run, and eventually joined the school cross-country team, but I didn't really train for it until I was 12 or 13. Rob having his dad involved in running was probably really good. I didn't know what steeplechase was before I was 14 or 15."

RF: What specific training do you do for steeplechase?

JW: "The summer's really specific. I do one really specific hurdles session every 10 days. I do that on a track with the hurdles positioned where they would be in a race, and doing reps over them, so it might be 800m or 1k reps.

Outside of that, there is more technical stuff – weekly drills, or up to three times a week in the summer. And a lot of my weight-training is focused on steeplechase – things like squats and step-ups, replicating that load that you're going to be under when you come off a hurdle, as well as driving the knee forward to be able to hurdle."

RM: "I think I train more like a 5k guy. Usually, we'd start hurdling in January and do so consistently every week from then on. I've not done that this year as yet, just because of the amount of snow we've had [in Indiana] and the issues I've had with my calf. But from this period onwards, it starts getting a little more specific, in the sense that I'll hurdle more, and we'll do [an interval] session over barriers once a month or so."



PIC: MARK ROBINSON



PIC: Mark Shearman

RF: Those steeplechase-specific interval sessions sound brutal. Do you dread them?

RM: "I dread it a little bit sometimes. The session I've done over the past couple of years is three times 1k with five-minute recoveries, but it's over five hurdles and it's running quick, and that is the sort of session you definitely dread, because it's pretty much equivalent to a race. It's just not much fun!"

JW: "Yes, those are the ones I do dread a bit, only because I'm often solo for those – completely alone except for a coach. That's quite hard, and they're hard to get right. At the same time, when you get those sessions right, it's really rewarding. Prior to running 8:28 last year, I can remember specific sessions two or three weeks before, and thinking, 'Right, this is clicking now!'"

RF: You both admit that steeplechase is a tough discipline, but does that mean James has an advantage as a Yorkshireman? Are northerners tougher than southerners?

JW: "I think sometimes, yes, they probably are. We [northerners] do have that reputation and I'm not going to hold that back, as I think it works in my favour sometimes. Being from Yorkshire is quite good. I grew up racing the Brownlee brothers in cross-country races. Whenever you see someone who's local or northern doing well, that's really beneficial."



PIC: MARK ROBINSON

JAMES' KIT BAG

- SiS Go Hydro – an electrolyte drink to provide him with energy with minimal sugar
- Flapjack - perfect for a natural energy boost
- Banana
- PUMA Faas 300 v3 - lightweight but supportive whilst training
- PUMA NightCat Jacket Shower proof jacket with reflective yarn which is ideal for training in the spring and dim light

JAMES' TYPICAL WEEK OF WINTER TRAINING

	AM	PM
Monday	1hr easy; weights	35min easy; drills; hurdle walkthroughs
Tuesday	35min easy	Interval session (≤7 miles effort), e.g. 6x5min off 1min recovery
Wednesday	≤70min easy; gym conditioning	(Optional) 35min easy
Thursday	≤60min acceleration run – slow start, building to 10k pace; hurdle drills	35min easy
Friday	Rest or ≤45min easy	
Saturday	– ≤35min tempo (in 10-15min blocks), e.g. 3x 10min at 4:40/mile followed by 5x1min on road	
Sunday	≤2hrs long run	

■ Easy/steady running is done at 7:30-6:15/mile pace. Average weekly mileage is 90-100 miles. James is coached by Philip Townsend of Leeds City AC.

ROB'S TYPICAL WEEK OF WINTER TRAINING

	AM	PM
Monday	70min easy	20-30min easy; weights
Tuesday	Interval session (3-8km effort), e.g. 8x 800m off 2.5min recovery	35-40min easy
Wednesday	80-90min easy	Drills, strides or hills, core
Thursday	70min easy	20-30min easy; weights
Friday	Tempo or fartlek (6-10 miles of effort), e.g. 2min-1min-30sec with 1min float recovery	35-40min easy
Saturday	70min easy	Drills, strides, core
Sunday	1.5-2hr long run	

■ Easy/steady running is done at 5:30-7:30/mile pace depending on upcoming sessions. Average weekly mileage is 90-110 miles (though Rob prefers to log minutes rather than miles). Rob is coached by Dave Leach of Lewes AC.

